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Ice Cream Industry

Handmade, Every Day, in Every Store: Handel's Growth Strategy Is Quality

This summer 38 Handel's will be operating in five states.

When Alice Handel started selling homemade ice cream out of her husband's Market Street service station in 1945, the recipes were all in her head. Like all great cooks, she added a little of this, a little of that, until her confection was perfect.

Today, Handel's ice cream is still made fresh every day, one batch at a time, all of the ingredients added by hand. The recipes are the same, but instead of remaining in Handel's head, they've been painstakingly transcribed by Leonard J. Fisher, who bought the ice cream business in 1985, then carefully watched and measured as Handel worked.

It was more than a year after he bought the business that Fisher says he realized Handel didn't have any written recipes – she continued to work in the ice cream store until her death in 1987. So, he put all of the ingredients in measuring cups and then recorded how much Handel used for each 3 1/2-gallon batch.

To ensure each flavor doesn't vary from store to store – there will be 38 Handel's throughout five states by June – employees use the written recipes and Handel's method of adding ingredients by hand to replicate more than 200 flavors.

Only 48 flavors are available each day because of limited freezer space, Fisher notes, with the most popular flavors available every day. The others change from month to month.

Adding ingredients such as fruit, nuts, chocolate chips, Oreo cookies and candies as the ice cream comes out of the machine keeps the additions from being broken into tiny, unidentifiable pieces, Fisher explains.

But the whole cherries, big chunks of cookies, and pecan halves that have been specially roasted, buttered and salted per Handel's specifications aren't the only things that set Handel's ice cream apart from other brands, Fisher says.

Unlike many store-bought brands, Handel's is 100% natural, no preservatives, artificial flavors or additives, Fisher says. "Handel's ice cream is high butter fat, low overrun, which means there's not a lot of air in it," he continues. "After a while, other ice creams will shrink in the freezer. That will never happen with Handel's."

Ice cream is made in special machines designed and made in Italy exclusively for Handel's, allowing the chain to maintain consistency and ensure the



HANDMADE – Jen Cooley, manager of the Creekside store and a corporate trainer, mixes a batch of chocolate pecan.

ice cream is made fresh in every store every day, Fisher says.

Between 150 and 200 gallons, and 80% of the available flavors, are made at each store every day, he continues.

At Handel's Creekside store near the intersection of U.S. Route 224 and Tippecanoe Road in Boardman, making ice cream begins around 10 a.m. and doesn't stop until 7 p.m.

Each batch takes 9 minutes or so in the machine, Fisher says. The workers start with a plain base of sugar, cream and milk solids. Depending on the flavor, various other ingredients are added such as chocolate, vanilla, fruit, marshmallow cream, candy, nuts and cookies.

The No. 1 seller, chocolate pecan, outsells all other flavors 5 to 1 and is served soft. Years ago, Handel's sold chocolate pecan as fast as it could be made, so it didn't have time to harden in the freezer, Fisher says. That practice of selling chocolate pecan soon after it comes out of the machine continues.

When Fisher bought the business, Handel made about 75 flavors. Today, it's more than twice that number, many discovered by mistake – call it serendipity – when employees accidentally added something not in the recipe. Chocolate-gone-nuts, a flavor created when an employee added deluxe mixed nuts rather than almonds to one recipe, was made only once, but people still ask for it, Fisher says. Customers have also helped develop new flavors.

Nothing beats a scoop of good, old-fashioned homemade ice cream, Fisher says, although he never dreamed he'd own an ice cream store.

"I grew up eating ices and sherbets. I didn't even know I liked ice cream until I tasted Handel's," Fisher says.

Fisher's grandparents owned a candy store in Brooklyn, N.Y., and he bought a lunch counter in New York when he was 20. Shortly after moving to the Mahoning Valley in 1976, Fisher and a partner opened the Yellow Submarine sandwich shop.

All the while, he kept hearing people talk about Handel's ice cream. But he could never find the store, which is tucked behind several Market Street businesses on Handel Court, a tiny one-lane, one-way alley that runs parallel to Market Street and opens onto Midlothian Boulevard.

Handel moved her business out of the service station, which stood on Market Street near Midlothian – the current site of First Place Bank – after lines of customers grew so long that she began to worry one of the children might be hit by a car, Fisher recalls.

Finally, a friend agreed to take Fisher to Handel's.

"I couldn't believe so many people were waiting in so many lines," he says. "How good could it be?"

Upon taking his first taste, Fisher understood. "It was great," he says, recalling the flavor he tried first: pineapple sherbet.

After that, Fisher became a regular at Handel's and eventually started thinking about how the ice cream could be sold in grocery stores.

At that time, Handel used six machines to make more than 300 gallons of ice cream a day at her only store, Fisher recalls, and a third of that was her signature chocolate pecan.

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Handel's: Homemade, Every Day

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"Alice loved making ice cream and she loved making people happy," Fisher says. "She never ate food. She ate a vanilla ice cream cone for breakfast, lunch and dinner."

Fisher gave up the idea of selling Handel's ice cream in supermarkets once he realized she could barely keep up with demand at her store.

On a busy day, he says, Handel's tiny stand served 1,700 customers. "There's only room for 35 cars in the parking lot!" he exclaims. Nevertheless, Handel's was a destination for thousands of area families.

After Fisher bought the business and learned to make the ice cream, he opened additional locations and began selling franchises.

But growth has been slow – and controlled – to ensure the quality of the product remains constant.

"I have requests for franchises every day," he says, "but we want to grow slowly."

After all, the secret to Handel's success has been the quality of its ice cream, Fisher says, and no one wants that to change.

Since Fisher bought the business, Handel's has gained national acclaim,

being named one of the Top 10 places in the country for ice cream by *USA Today*. It also was named one of the best ice cream parlors in the country by *travelchannel.com*, and one of the best ice creams in America by *Chocolatier Magazine*.

The reason Handel's ice cream is among the best, Fisher says, is "We don't skimp and we use the best ingredients."

Handel's also sells shakes, malts, coolers, smoothies, sundaes, banana splits, cakes, pies, hurricanes, in which ice cream is blended with candies, cookies or fruit, and "mocha-

cinno," an iced coffee drink blended with ice cream.

A kids club, for children ages 3 to 12, provides birthday treats and special prizes to members as well as an opportunity for kids to taste test new flavors, Fisher adds.

Handel's offers ice cream socials and employee recognition programs for corporate customers, and auctions off opportunities for customers to create their own flavors as fund raisers for local charities.

Handel's operates stores in Ohio, Pennsylvania, Indiana, Virginia and California.