Salt and Straw: quirky, tasty, green

Cousins create buzz with flavors worth waiting in line for

By JENNIFER ANDERSON
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If Portland were served on an ice cream cone, it just might be a scoop of Freckled Wheelock Chocolate. The purveyors of Salt & Straw ice cream dreamed up the flavor to showcase two unique ingredients — made-in-Portland chocolate and harvested-in-Oregon sea salt — that combine for a subtle yet complex flavor, the essence of their wildly successful "farm to cone" philosophy.

Starting up just two years ago with a food cart on Northeast Alberta Street, the company opened its first shop on Northeast 2nd Avenue three months later, and then its second on Alberta. It's poised to open an ice cream cart in Lake Oswego in mid-June and a third brick-and-mortar shop two weeks later at Southeast Division Street and 3rd Avenue.

Salt & Straw co-owners Kim and Tyler Malek also will move their cramped production headquarters into a separate kitchen in Southeast Portland in mid-July. By summer the two cousins will employ about 170 people.

For a treat best enjoyed in the sunshine, Salt & Straw.commands lines around the block before 8 a.m., even on Portland’s hottest winter mornings. So what’s the secret? It could be the outstanding flavors Tyler Malek dreams up. His bone marrow and smoked cherry with bourbon flavor has drawn national attention.

Last spring, his Arbequina olive oil earned a shout-out from Oprah Winfrey. It was the first of a flurry of national media coverage that hasn’t stopped.

Some of the exposure, cachet and credibility comes from working with and cross-promoting with Portland foodie icons like Pok Pok, Olympic Provision and Stumptown Coffee.

A series of collaborations with local chefs just June was the impetus for salt ice cream with homemademeyealmarmalade in collaboration with Bamboo Shau, and "floe s'mores," toasted with a vanilla ice cream and a brown sugar crumb (in collaboration with Oo).

"Quite a mouthful — literally. Basically, the Maleks say they wanted to showcase Portland on a cone. "Ice cream is a canvas for Portland’s artisan movement," says Tyler Malek, who now leads the ice cream operations along with a food scientist and an ice cream chef. "It’s approachable. We can give samples. It has a neutral base that holds flavor really well."

The neutral base is heart, made from 17 percent butterfat compared to the standard 10 percent for most ice creams. It’s also made by hand in small batches of 5 or 16 gallons. Salt & Straw has been using all natural cream from Lochmead Dairy in Eugene, but just switched to a cheaper dairy to reduce its carbon footprint.

The adventurous offerings alone aren’t what catalyzed Salt & Straw to success in just two years. It’s the community built in the process of collaborating with restaurants and artisan purveyors, the Maleks say.

"Our mantra is ‘All ships rise,’” Kim Malek says. “For a business, in order to be sustainable, we have to be part of a strong community.”

To Kim Malek, community means going where place families can hang out together, where neighbors run into each other and everyone can meet in line and buy their new acquaintance a scoop or land a job offer.

Salt & Straw expanded its ice cream shop when she lived here in the late 1980s. She left town for a corporate job but returned a few years ago, rekindling her dream of the ‘90s after she realized cousin Tyler, who was thinking about culinary school, was on a similar path.

This month their menu specials celebrate Father’s Day with a “six pack” of beer-inspired ice cream flavors, in partnership with Portland craft brewers Breakside Brewery, Gigantic Brewing Company, Hair of the Dog Brewing Co., Lompoc Organic Farmhouse Ales, The Commons Brewery and Willamette Brothers Brewing.

The flavors don’t actually contain beer, but just didn’t taste right, Malek says. So he worked with local brew masters to deconstruct the flavor profiles of their own beers and recreate them in the kitchen.

From the start, Salt and Straw has used 100 percent renewable energy, and fully compostable serving ware. Tasting spoons are made of reusable metal.

“Sometimes we go through a lot of spoons, but that’s okay,” Malek says. “We’re in it for the long haul.”

The weather isn’t ideal for cooking in an open kitchen, but Malek is happy to build a separate facility for the season.

"It’s hard to make good ice cream, and salt and good," Malek says.

To add depth and texture to the chocolate, Malek had come upon an old-school ice cream-making technique called freckling, which leaves bits of chocolate suspended in an emulsion state for a little crunch. Salt is added to the ice cream at the very start.

“Good salt brightens everything up,” Malek says. “It mellows it out, brings out the sweetness.”

Jacobsen discovered that Netarts Bay is perfect for salt as well as oysters: 85 percent of the water there is discovered with each tidal change, making the water fresh and clear.

The labor-intensive process starts with filtering the bay water through a sand filter at least five times. Then the water is boiled to take back the calcium and magnesium, which can give sea salt a bitter taste. The brine is transferred to evaporation pans and sits for 24 to 48 hours. Salt crystals form in the bottom, where they drain and dry before Jacobsen hands them according to size (smaller bits are mineral salt; larger ones are flakes). He makes two 120-pound batches per week. Each takes three to five days, from sea water to package.

Salt & Straw had been selling four ounce bags of Jacobsen Salt for $10 in its shops and offering sprinkles for each scoop upon request.

Other local artisans took notice. Jacobsen Salt has been used in Portland-based Xocolat de David bars and Spielman Coffee Roaster's bagels, as well as Pyle's Place, Ned Ludd, Lincoln and Ava Jean's restaurants.

ICE CREAM PHENOM FINDS SYNERGY WITH LOCAL SALT MAKER

When it came time to find a partner for Portland's Woodblock Chocolate, Salt & Straw co-owner Tyler Malek played it straight for once. No wacky ingredients, just the world's most common salt.

Malek had just met Ben Jacobson, who'd spent the past three years dabbling in salt the way a homebrewer dabbles in yeast and hops.

The difference is that artisan salt making in the U.S. is so uncommon that there were no how-to guides or recipes to follow. There was no equipment to buy, so Jacobson got everything he needed custom-made.

"It's easy to make bad beer and crappy salt," Jacobson says. "It's hard to make good beer and good salt."

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Cone’s rely on local chocolate

Freckled Wheelock starts with cocoa beans from Trinidad and Costa Rica.

"We can track every bean back to its farm," says Charley Wheelock, who started Woodblock Chocolate with his wife, Lilia Wheelock, armed with one year's supply of cocoa beans at the time Kim and Tyler Malek launched Salt & Straw.

After the couple crossed paths, the Maleks started selling the chocolate bars in their shop and then used it for a new Valentine’s Day flavor.

Wheelock circles the globe to produce his chocolate, becoming Portland’s first bean-to-bar chocolate company.

After visiting the original farm or coop and seeing the beans by container in 100-pound burlap sacks, which he has to carry through the door because the holder won’t fit through the doorway.

With a 1965 peanut roaster he found on eBay, Wheelock roasts the beans in 50-pound batches, then pours them into a "winnowing" machine he built to separate hulls from beans. Cocoa nibs are then sent to a 24-hour cold-pressed process, refined with stone wheels, heated in a giant metal vat with pure cane sugar, set in large blocks and aged about three weeks.

The 79-percent chocolate is finally tempered into 25gram bars that are wrapped by hand and sold for $94 to chocolate enthusiasts and chefs here and around the world.

Wheelock plans to launch two new bars this summer that he promises will be exciting to anyone who appreciates the distinctions between his Trinidad, Venezuela and Madagascar bars.

"The fun thing is the differences in the flavors in the origins, so we're sticking to pretty basic products."

— Jennifer Anderson