



In the age before refrigeration, ice cream was a most evanescent, and thus prized, delectable; those who served it had to be nimbly resourceful in keeping it cold and in its ideal form.

It's said that Marco Polo brought back a recipe for "water ices" to Italy from China, and that the delicacy later evolved into ice cream. But even if its origins are in the East, ice cream has very much become a new-world delight. Consumers in the U.S. eat more ice cream than those in any other country in the world. And its history shares an interesting parallel with America's—in the 1770s, the first ice-cream parlor opened in New York City, just as the country was asserting its independence.

Since then, ice cream has evolved in tandem with our ability to preserve it. In 1832, the Philadelphia confectioner Augustus Jackson refined a process for making ice cream, developed some new recipes, and began selling it to other ice-cream parlors, with the product packaged in quart-size tin buckets covered with ice. Presumably, the labeling for the tin was minimal.

A little more than a decade later, Nancy Johnson invented a device, later patented by another inventor as "Johnson's Patent Ice-Cream Freezer," to make the dairy treat much more easily. Ice cream was originally produced in small quantities, but by the mid-19th century, factories emerged where the dessert was kept cold on ice. During the late 19th century, industrial refrigeration machines became increasingly widespread, and in the early 1920s, the continuous-process freezer increased the efficiency of ice-cream production. Enter the ice-cream package.

SINGLE SERVING

A brief history of ice-cream packaging

By Steven Heller

For small, ready-to-eat quantities, the edible cone, which debuted in 1904 at the Louisiana Purchase Exposition, was perfectly suitable. Wooden ice chests or metal containers were used to transport large quantities. In that era, waxed-paper cartons were de rigueur for packaging, but ice cream still had to be eaten rather quickly before it turned to a gloppy mess. Branded ice-cream packaging came into its own with the advent of single-serve portions such as pops, bars, sandwiches, and Eskimo Pies. In 1920 Harry Burt invented one of the most iconic of these confections when he covered a bar of ice cream with a chocolate coating; to avoid a mess, he put it on a stick, and the Good Humor bar was born. A paper wrapper covered the actual bar, so Good Humor's trademark—an ice-cream pop with a bite chewed off the top—revealed the layers of goodness inside.

Many kinds of packaging, from wrappers (paper and foil) and cups (paper, plastic, and Styrofoam) to square boxes, circular vats, and rectangular tubs, have been used to hold the frozen delight. Logos, imaginary trade characters, and goofy animals have pitched the product, as have images of happy children and drawings or photographs of what's inside. Some packages just use type alone—clearly the message is of the utmost importance. No color is off-limits for ice cream, unlike most other food, the packages of which tend to be more restrained. No novelty graphic is too absurd. Of course, there is still good and bad packaging. But decorated or spare, there is something far more archetypal, even primal, at work here: Whatever the design may be, mouths will water. ■

