

CELEBRATING NATIONAL ICE CREAM DAY

A look inside Shaw's, Tillsonburg's own ice cream plant

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Editor

There's nothing that says summer more than ice cream. With National Ice Cream Day coming up on July 20th, it's the perfect time to enjoy a scoop, and to look at the story behind Tillsonburg's own ice cream factory.

The evolution of Shaw's Ice Cream is one that traces its roots back to another Tillsonburg institution: Dad's Ice Cream, the local ice cream shop on Vance Drive that has been owned by the McLaughlin sisters since 1993.

"I've scooped Shaw's Ice Cream since I was 11 years old," said Kelly Heleniak, one of the partners of Shaw's with sisters Kristine Hayes and Kim McCutchen.

Dad's Ice Cream was the perfect summer job for the sisters but disappointment set in when they received a letter in 2001 from their supplier (Shaw's Ice Cream) that the company was closing.

At the time, the older two sisters had established careers, and Kelly, Kristine, and Kim were in university. Their younger sister was still in high school.

"Us middle three sisters thought, 'We love Shaw's; we know about retailing ice cream,'" Heleniak recounted. "We investigated other suppliers but thought this could be an opportunity to make our own ice cream for Dad's under the Shaw's name and keep the brand alive. That's how this whole crazy idea started."

Stepping back in time, Shaw's was a family-run business started in downtown St. Thomas in 1948. The company moved to the Sunset Road location in the 1950s and added a dairy bar. The company expanded and launched Shaw's Dairy Stores, which had several dozen locations across the province. The Becker Milk Company bought Shaw's in 1987, which, in turn, was bought out by Mac's in

the 1990s which left the business corporately run.

"Ice cream was not their core business, it's convenience stores," Heleniak said, explaining this is why the doors of the St. Thomas plant were being shuttered.

A new venture

The three young entrepreneurs entered the ice cream-making business with just a two-week crash course from Grant Devereaux, who was the plant manager at the time. They kept one production employee, Sue Haines, who is still with them today.

In the early years Hayes started as the accountant, McCutchen got her D license for deliveries, and Heleniak looked after the sales and customers. All three learned how to make the ice cream they had been scooping for years.

"People were still lined up," Heleniak recalled, on the positive point of the launch.

On the negative side of the venture, Shaw's had sent out notices its doors were closing before the



(CONTRIBUTED PHOTO)

Sisters, left to right, Kim McCutchen, Kristine Hayes and Kelly Heleniak are the owners of the Shaw's Ice Cream plant in Tillsonburg.

ice cream stores and a growing number of retailers. Learning more about the industry, they came to the realization if the company was going to expand further, they needed a bigger facility and to modernize the 1950s ice cream-making machinery that came with the plant.

"We realized something big had to happen, so we moved the

plant. Besides supplying other scoop shops, Shaw's is available in tubs across Canada in Sobeys's, Food Basics, Wal-Mart and hundreds of locally independent shops and markets.

The emphasis over the last 20-plus years has been on growing the brand, which has paid off, Heleniak said. "There's a huge push for buying local and Canadian. We are a small family business that is women-led. Fresh cream is our first ingredient and we pride ourselves on using 100 per cent Canadian dairy."

The company now employs 100 people during the peak summer season, and nearly 60 year-round.

The modern plant has two lines for ice cream manufacturing and a line for soft ice cream bagging. The process starts with a mixture of milk, cream, and sugar. The mix is pasteurized, and then ages for approximately 24hrs. It is then pumped into ice cream machines and freezes; coming out like soft ice cream at -5C. Depending on the flavour being made a ripple and/or an inclusion (fruit, candy, brownie) is added to the flow of ice cream with pumps and feeders. The product then chills for a minimum of 24 hours in blast freezers at -28° C to become hard ice cream.

On top of their Shaw's brand, ice cream is also produced for eight other companies, which include various formulas of custard, frozen yogurt, grocery pints, non-dairy, a line of organic ice cream and other specially formulated frozen desserts.

Shaw's Ice Cream can be found locally at The Country Table, Chrissy's Corner Store, Bre's Fresh Market, Sobeys, Zehrs, and metro.

Of flavours and names

Twenty flavours of Shaw's Ice Cream are offered in the take-

home 1.5L tubs, with 65 available in larger containers for locations serving scoops.

The flavour of the summer is Monster Cookie. Other top sellers are Moose Tracks™, Grammy's Cupboard, Coffee & Cream, Death by Chocolate, Cotton Candy and Chocolate Peanut Butter.

Naming ice cream flavours is something fun the sisters share. Lumberjack, Dump Truck, Unicorn Toots and Peanut Butter Boss are examples of some of the unique names they have dreamt up over the years.

Grammy's Cupboard, a standby with vanilla ice cream, a peanut butter ripple, chocolate chip cookie dough and brownie chunks, has an interesting story.

"It was a nod to our Grammy," Heleniak said. "Growing up, she always had her home-made chocolate chip and peanut butter cookies in her cupboard, along with packages of little brownies, when we would come to visit."

Dump Truck is chocolate ice cream with "dump loads of brownies" and a blue marshmallow ripple while Unicorn Toots is a vanilla cake batter base with a pink frosting ripple and rainbow chocolate chipits."

This year's limited edition 1.5L flavours are Cherry Cheesecake, Coffee & Cream, and Monster Cookie. The latest updates can be found online at www.shawsicecream.com

a family-run business with a focus on manufacturing quality ice cream with unique flavour offerings," Heleniak said. "This has really set us apart from our competition. We are proud of our roots and what we have been able to accomplish by owning Shaw's Ice Cream for the past 24 years."

To infinity and beyond

That catch phrase from the Toy Story movies could apply to the future of Shaw's and a realization the owners had about childhood and happiness.

"We understand there's an emotion attached to our offerings," Heleniak said. "People associate ice cream with happiness which is special for our brand."

That happiness is relatable, whether it's going to Dad's Ice Cream after a soccer game, or enjoying a home-scooped ice cream during the summer - ice cream has a sense of nostalgia associated with joy.

"It becomes part of people's lives and core memories," Heleniak said. "Most reflections of enjoying ice cream are coupled with a positive event like a birthday, a special outing or simply sharing a moment with friends or family at their local ice cream shop"

When work started on the Tillsonburg plant, the initial thought was it was too big. Now, it is realized more freezer space is need-



(CONTRIBUTED PHOTO)

three sisters bought the company in June 2001. It was in the midst of the busy season for ice cream shops, and customers had been forced to find new suppliers.

"It was an uphill battle," Heleniak said.

From these humble beginnings, they persevered, and slowly, Shaw's Ice Cream returned to

manufacturing portion of our business to our hometown of Tillsonburg on Clearview Drive" Heleniak said.

Purchasing a building that was used for wind turbine parts, extensive renovations were done, and state of the art equipment was purchased.

The St. Thomas original plant is now a retail only destination and continues to draw crowds as one of the busiest ice cream shops in Ontario. The Shaw's Dairy Bar is a must stop for travellers on their way to Port Stanley beach. This location is open from March break until December.

"It has become a real destination for tourists and locals," Heleniak said. "Generations of families have frequented our dairy bar and it is a landmark for Elgin County"

Today, Shaw's manufactures the equivalent of nearly 33 million scoops of ice cream in their 60,000-square-foot Tillsonburg



(JEFF HELSDON PHOTO)

Sue Haines, the only original employee of Shaw's Ice Cream from the former ownership, still works in the Tillsonburg plant and is shown with ice cream making machines in the background.

cream.com or the company's Facebook or Instagram pages (@shawsicecream).

"The idea is to pique customers' interest with something new," Heleniak said. "If it's a runaway hit, we keep it in our line-up."

Sometimes a flavour is retired to make way for new ones but then can reappear years later.

"Our goal when we purchased Shaw's was to get back to being

ed, and an addition will be necessary in the near future.

There are plans to expand the co-pack part of the business, but the main focus will be on the continuation of producing high-quality ice cream under the Shaw's Ice Cream brand.

The business has also come full circle - the three sisters' children are working at Dad's Ice Cream, and in the event trailers, just like their mothers did.



(CONTRIBUTED PHOTO)

Enjoying ice cream at Dad's is a Tillsonburg summer tradition.