

# ICE CREAM: A LOOK INSIDE THE CONE



It's fair to say that ice cream is one of the most popular sweets in the Middle East. **Nagi Morkos**, founding and managing partner at Hodema consulting services, gives us the scoop on the flavors and trends to look out for.

For centuries, citizens of the Middle East have been enjoying the taste of "booza," traditional ice cream made of frozen milk, honey or sugar and thickened with starches or mastic gum. The immensely popular sweet treat showcases the region's most-loved aromas, such as ashta, rose, pistachio, cardamom and almond, to name just a few. Some even say that ice cream was created in the Middle East and reached Europe via the Arab invasion of Sicily in the eighth century. Others say it was served as a refreshment to the Caliphs in Arabic Andalusia.

#### Iced out: the impact of the pandemic

There are two sides to the frozen desserts and ice-cream industries. The divide lies between food companies selling takeaway buckets — the largest category in terms of volume — and shops and cafes serving the "sherbet" for immediate consumption, which tops the market in value terms. The outbreak of Covid-19 caused a major blow to the latter. Growth has melted away during the lockdowns as sales largely rely on flexible travel and leisure. But it is not all gloomy, as Middle Eastern customers have and will remain faithful ice-cream lovers despite the bleak circumstances.

#### The many scoops of frozen delicacies

The UAE market topped USD 120 million in 2019 and was showing steady growth until the pandemic. Five main groups share the industry: IFFCO, Mars, Unilever, National Trading & Development Est. and Galadari Ice Cream Co. IFFCO is the regional leader and owns, among others, London Dairy Cafes. Unilever runs Grom and Ben & Jerry's, which can be purchased in stores and online in the region. National Trading & Development Est. is the local distributor of Häagen Dazs. The brand currently has 16 cafes and corners in the UAE. Finally, Galadari has been a Baskin-Robbins franchisee for nearly 40 years and oversees the brand's 800 shops across the region, in KSA, UAE, Qatar, Bahrain, Oman, Jordan and Kuwait in a joint venture. Since 2018, it has also been running the Dessert Cafe in Dubai.

#### The "creamy" type

The Western type of ice cream — which we will call "creamy" to distinguish it from the others — is the main category when it comes to imported brands. It usually includes dairy products and features a wide variety of flavors. Most American and European-born brands fall into that group, such as the Swiss Mövenpick or Häagen Dazs. Since 2011, Mohammed Khaled

Alkhalaidi Trading Establishment (MKKTE) has been the exclusive franchisee of Mövenpick ice cream in Saudi Arabia.

Popular American brands have been burgeoning across the region, including Florida's Sloan that's known for its award-winning flavors and over-the-top pink decor. It has two outlets in Riyadh and Jeddah, and two cafes in Kuwait. The famous Brooklyn Creamery has also started an online business in Dubai, offering fat-free, vegan and dairy-free options. Cold Stone Creamery, launched in Arizona, is betting big on the region, with shops in Beirut, Riyadh, Jeddah, Abu Dhabi and Dubai. Marble Slab — a competing brand from Texas, with over 75 flavors and dozens of mix-ins — is now in Bahrain, UAE, Kuwait, Lebanon and Qatar. On a smaller scale, some homegrown labels are starting to make a name for themselves: Dubai's Coco Yogo specializes in plant-based frozen treats free from dairy, soya, corn, gluten, eggs, preservatives and refined sugar; it is being sold through Deliveroo. Xscoop sells blue scoops in Riyadh, while Dubai's on-the-go ice-cream parlor Camel Cones Ice Cream drives around the area with its colorful truck. In Lebanon, Froozza is the latest to open in Beirut's Mar Mikhael neighborhood.

◌ Oriental frozen delicacies have always been an all-time favorite, and although Western brands have carved out their niches, ice-cream lovers always go back to basics. ◌



#### The "exotic" type

The Japanese-inspired brand M'Oishi, located in Dubai, features the iced version of the traditional mocha rice cake. It partially imports its ingredients from Japan. In Jumeirah, iScream displays unusual flavors, such as Tabbouleh, Emirati Coffee, Curry and even Flaming Wasabi. The Ice Cream Lab is famous for its innovative take on molecular gastronomy, using liquid nitrogen to instantly freeze fresh ingredients into ice cream. The first store opened in 2014 at Dubai Mall. A master franchise agreement was signed of Saudi Arabia. Today, there are 15 branches in seven countries across the region. In Riyadh, the Nitrosphere Ice Cream Café attracts night owls with its mysterious smoking ice cream bowls. Finally Kuwait has one of the most peculiar versions of the concept. Inspired by the street food and night markets of Thailand, Annette Tuk Tuk sells ice cream on a stick, which is handmade in their central kitchen facility in Bangkok.

#### Back to the "booza"

But let's get back to where it all started. Oriental frozen delicacies have always been an all-time favorite, and although Western brands have carved out their niches, ice-

cream lovers always go back to basics. There are countless small shops selling "booza" across the region. Some have even become legends, such as Oslo in Mar Mikhael or Hanna Mitri in Achrafieh. Others had bigger plans in mind and exported their concept, including Beirut's Bouzet Jeddo. Its pomegranate, meghli and halawa flavors have traveled to Dubai. Bachir Ice Cream, known to all Lebanese, has even made it to Paris. In Kuwait, Twisting Cones celebrates "booza" the Turkish way; but Dubai's Nouq is probably the most distinctive place. The outlet offers camel milk scoops with flavors like "Honey Saffron" and "Arabic Mastic."

#### Gelato: bringing Italy to your cone

For some, the top choice is indisputably Italian gelato. With its distinctive taste and texture, the gelato has made a name for itself across the globe. Amorino and Grom are the biggest names in the market, but several smaller brands are also doing quite well. In Dubai, Canvas, Cone Street and Morelli's are among the classics, while in Kuwait, Teetoo, Frost Gelato and Casa Del Gelato are attracting crowds. The Lebanese-born Orso Bianco and Oh My Gelato!, and Saudi Arabia's La Chino Ice Cream, are bringing local twists to the century-old

frozen dessert. However, the one to watch in Saudi Arabia is Yogorino. With 13 outlets in Riyadh, Jeddah and Makkah, the European brand has been in the country since 2013, mixing two popular concepts: gelato and frozen yogurt.

#### The fro-yo craze

Frozen yogurt — or "fro-yo" — has widely benefited from the growing interest in health and wellness to become the guilt-free, healthy but tasty alternative to ice cream. While some ice-cream parlors have decided to make the shift by offering organic and lighter options, others have switched to frozen yogurt altogether. Cone Zone, established in Saudi Arabia in 1993, was a pioneer in the country for low-fat and dairy-free options. Today, it supplies restaurants, coffee shops and hotels in KSA and across the region. Menchie's in Dubai has over 100 rotating flavors, including non-fat, low-carb, gluten-free and non-dairy options. The frozen yogurt trend has also brought the popsicle back from the 90s. In KSA, Gourmet Pops sells all-natural fruit iced sticks, while Beirut's PopCity pays tribute to the famous "booza talej."