

Silicon Valley

MODERN LUXURY

Smitten Ice Cream's
**ROBYN SUE
FISHER**
Rule-Breaker &
Industry Innovator

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and comfort

SMITTEN FOUNDER ROBYN SUE FISHER IS ON A
MISSION TO MAKE THE ABSOLUTE BEST ICE CREAM,
BALANCING TECHNOLOGY AND OLD-TIMEY WAYS.

Robyn Sue Fisher has long been enamored with the idea of taking something old and making it new again. As a kid, she and her twin brother would collect rocks from behind their house, glaze them and sell them as paperweights or decorative objects out of a makeshift store in their basement. (They were their best-sellers and the items they were most proud of, she says.) As an adult, armed with a Stanford MBA, she has spent more than a decade in pursuit of pure joy—which to Fisher takes the form of ice cream. And she hasn't just been ice cream parlor-hopping, attempting to track down the absolute best chilled creations out there, though these days that is considered R&D for her. Fisher has taken her love of the frozen treat to the next level with her Smitten Ice Cream (smittenicecream.com), which marries a back-to-basics approach to ingredients with state-of-the-art machinery for a product that is “unprocessed and real, with amazing taste and texture,” she proclaims. “My goal is for people to eat our ice cream and be blown away.”

Back in 2009, two years before she would open her first retail location, Fisher's business basically consisted of an ice cream machine powered by an old motorcycle battery that she had rewired and reconfigured. She placed the jerry-rigged contraption on top of a milk crate, which was then bungee-corded to a Radio Flyer wagon outfitted with off-road wheels. A cooler held the day's fresh ingredients, and a tank of liquid nitrogen, which can flash-freeze food, enabled her to churn out ice cream on the spot. To make the base of her inaugural flavor—caramel, offered with or without sea salt—she was up until 2AM cooking the syrupy substance in her studio apartment. She spent countless hours squeezing citrus for the Meyer lemon flavor and scoured the farmers market for peppers to spice up her chocolate ice cream.

Fisher and her souped-up red wagon became fixtures at “rogue food festivals,” as she refers to them, where she banded together with other mobile vendors to purvey in alleys and parks on short notice. “My Twitter feed was: ‘Here's the flavor of the day, here's where I'm gonna pop up. Come and get it before I sell out or before the cops find me.’” According to Fisher, people would come out in droves, waiting up to 40 minutes in line. “We had a massive following, just with the wagon and fresh ice cream,” she says. “It really rooted me in what people care about; in the conversations and in the community around food; and in the fact that this is a product of joy.” Her sales model was also great market research, helping Fisher understand what was working and what wasn't working, the right price point, the flavors people clamored for—“a lot of things that you can't solve sitting behind a computer, writing a business plan.”

Today, there are nine Smitten locations in California—including a kiosk in Santana Row—and last year, they combined to sell a million scoops. The centerpiece of each shop is Fisher's custom-built Brrr machine, which holds four patents and allows for freshly made ice cream within

minutes. Brooke Mosley, previously the pastry chef at Outerlands in San Francisco, has come on board to develop new ice cream recipes as well as expand the brand's offerings—all in keeping with its ethos of creating the best-quality and best-tasting fare. Thanks to its first partnership with a grocery delivery service, Good Eggs customers will soon be able to get just-churned Smitten pints right at their doorstep.

Smitten's origins date back to 2007, when Fisher fronted the endeavor with \$30,000 of her own money. In the years since, the company has attracted investors from a range of fields. “There are so many different angles that Smitten is coming from—retail, food, tech,” Fisher says of its crossover appeal. Paul Pressler—a partner at New York-based private equity firm Clayton, Dubilier & Rice, who invested personally—recalls his initial impression after meeting Fisher in 2011: “What struck me is that the world is not necessarily waiting for another ice cream purveyor,” he says. “But her take on bringing a healthy, freshly made product to the consumer, and the sense of experience—to some degree, the theatricality of that experience—not only was unique and differentiated in the marketplace, but also hit on a lot of the themes that are currently trending.”

Fellow investor Linnea Roberts admits, “I'm not a huge ice cream person, but I am a health nut and a label reader. If I can't pronounce the ingredients on a label, I usually won't buy it.” Through her GingerBread Capital, Roberts has allied with other women to invest in female-founded companies. Last November, she hosted a dinner party for 40 at her Atherton home. Fisher was invited to speak and brought along her ice cream machine. “She was a huge hit,” says Roberts, who ultimately coordinated a group to invest in Smitten earlier this year. While there are other businesses that purport to make ice cream in a similar fashion, there's a distinct “difference between liquid nitrogen technology with a mix that's full of crap versus using real ingredients,” Roberts adds.

Indeed, the base for Smitten's ice creams is straightforward—organic cream and milk, sugar, a dash of salt, maybe butter and egg yolk—while the flavors rely on carefully sourced ingredients, like beans from Petaluma's Mountanos Family Coffee & Tea for the coffee ice cream, one of three seasonal options currently in rotation. Since November, Mosley has been responsible for turning out these flavors. She is also prototyping Smitten's bakeshop program, which will initially be rolled out at the location in San Francisco's Mission District, not far from company headquarters. Says Mosley of the ice cream: “There's no bullshit, there are no bad ingredients, there's no smoke and mirrors ... Well, there's smoke, literally smoke”—the billows of fog produced by the liquid nitrogen—“but everything is transparent.” At Smitten, the Brrristas, as the folks behind the counter are called, pour a base into the bowl of the Brrr machine, press a button that releases the liquid nitrogen and about 90 seconds later, have ice cream. “The fact that we literally make it to order in a magic machine will always ensure ours is the freshest and with the most out-of-this-world texture,” notes Mosley.

While Smitten's food values align with Mosley's, Fisher herself was the initial reason that the chef joined the company. “Robyn is *awfully* charming and just a real, accessible human,” says Mosley. “She's so authentic and genuine, and full of integrity and passion. When she spoke about what she does and why she does it, I was like, ‘Yep, wherever you're going, I want to go there too.’ She's like Pied Piper. I'd follow her anywhere.”

Investor Allison Rose—who has funded a number of buzzy restaurants recently, including Protégé in Palo Alto and Che Fico in San Francisco—was so charmed by Fisher that she put money into Smitten before she even sampled the ice cream. “I've got a gut feeling when I meet people, and I always follow that. There's just that spark there: You know that they're going to work their ass off, that they're not just in it for the money; they're in it for the passion. That's totally what came across with Robyn,” Rose remembers. “When I met her, I thought: She's going places.”





In a little over an hour, Fisher is scheduled to film a spot for Norwegian Air, which is highlighting Smitten in its San Francisco travel guide. While many in her position might be fretting over hair, makeup and wardrobe right now, Fisher is walking her bike down Valencia Street in San Francisco. Before meeting me, she dropped off the older of her two sons, 4-year-old Dash, at school—hence the electric Xtracycle that she’s riding this morning. Her cardigan, skirt and boots ensemble is accessorized by a bike helmet that partially obscures her shoulder-length brown hair.

Spend even five minutes with the warm and exuberant Fisher and you would never guess that she was once a nervous little kid, full of anxiety. At ages 4 and 7, she underwent surgeries for chronic stomach issues. The problems with her appendix and gallbladder caused her to become “anxious and a worrier,” she says. “My medical chart looked like a 70-year-old’s.” For Fisher, ice cream came to represent “a happy place, a timeout from life, a moment to pause and just enjoy the present.” Throughout her childhood in Wayland, Mass., a town about 20 miles outside of Boston, ice cream was “a staple in my family’s diet”—with her cardiologist father, genetic counselor mother, older brother, Jeff, and twin brother, Daniel, consuming it most nights for dessert as well as regularly venturing out to farm-run ice cream operations. (The family relocated to Marin County when she was 16.)

Despite her early health troubles, Fisher, a self-described tomboy, excelled at sports. After earning a degree in psychology from Williams College, where she played basketball for four years and softball for a year, she worked for consulting firm Monitor Group for several years. “I didn’t *love* consulting,” she says. “I kind of felt lost and wanted to switch gears.” So she left Monitor Group in 2005 and entered the Stanford Graduate School of Business, where in her second year she enrolled in what is now titled Startup Garage. The objective of the two-quarter course, which was open to students from all graduate programs, was to hone a business idea. Fisher wanted to explore an ice cream concept and formed a group with four other women with different backgrounds: product design engineering; banking and finance; marketing; and journalism. The latter, through her role on the graduate student council, had learned about a physics professor who, as part of his class, was making ice cream using liquid nitrogen.

Although it was novel to the group, liquid nitrogen ice cream is hardly new. Doug Goff is an ice cream expert who has taught the subject for more than 30 years, as well as co-authored a reference book, *Ice Cream*, on the technical and scientific aspects of frozen dairy treats. A professor in the food science department at the University of Guelph in Ontario, Canada, he tells me that “the one advantage of liquid nitrogen is the very rapid freezing that you can get. If that’s done properly, with a high level of mixing and agitation while it’s freezing, you can get a really small ice crystal formation in the ice cream and that can give you very smooth texture.” While the process is elemental—add liquid nitrogen to your

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ice cream base and combine—it does have its challenges. If you don't stir the mixture enough, Goff adds, “it solidifies immediately in front of you and makes a very hard product ... a frozen block.”

Fisher knows this all too well. Sitting at a cafe, she opens up her laptop, tracks down a series of photos from 2006 and pivots the screen toward me. There she is, in the backyard of her Palo Alto rental, with a machine cobbled together from parts procured on Craigslist and a tank of liquid nitrogen nearby. Fisher scrolls through to the finished product: “a bad, overfrozen mess,” in her words. “Getting the right texture and flavor is the hard part. The gist is: You're freezing at -321 degrees, and it's really easy to overfreeze and turn it into Dippin' Dots. It's also really easy to freeze it inconsistently. You're dosing liquid nitrogen into a bowl; if you get too much in one spot, that spot overfreezes and other parts are still melty.”

By the end of the Stanford course, despite additional prototyping, the group's ice cream didn't taste much better. But Fisher now had a business plan, a good pitch deck and lots of positive reinforcement. She also had a job offer with the FBI, but turned it down. “I was 29 years old and knew at some point I would want a family and need to support people,” she says. “This was the time to do the crazy things because life just gets more complex. I could feed myself rice and beans, I could work until 2AM—all those things that I knew would be harder later. This was the time to just try to make things happen and go after it. In the back of my mind, I knew I could go back and get a ‘real job.’ But this was my time to shoot for the stars.”

So how did Fisher become the Rube Goldberg of ice cream—devising a complex machine, the Brrr, to achieve a seemingly simple task? “I feel like how ice cream's been industrialized goes against the ideals of what the category should be,” she says. “Part of my goal is to bring it back to good. Smitten is my way of throwing the rulebook out the window and trying to build it back up with the right morals and ideals.”

After Stanford, she signed up for the Penn State Ice Cream Short Course, “which teaches you how big manufacturers do it,” she says. At the conclusion of the one-week session, she had a diploma, T-shirt and further confirmation of how industrialized ice cream manufacturing has become. Stabilizers such as guar gum and carrageenan—which combat those dreaded ice crystals—were not ingredients that she thought should be in ice cream, yet they are commonplace in those lining grocery store freezers. “The thing about ice cream is, it's so weighed down by its own infrastructure and supply chain and distribution channels that it's stuck under that weight and can't get away from the infrastructure that it's built,” says Fisher. “Part of Smitten is: Let's throw that infrastructure away. Let's turn our stores into microfactories and build infrastructure that meets the needs of consumers. Let's make a machine that automates the process of making fresh ice cream and enables our stores to be microfactories.”

Integral to Fisher's plan was a superior ice cream machine. To build one, she linked up with a retired aerospace engineer based in Boston who, like many in Smitten's early days, worked for equity in the company. (The first few years, Fisher didn't pay herself and took on consulting work on the side to pay the bills.) The problem the pair faced: During the churning process, all of the particles had to be in motion; nothing could stick to the mixing bowl or beaters. “We tried *everything*,” says Fisher. “We looked at snow plows. How do they scrape ice off the pavement? We looked at airplanes. How do they keep ice off their windshield? We looked at everything that existed and tried to replicate it on a small scale to make ice cream. None of it worked. We were knocking our heads against the wall trying to figure it out.” Two years in, they had a breakthrough. The result: an apparatus with double helical mixing blades that scrape and clean every surface, as well as push the ice cream down and in to reduce air. “It creates this superdense and flavorful product,” Fisher enthuses. Over the years, “tons of software smarts” have been incorporated into the machine—hence its multiple patents. (When she met her mechanical engineer and product designer husband, Tobin, in 2009, he lent her a stack of books about the patent process because she was drafting provisional patents. “Sexy, right?” she quips.)

As Pressler, the angel investor, sees it, the Brrr machines provide “some protectability” for Smitten. “You're always looking for businesses that can create a little bit of a moat around them,” he says, adding that its technology is what enables the company to be a “huge disruptor in the space.” For Fisher, the machine, coupled with the insistence on first-rate ingredients, is what sets Smitten apart from the pack. “[Our competitors] are not focused on the fresh element; they're focused more on the wow factor—the gimmick—which drives me mad,” she says, referring to the spectacle of the liquid nitrogen cloud. “We combine the love of food—California foodie values of transparency and sustainability—and farmers market freshness with the tech element to enable both scale and precision. I call it new old-fashioned.”

Smitten's old-fashioned values also extend to its emphasis on engagement with customers and the community. While Fisher is no longer hauling around that red wagon—it now resides on her front yard—you can still find her scooping ice cream in the shops. On a recent Friday, taking a break on a bench by the window of the Mission venue, Smitten General Manager Veronica Ronchi watches guests file in from Valencia Street and marvel at the churning process. “The customers here are the happiest human beings,” she says. “They come here to treat themselves. If they are sad, they become happier. If they are happy, it's even better.”

Which explains the moniker that Fisher chose for her business. “It's unfiltered love, and ‘smitten’ is a word that makes you happy and brings out nostalgia,” she says. “There's so much emotion around ice cream that everyone can connect with it, and we're bringing it into the future.” ■