

Taste that's always cool

SUMMER wouldn't be the same without ice cream. What is it about it that brings out the child in us? Whatever one's age, there is something almost magical about the tinkle of an ice cream van on a long summer evening.

It could be that ice cream makes us hark back to bygone summers of our childhood, which is why the production site for Purbeck Ice Cream – an Enid Blytonesque former dairy farm overlooking Corfe Castle – seems such a romantically fitting location for making cold stuff.

Much has changed for Peter and Hazel Hartle since they started their business 20 years ago, when their three boys were infants and the couple had one ice cream van. Now with 14 members of staff and a production line that can make up to 1,800 litres an hour, Purbeck Ice Cream supplies the crème de la crème of catering establishments both down here and up in London, not to mention many a happy local and tourists over the summer. Dairy farmers by trade, with a Friesian herd on their 126 acres of hillside pasture; the quotas in the '80s.

Hazel explained; "We had to get up to 80 cows to make us viable, but the government put down out quota to 30 cows. We could not afford to that, so we went up to 80 cows, but we had to find something to do with the surplus milk. We never planned to go into ice cream, but we found once we started making it that there was a little, rather than no money, at the end of it"

The inspiration for Purbeck Ice Cream was, from the beginning, the idea of "ice cream as it used to taste". In their courtship Peter and Hazel bonded over a mutual love of ice cream. "We used to do ice cream crawls," smiled Hazel. But their preference on these crawls was for natural flavours and colours. "Did you know there's no such thing as Cornish ice cream?" said Hazel. "All it is, is added yellow colouring."

Now their product contains natural flavours with no unnatural colouring, no eggs, no nuts and no gluten.

Hazel said: "When we first started there were quite slim pickings when it came to natural flavours. We started off with flavours that were in season at the time such as raspberry and blackberry.

"We try and stick as much as possible now to things we can source locally. We start on the farm, and then we look in Purbeck, then Dorset then the South and then the UK. You can not find things like mango and chocolate and vanilla in this country. But we check that the traders are ethical, like-minded people."

One problem the ice cream makers faces in the early days of the business was that they could not find a nice enough vanilla flavours.

The problem was, Hazel explains, that most big ice cream companies, years and years back, used to add strong artificial vanilla to their ice cream to hide the fact that surplus fat from the company had been added to the mix. "So our basic mix is milk, double cream and clotted cream," she elaborated. "We launched our 'traditional' as we called it then; it was made with clotted cream and no vanilla flavour at all. It took off. Eventually, we did find a vanilla we liked, which was natural essence. Now we sell both"

The Hartle's ice cream venture was a success. Before long, the cows and quota had been sold and they began to buy the milk in from elsewhere. "It had to be Purbeck milk; 90 per cent of it comes from our neighbouring farm," said Hazel. "Once we went wholeheartedly into ice cream and started buying in the milk;

we started doing something with the seasonal variation."

The seasonal variation is reflected in the way that in winter, when the trade is quiet in Dorset, it is busiest up in London because everyone tends to eat out then.

"London is always a couple of years ahead of us and we are pretty good in Dorset," said Hazel. "The London people like the Spice Rack range such as the cracked black pepper, whereas locally the more traditional flavours sell."

The Spice Rack range, which features Purbeck Ice Cream's most outrageous creations, includes cracked black pepper, lemon grass and the famous chilli red flavours.

"We made chilli red for Sringbourne Fire Station in Bouremouth when they were doing a Mexican evening," Hazel explained. "The chefs got hold of it and they said you must serve it with fish. They said, 'You do not have this big bowl with wafer; scoop it with a melon-baller and serve it with seafood.'" She added: "Rick Stein gave us an award for the sheer audacity of launching a chilli ice cream. He used a cheese slicer and rolled



it into a curl and put it on top of a sizzling steak. Because of its all-natural ingredients, it becomes cream sauce when it melts. It's very versatile to play around with."

From the beginning, the Hartles have also made sorbets in which the farm's water from their private supply is now used. The latest sorbet flavours are pomegranate and quince. Hazel explained "Pomegranate is in vogue. It's about getting the right flavour out at the right time."

The latest addition to the sorbet range is Bucks Fizz in celebration of the company's 20th birthday. Despite its old-fashioned backdrop, the family business retains a very modern flavour.

For more information, visit www.purbeckicecream.co.uk