Ice Cream Through the Ages: A brief history of the summertime treat (FlipSide)

By Thomas Ward Horace Mann Middle School (Charleston Sunday Gazette, July 26, 2019)

There are some things in our culture that are so universal that you can find some version of them nearly anywhere on Earth. Popular brands, certain books and movies and particular yummy foods. Pizza, chocolate, coffee… you can find them in most other world countries without too much trouble.

But perhaps the most universal of all — that sugary summery staple, ice cream. In Italy, they have gelato, in Japan, mochi, in India, kulfi — there’s even a French fluffy ice cream treat called “fromage,” which, contrary to the English translation of the name, does not contain any cheese. But how did the stuff get so far around? And where does it actually come from? It’s a long story, and a truly delicious one, too.

Most sources agree that the earliest known form of ice cream existed in China, about 4,000 years ago. An article published by the Old Farmer’s Almanac describes the Emperor Ta’ang and other elites enjoying several frozen dessert dishes, including flavored syrups, and a mixture of flour, fermented milk and ice. Even then “ice cream,” as it were, was very popular; according to the article, Ta’ang supposedly kept 94 “ice men” on hand to transport fresh ice from the mountains.

There are a couple of different versions of how the idea moved to and through Europe over the next 3,000 years, before being spread farther by colonization. One story told by the International Dairy Federation of America (IDFA) said that in the 1200s, Marco Polo returned to Italy from his travels in Asia with the recipe. After the dish arrived in Italy, the Italian Catarina dé Medici married a French royal, and brought ice cream recipes with her to the court of France, says the IDFA. Though both stories are romantic, they are also commonly regarded as myths. The likelier version is much more complex.

Through trade, the Chinese recipes spread through the Far East, eventually reaching the vast Persian Empire, which extended through much of the Middle East and Western Asia, say articles by both “PBS Food” and the “The Nibble.” As people generally do with new things, the Persians then added their own touch to the dish. They created something called “sharabat,” or sherbet; described by the “Nibble” article as “a cross between sorbet and rice pudding,” made of up of ice flavored with fruit syrups.

In addition, all of the aforementioned articles agree that Greek and Roman leaders on travels and conquests became famously hooked on it. Like Ta’ang, Alexander the Great had snow and ice imported, in order to make fruit ices sweetened with honey and nectar. Eventually, Alexander the Great would conquer the Persians, and sharabat would stay in the region for a good long while.

When the eighth century rolled around, the Arabs (formerly the Persians) invaded Sicily. This brought sharabat into Italy, and it once again took off as a high-class dessert, though the Italians called it “granita.” For a while, ice cream stayed in Italy, through most of the Middle Ages. But when the Renaissance, and a renewal in trade and culture arrived in Europe, it quickly began to spread, and be modified, mostly in France and Italy.

In the PBS Food article, Explore the Delicious History of Ice Cream, Tori Avey describes how with the addition of sugar, sharabat morphed into what we today call sorbet. She mentions other modifications, too; in the 1500s, an architect working in Florence added eggs and cream to sorbet, making gelato, which you probably know as an Italian version of ice cream. Antonio Latini, a man working for a Spanish viceroy in Naples, would add milk, making what many historians agree to be the first true ice cream.

Of course, for a long time, the sweet stuff would generally remain something reserved for royalty. It wouldn’t be introduced to the lower classes for a long time, and was not even brought to the non-royal wealthy until 1686, when, according to The Nibble, Fransisco Procopio dei Coltelli opened Paris’ first cafe, and became popular with many for its ice cream dishes, which in that era came largely in fruit flavors — no mint chocolate chip or rocky road, unfortunately.

When colonists came to the New World, they, quite naturally, brought ice cream with them. It remained popular, though it was not always easily available due to the complicated process that had been used to make it up to that time. The Nibble article describes it in some detail. You had to cool all of your ingredients with hand-chipped ice and salt in large pots, and stir it by hand for a very long time, and even then it had to be eaten almost immediately.

It was not until 1800 that insulated freezer-houses were invented. But both before and after that it was a very popular dish with most everyone, including several presidents. Thomas Jefferson wrote several of his own ice cream recipes, some of which you can still find today, and George Washington kept several enormous ice cream pots at Mt.Vernon, to have it easily available, according to the IDFA. The story about Martha Washington leaving a bowl of cream out on a cold night and thus discovering the tasty treat it produced is another myth.

Through the 19th and 20th centuries, ice cream was modified more, this time in America. Ice cream sodas, sundaes and other frozen dishes were invented, and served in the era’s very popular ice cream parlors. In 1903, a patent was filed for the invention of the ice cream cone, and in the ’30s, it began to be sold in grocery stores.

By WWII, it had become something of an edible American symbol. It was eaten by civilians and soldiers alike to keep up morale, and Mussolini actually outlawed ice cream in Italy, for that very reason, according to the Old Farmer’s Almanac.

After the war, production picked up again in America, and it has remained fairly constant since. The parlors and soda fountains gradually disappeared, to be replaced by packaged varieties, and specialty ice cream stores and restaurants.

Now, you can find ice cream almost anywhere, in any number of forms — scooped, rolled, freeze-dried (no wonder astronauts look sick when they get back, if they’ve had to eat that stuff), you name it. But it’s still just as popular and just as tasty as when emperors and kings took their first licks so long ago.