WHERE TO EAT IN THE VALLEY RIGHT THIS MINUTE

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

The feast issue

WHERE TO EAT IN THE VALLEY RIGHT THIS MINUTE
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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, through 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—feasible only because it was bungee-corded to a Radio Flyer wagon—fed a small 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 Mountainos 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 Brr 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 astoundingly 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 Protegé 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 Gott 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
We combine the love of food ... and farmers market freshness with the tech element to enable both scale and precision. I call it new old-fashioned.