

The sweetest thing

Virginia City Creamery honored by National Geographic
By Story and photos by Tim Trainor - 08/29/2009



Virginia City ice cream shop is one of the sweetest in the nation, according to National Geographic.

The British company's 2009 "10 Best of Everything: Families, An Ultimate Guide for Travelers" named Virginia City Creamery as one of America's best.

Located at 205 W. Wallace St., the small shop was opened in 2001 by Mark and LouRae Weber of Sheridan.

Weber said he had no clue his shop was included in the book until a customer ordered a scoop, and then off-handedly noted that he was traveling the country to visit the Top 10 ice cream shops.

"I couldn't believe I was included," said Mark. "I had no idea." The Webers didn't have any idea about making ice cream, either, when they first started.

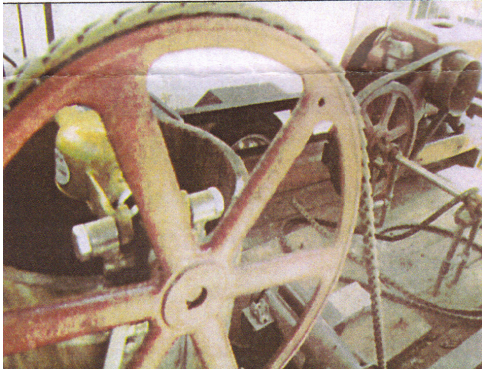
"We didn't have a clue what we were doing," said Mark, who also owns the jewelry store located next door with his wife. "I feel bad about the people who came through those first few years." They had no experience making ice cream, and the skill didn't come naturally to the Webers. But after a few years of mediocre sales and feedback, they decided to take their shop to the next level.

They enrolled in Pennsylvania State University's "Ice Cream Short Course" in 2004. The class, which has been operating since 1892, is a crash course in the art of ice cream.

"We learned how to make it in a number of ways," Mark said. "But everyone who tasted it liked it better when it was made with the older technology." That older technology fits right in with the business culture of historic Virginia City, a well-preserved old mining town that caters to tourists.

"I always tell people, you've got to buy into the history thing right away if you want to make it," Mark said. "Either buy in and go all out, or open your business someplace else."

Weber's old school technology is apparent in his operation. He makes the ice cream five gallons at a time with a 1938 McCormick-Deering engine that is just feet from Wallace Street's wooden sidewalk.



"Tourists like to watch us make the ice cream," Mark said.

They make about 60 gallons per day, which makes the Virginia City Creamery one of America's smallest commercial ice cream manufacturers.

The creamery can produce more than 20 natural flavors, because they are made in such small batches. But one flavor needs to be made more often than the others: huckleberry.

"Huckleberry is far and away our biggest seller," said Mark.

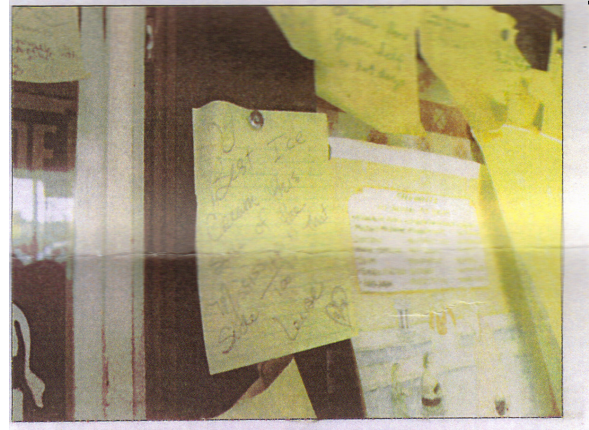
The uniqueness of the Webers' operation comes not only from how it is made, but how it is kept.

"Modern ice cream keeps trying to get smoother and smoother," he said. "Ours is chewier, and rougher, with ice crystals in there, too." That's because of the temperature, and the way his ice cream is frozen.

Tom Palchak, manager of the creamery at Penn State University where the Weber's learned the tricks of the trade, said the freezing process is an extremely important influence in the cream's taste.

The temperature at which the Weber's freeze the cream is less than zero degrees, which makes it more stiff and lickable, said Palchak.

"It's not like Soft Serve ice cream, which is made to be consumed right away," he said. "The hard-packed stuff can last a lot longer on the cone."



Customers have responded, and the feedback has been so good, the Webers have decorated their store with the comments. A little yellow note pad is available for customers to document their feelings about the ice cream. They then stick them up to the front of the store.

"Best ice cream ever!" reads a note from a traveler named Kylie.

Another is written in Dutch, and a third is from Aerosmith front man Steven Tyler.

"He's a fan," said Mark.

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