

Dining In

The New York Times

Making Texas Cows Proud

By R. W. APPLE Jr.

BRENHAM, Tex.

THE tens of thousands of German immigrants who poured through the Port of Galveston and across south-central Texas in the mid-19th century brought with them formidable appetites not only for hard work but also for good food and drink. All these many decades later, the Lone Star State still relishes and keeps alive their legacies.

Take beer. Texans rural and urban dote on long-neck bottles of Shiner bock, Shiner lager and other suds with the distinctive tang of the Rhineland, made by the little Spoetzl Brewery hidden away halfway between San Antonio and Houston.

Cutting even closer to the heart of the matter, take barbecue. African-Americans and Hispanics clearly had a lot to do with establishing 'cue as a Texan passion, but it was German-American butchers, drawing upon the Old Country's meat-smoking traditions, who enshrined beef rather than pork as the regional meat of choice. Not by accident

have families named Mueller (in Taylor) and Kreuz and Schmidt (in Lockhart) served up some of the state's top barbecued brisket and link sausage for years on end.

Perhaps less obviously, you could — you should — take ice cream. Blue Bell ice cream, to be specific, which is made in out-of-the-way Brenham and which many people consider the best in the country. So many people think so that Blue Bell, though sold in only 16 states, mostly in the South, and sold for a premium price, ranks No. 3 in sales nationally, trailing only Dreyer's (known as Edy's in some areas) and Breyers, ahead of the more widely available Häagen-Dazs and Ben & Jerry's.

The 100th anniversary of Blue Bell Creameries — “the little creamery in Brenham,” as it folksily and misleadingly describes itself — will be celebrated in 2007. For most of those years, members of a German-American family named Kruse (pronounced CREW-zee) have been at the helm, exhibiting an obsession with quality and a way with words. Ask why distribution is so restricted, and



Megan Thompson for The New York Times

JUST ADD SPOON Blue Bell ice cream from Brenham, Tex.

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Ice Cream to Make a Texas Cow Proud

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the Kruses answer, "It's a cinch by the inch but it's hard by the yard." Ask about raw materials, and they reply, "The milk we use is so fresh it was grass only yesterday."

Snappy slogans like those, coined by family members and an inventive Houston advertising man named Lyle Metzdorf, have helped to fuel the growth of Blue Bell, which is named for an indigo-colored wildflower that blooms in July, when ice-cream cravings become irresistible.

Ads are all-important, Ed F. Kruse, 78, the company's avuncular chairman, said in an interview. "You could put gold nuggets in the ice cream, but that wouldn't do you any good unless you get it into people's mouths so they can see if they like it."

But Blue Bell is not all hat and no cattle, as they say of some things and some people in Texas. With clean, vibrant flavors and a rich, luxuriant consistency achieved despite a butterfat content a little lower than some competitors, it hooks you from the first spoonful. Entirely and blessedly absent are the cloying sweetness, chalky texture and oily, gummy aftertaste that afflict many mass-manufactured ice creams.

I wouldn't (quite) claim to remember every bite of ice cream that I've eaten since my first tastes of peppermint stick at Mary Coyle's and banana at Isaly's in Akron, Ohio, around 1940. But I can recall no American commercial ice cream in a league with Blue Bell except the remarkable Graeter's, which is made in Cincinnati and sold only there and in a few nearby cities.

The Kruse family sings from the same hymnal, stressing the importance of central control. Ed Kruse; Howard, 75, Ed's brother, the company's president emeritus, and Paul, 61, Ed's son, the president, entrust nothing to franchisees or distributors. Every ounce of their ice cream is made in their four plants, one in Sylacauga, Ala., one in Broken Arrow, Okla., and two here in Brenham, a trim little town of 13,500 set amidst rolling hills carpeted with live oaks and daisies an hour or so west of Houston.

"We make it all, we deliver it all in our own trucks and we maintain all the stock in retailers' freezers," Ed Kruse told my wife, Betsey, and me as we sat in the old-fash-



Photograph by Monroe Schwartz for The New York Times

ioned ice cream parlor at Blue Bell's headquarters, dreamily lapping up dishes of its best-selling product, Homemade Vanilla. "Ice cream does not do well if it isn't handled carefully. The texture is ruined by any significant variation in temperature."

Ice cream that makes Brenham a bigger draw than Crawford.

The milk of more than 50,000 cows from Jersey and Holstein herds on farms within 200 miles of Brenham is delivered to Blue Bell's plants here every day of the year. Every batch is carefully tested lest an "off" flavor creep in. Control again.

No wonder deprived Yankees and displaced Texans pay big bucks to have Blue Bell sent to them, packed in dry ice (four half-gallons for \$89, including shipping). No wonder astronauts on board the Atlantis space shuttle took some Blue Bell along with them in 1995. And no wonder the White House press corps goes through gallons of the stuff whenever it finds itself sweltering in the underwhelming Crawford, Tex.

Fellow named Bush is said to like a scoop or two on a hot day, too.

For many people, buying Blue Bell ice cream means buying into a carefully crafted image of bucolic simplicity and tranquility, light years from the hurly-burly of 21st-century urban commerce.

But don't plan a pilgrimage to Brenham

in search of farm wives in gingham frocks churning out ice cream in wooden tubs. True enough, Blue Bell remains a family company. True enough, it still uses the charming little white building with an Art Deco facade in which it once made all its ice cream. But today it produces more than 100 pints a minute in its big modern plant, with enough stainless-steel tanks, pipes and specialized machinery to equip a small refinery. Its annual sales top \$400 million.

A mixture of milk and cream is first pasteurized and homogenized, then blended with sugar and flavoring agents, on the Blue Bell production line. Rows of 40-year-old Cherry-Burrell freezers, with a capacity of 60 gallons each, spew out ice cream with the consistency of a milkshake. Six hours in a blast freezer turns it rock-hard, dropping the temperature well below zero.

When I asked Howard Kruse for the real secret behind Blue Bell's success — not for the formula, which I knew he wouldn't tell me — he replied, "A combination of process and ingredients." Duh.

A half-gallon of Blue Bell, whose retail price ranges from \$4.99 to \$5.99, weighs 52 ounces, compared to 40 ounces for Breyers, and it has a butterfat content of 13 percent, compared to 18 percent for Häagen-Dazs.

Italian gelato, also noted for richness, contains even less butterfat, usually around 7 percent and never more than 10. And Blue Bell's sweetness is restrained. When I ran these facts past Mr. Kruse, he replied, "We aim to fill our customers up on taste, not on fat and sugar." Double duh.

On the matter of flavors, the Kruses are a good deal more forthcoming. They make 45 or 50 in any given year, building on a core list of 17. The rest vary from season to season and market to market. Grocers' freezers are not big enough to accommodate all the varieties customers might want — peppermint year round, for example — so a system of rotation is inevitable.

The biggest seller by far is Homemade Vanilla, developed in 1969; it is only one of four vanillas in the repertory, and it is of course not homemade at all, just made to taste as if it were. I was struck by two things about it: a faint hint of maple flavor, which I



THE BEST PART Schoolchildren in the ice cream parlor at the headquarters of Blue Bell Creameries in Brenham, Tex. Howard Kruse, far left, and his brother, Ed, help run the company, which is 99 years old.

found very appealing, since I love maple syrup, and the absence of the tiny black flecks (the seeds of the vanilla pod) that are so evident in most premium vanillas.

If it is flecks that you crave, you can opt for Natural Vanilla Bean.

Cookies 'n Cream comes second. Blue Bell makes no claim to have invented it but certainly pioneered the flavor, buying Oreo cookies at retail prices from Nabisco, painstakingly cutting open each package and dumping the contents into the mixers. That got tedious very quickly, and today Blue Bell bakes its own.

No. 3: Dutch Chocolate, made with — you guessed it — chocolate from the Netherlands, with the taste of the finest cocoa. No. 4: Great Divide, half Homemade Vanilla and half Dutch Chocolate.

Some regional flavor preferences are easy to fathom. New Orleans, a big banana port since the 19th century, loves Banana Pudding (and Banana Split, which I admit that I found a bit of a dog's dinner, over-stuffed as it is with sliced maraschino cherries, crushed pineapple, almonds, strawberry topping, chocolate syrup and quarter-inch slices of bananas fresh from the Chiquita box). It's much harder to understand why parts of the Midwest adore Black Walnut

and why El Paso has a passion for Pistachio-Almond.

There are flavors with a Hispanic influence: Dos Amigos, in which vanilla ice cream is swirled with Mexican chocolate containing a hint of cinnamon, for example, and brightly hued Piñata, flavored with lemon and accented with strawberry.

I long to taste Peanut Butter Cup (Reese's are among my many weaknesses) and Hot Fudge Sundae (another one) and Cinnamon (still another hard-to-get variety, since it is sold only in restaurants). When they saw me drooling unashamedly at the prospect, the kindly folks in Brenham promised to send me some Cantaloupe and Cream this summer. It is made only from July 4 to Aug. 4, when cantaloupes from Pecos, the state's best, reach peak ripeness.

But I already know my favorite: Buttered Pecan. I'd never tasted anything like it, nor had Betsey — packed with roasted, lightly salted Texas pecan halves. (The pecan, as Ed Kruse was quick to remind me, is the Texas state tree.) Rich. Mellow. Salt and sugar playing Ping-Pong in my mouth. I could easily down a pint at a single sitting. Just give me a spoon (no dish required) and stand back, kid.