

A Snowball's Chance

There's more science to a snowball than syrup and ice.



Snowball fans will defend their favorite with the ferocity usually reserved for sports teams and deities. One hot afternoon, three intrepid *OffBeat* staffers set off with a thirst for knowledge and an unquenchable hunger for sugar to understand what inspires such devotion.

Our quest began at Pandora's in Mid-City, where there always seems to be a line. Our favorite here was the nectar cream, a super-sweet flavor with origins in the mythical K&B drugstores. The ice was smoother in the nectar cream than in the two non-cream flavors we tasted, which we also noticed at other stands. Cream flavors are refrigerated, so we guessed that the colder syrup keeps the ice soft.

We also tried the exotically named Tiger's Blood, which actually tastes like a cherry Slurpee sprinkled with coconut. According to SnowWizard, which makes machines and syrups for many stands, Tiger's Blood is the twelfth most popular flavor locally. Nectar doesn't even make the list.

Next up was Sal's, a nearly 50-year-old stand in the parking lot of a Metairie bank. Like all great snowball stands, Sal's is the kind of place where the *Happy Days* gang might go after a date. Sal's flavors were vivid and unique. The cream of chocolate tasted like a Tootsie Roll, and I mean that as a compliment. The peach tasted like fruit. Sugar, though, was the main flavor at Sal's, where the snowballs were the sweetest we found. And some of the ice had hard patches that we couldn't crack with our plastic spoons.

We continued to William's Plum Street Snowballs, which many champion as the city's best. Plum Street uses a rickety Eisenman's machine that sounds like a lathe grinding metal. It makes some of the smoothest ice we sampled. We also liked the substitution of cups with charmingly impractical Chinese take-out pails, which have to be wrapped in plastic bags to catch drips. Plum Street makes its own condensed milk, so we ordered a squeeze on another nectar cream snowball. We didn't notice

much difference from regular condensed milk, although after nearly nine snowballs our palates were perhaps not at their peaks.

Nearing the end, we descended on the Queen of the Ball, a new place on Oak Street. The queen has a few clever gimmicks to compete with the classics. The cheery shop, with its girly black and pink striped décor, specializes in fruit stuffed snowballs and a long list of special mixes carefully annotated in a Mead composition book. A wedding cake-flavored snowball stuffed with strawberries was the winner here, although one person grumbled that stuffed snowballs aren't real snowballs. Even our crew's curmudgeon, though, couldn't deny its good taste.

We ended our journey on the yellow line at Hansen's. I'll confess that I'm a fierce Hansen's partisan. Although my faith wasn't shaken, I'll admit now that other snowball stands have their charms. Hansen's flavors, though, are richer than most. No one can touch the tartness of its lemonade syrup. And the ancient, noisy machine, hand-built by the late Ernest Hansen, still makes some of the softest ice in town.

After our afternoon of snowball research, I wondered why the ice's texture, even at stands using the same SnowWizard machine, could vary so much. Eager for answers, I visited the SnowWizard factory on River Road—the New Orleans equivalent of a trip to Willa Wonka's. Even in the parking lot, a sugary smell fills the air. The showroom has the original machine that George J. Ortolano built in 1936 for his grocery store on the corner of Magazine and Delachaise. Ronnie Sciortino, Ortolano's nephew and the current head of SnowWizard, showed me around the plant.

Why, I asked, do some snowball stands produce better ice? Not surprisingly, the blades must be sharp. The ice's temperature matters. Too cold, and the ice becomes dry and won't stick together. Too warm, and the ice gets wet and balls up. Most importantly, the operator must push the ice against the blades with a slow, gentle pressure. Too much force, and the machine creates coarse

chunks instead of powdery snow.

The machine has barely changed since 1936. Today, when so much is automated and automatic, it's good to know that a snowball still requires craft.

OTHER NEWS

Greg Sonnier, the chef of the much-missed Gabrielle restaurant, brings his lusty Louisiana food to the ultra-refined dining room of the Windsor Court's Grill Room... Through Labor Day, \$21 gets you a three-course Caribbean lunch with a complimentary mojito at 7 on Fulton... Joel Dondis (La Petite Grocery and Sucré) opened Grand Isle, a seafood-centric restaurant in Harrah's growing complex on Fulton Street... The Emeril Lagasse Foundation gave \$500,000 to local youth organizations, including the NOCCA's culinary program and Edible Schoolyard at Green Charter School... Li'l Dizzy's opened a second location in the CBD... La Spiga, the Marigny's favorite bakery, closed its doors. ★

Grand Isle: 575 Convention Center Blvd., 520-8530.

Grill Room: Windsor Court Hotel, 300 Gravier St., 522-1992.

Hansen's Sno-Bliz: 4801 Tchoupitoulas St., 891-9788.

Li'l Dizzy's Café at the Whitney: 610 Poydras St., 212-5656.

Pandora's Snowballs: 901 N. Carrollton Ave.

Queen of the Ball: 8116 Oak St., 430-5718

Sal's Snowballs: 1823 Metairie Ave., Metairie.

7 on Fulton: Riverfront Hotel, 701 Convention Center Blvd., 681-1034.

William's Plum Street Snowballs: 1300 Burdette St., 866-7996.

Todd A. Price is included in Michelle Lovric's Skewered! (Chicago Review Press), a collection of quotes from the rudest food reviews ever.