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The History of Thrifty Ice Cream

By NANCY LUNA / The Orange County Register

Three decades ago, Thrifty Ice Cream could be found in a handful of Southern California restaurants, but you wouldn't know it. Back then, shops wouldn't dare tell customers they served what was considered a poor man's ice cream made in a small factory in El Monte. At Farrell's Ice Cream Parlor, menus did not boast the Thrifty brand, which was delivered in a pick-up truck carrying unmarked 3-gallon cartons.



Thrifty Ice Cream, famous for its cylinder-shaped scoops and low prices, is celebrating its 70th birthday this year. Its parent company, Rite Aid, gave the Register a tour of its Southern California factory.

"There was a stigma. We were the cheap ice cream," said Ron Simmer, general manager of the Thrifty Ice Cream plant in El Monte. But this year, as Thrifty celebrates its 70th birthday, the nostalgic drugstore treat is finally growing up. In a billion-dollar frozen dessert industry, book-ended on each side by pricey players like Haagen Dazs to eco-friendly brands such as Ben & Jerry's, Thrifty is emerging regionally as the practical choice for the masses.

The ice cream's label is proudly displayed in indie shops from Catalina Island to Las Vegas, as well as freezer space at some Costco business warehouses in California and Washington.

Thrifty-branded kiosks have also popped up in Mexico as its East Coast parent company, Rite Aid, pushes the ice cream's presence outside its California home base.

"We've recently been going through a metamorphosis," said Simmer, who has been with the company for 30 years. "We're proud of our product, and we don't want to camouflage it." Simmer gave The Register an exclusive tour this summer of Thrifty's 34-year-old ice cream factory, a 3-acre facility tucked in a culturally diverse industrial sector in El Monte. As we enter the 20,000-square-foot plant, my senses are hijacked. I'm assaulted with sugary smells, bold colors and skin-tingling cold temperatures.

The white lab coat of one factory worker is splattered with neon blue and red stains and some brown — as if he'd been playing with finger paints all day. The collage of colors gives Simmer an instant answer to the day's first question. What kind of ice cream is being made today?

"Looks like we're making cotton candy. There's a lot of punch to the flavor," said Simmer, who can often predict (based on smell) what ice cream is being made before entering the plant. Cotton candy, as it turns out, is a year-old flavor that has performed beyond the company's expectations. Of the millions of gallons ice cream produced by Thrifty annually, the most popular sellers aren't classics such as vanilla and chocolate. Instead, fans lean toward cylinder-shaped scoops of Butter Pecan, Rocky Road, Pistachio Nut, Chocolate Chip and Mint N Chip.

Though Thrifty is not known for its unconventional varieties, bold new flavors are becoming trendier among today's Food Network-educated consumer. As a result, Simmer said Thrifty will test hundreds of quirky ideas each year before putting a new flavor to market. Some are instant money-makers, while others don't

work. "The avocado ice cream didn't cut it," said Simmer, 57. Strawberry Shortcake and Apricot-Mango sherbet didn't sell either. This summer fans are enjoying scoops of Lemonhead, Red Hots and Birthday Cake.

What also works for Thrifty is price. Today, the aptly named Thrifty ice cream, which sold for 5 cents a scoop 30 years ago, remains a bargain amid brutal economic conditions.

A single cone (2.75 ounces) costs \$1.29 while a triple scoop is \$2.49. That's roughly 50 percent less than premium scoop rivals. "We're the biggest bang for your buck," said Simmer. But don't think for a minute that the factory is skimping on ingredients. Thrifty ice cream uses imported confectionery ingredients and adds real chunks of fruit and cookie pieces to ice cream, which contains a respectable 10.25 percent amount of butterfat. (Most premium ice creams contain about 12-16 percent butterfat).

During our tour, thousands of tiny malted crunch balls were fed to a near-frozen batch of chocolate ice cream to make Chocolate Malted Krunch. Simmer said the candy pieces are made specifically for Thrifty.

That kind of quality control is getting recognized as Thrifty increases its wholesale business. Roughly 40 percent of the company's ice cream sales are generated from retailers, said Simmer, who eats a couple of bowls of chocolate chip every week. "There's much more buzz about the brand," he said.

Even Farrell's has turned. After closing shops years ago, the old-fashioned scoop shop is making a comeback under new owners. The first Orange County Farrell's to reopen debuted last year in Mission Viejo.

After testing 100 brands, the new owners decided to serve Thrifty Ice Cream — the same brand used years ago by previous owners. "We take ice cream very seriously because our guests expect and deserve the best," Farrell's owner Mike Fleming told the Register after Farrell's won our Best Ice Cream contest earlier this year.

Still, the heart of Thrifty's business lies within its old-fashioned scoop shops -- nestled inside 599 Rite Aid stores in California. (Rite Aid bought Thrifty in 1997.)

In the 1930s, the Borun brothers ran a string of Thrifty Cut-Rate Drug Stores, which were equipped with soda fountains. To maximize profits, the brothers decided to make their own ice cream in-house.

They cranked out their first ice cream batch in 1940 inside a small Hollywood factory. A cylinder-shaped stainless steel scooper was introduced a decade later to ensure each scoop was uniform.

By the 1970s, Thrifty ice cream was a household name with scoop shops inside drug stores scattered across California. Its most loyal fans fondly recall piling into the family station wagon to get a cone for as little as 5 or 15 cents.

"Best ice cream around," writes Dennis Hart, 56, on Thrifty's Facebook fan page. "Their diner sold vanilla cokes - a favorite on a hot, summer day. And they didn't mind if you came in bare-footed, either... that cold, linoleum tile floor felt so good." Strangers routinely tell Simmer similar stories when they learn he runs the Thrifty ice cream plant. "I remember buying it as a kid, and now I buy it for my kids," fans tell him.

For Simmer, that's the ultimate compliment. "It's a neat industry to be in. We make something that makes people happy."

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