

MackKay's Cochrane Ice Cream turns 60 Creamy confection has delighted Albertans for generations

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Calgary Herald

Wednesday, May 14, 2008

As a toddler, Robyn MacKay used to stand on a stool beside her father, while he cranked out pail after pail of his now-famous ice cream.

"He let me hold the spatula," she recalls with a laugh.

By the time she was 13, she was wearing a uniform -- a headscarf and flowered seersucker sleeveless apron -- and scooping ice cream cones for customers by herself.

"I still remember my mom and dad standing in the back listening and peeking around the corner to see what I was doing," she says.

"I remember being so nervous, being all on my own."

Not anymore. Robyn is part of the legendary MacKay's Cochrane Ice Cream dynasty. The family-owned, Cochrane-based company celebrates 60 years in business this summer. (To mark the occasion, staff will celebrate with a birthday party July 20 at the store.)

MacKay's Cochrane Ice Cream was officially started in 1948, but the story begins a couple of years earlier. James MacKay -- Robyn's father -- had been a soldier in the Second World War. After the war ended, he came back to Cochrane, the town where he'd been born and raised.

In 1946, he bought a late-1800s general store, a small shop that sold a little of everything, from coffee to brassieres.

Christina was his young wife, a war bride who came to Canada from Scotland that same year.

At that time, the road in front of the shop was the old Highway 1, Robyn says.

"Dad used to get a bit of tourist trade back then, people travelling through to Banff," she explains.

But shortly after he started the business, the highway was rerouted around the town.

"He thought, 'What am I going to do to bring the tourists back?' He thought maybe people would come into town for a cone on their way to the mountains."

The rest, as the expression goes, is history. By 1948, the MacKays were selling soft vanilla ice



CREDIT: Jenelle Schneider, Calgary Herald
ice cream



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cream cones, a big novelty back then. Eventually, James started making hard ice cream and within a few years, people were coming from miles around to enjoy the family's rich, creamy treats.

When their father passed away in 1983, Robyn and her sister Rhona MacKay took over the business. It was a tough go at first. The pair had never ordered supplies or balanced the books.

"We didn't even have a key to the store," Robyn recalls.

"We were just stumbling around . . . but we weren't afraid to ask for help."

These days, Robyn, now 49, manages the retail side of the business -- scooping ice cream for customers and hiring and managing the fellow scoopers. Rhona, 51, handles "the plant" where the ice cream is made, a couple of blocks from the main shop.



CREDIT: Jenelle Schneider, Calgary Herald
MacKay's Ice Cream in Cochrane offers a wide variety of flavours.

(Two other siblings, Heather and Allan, are also involved in the business, although not as extensively as Rhona and Robyn.)

In the early days, flavours were fairly simple -- chocolate, vanilla, butterscotch, typical North American ice cream fare. (James MacKay's original hand-cranked ice cream-maker now sits on display at the front of the store, as does the old-fashioned ringer washing machine used to wash uniforms, and the coffee grinder from the family's general store days.)

Today, the MacKays make 100,000 litres of ice cream a year. They have more than 200 varieties and, at any one time, there are roughly 53 flavours in the Cochrane store, which sells about 250,000 cones a year.

Not all the ingredients are 100 per cent natural ("That would be impossible with flavours like bubblegum," notes Robyn), but the milk and cream come from Parmalat Dairy in Calgary, and the ice cream is high in butter fat, dense and delicious, she says.

"It tastes like creamy heaven," she says. "It's really rich. . . . You can taste that in your first lick."

Chocolate, vanilla, strawberry and maple-walnut have always been the most popular flavours.

But these days, many of the most popular varieties reveal an Asian influence, Robyn says. Tropical fruits are always a hit, as are green tea, purple yam, avocado, jackfruit and even durian, a strong-smelling Asian fruit. The durian is so pungent, says Robyn, that it has to be made at the end of the day, and staff wrap the containers in plastic as soon as it's made. It isn't for sale by the cone; fans buy the entire container and open it elsewhere.

Other varieties, however, are decidedly more mainstream.

"We're trying new flavours all the time. This week, we tried an apple-pear sorbet," Robyn says.

"The possibilities are endless, right? You can combine just about anything into an interesting ice cream."

Christina MacKay, Robyn and Rhona's mother, is now 82, but she still comes into the store five days a week, to check the legacy that she and her husband created so many years ago.

And she still eats ice cream every day. (For the record, she doesn't have cholesterol or weight problems, says Robyn, and her favourite flavour is mochaccino.)

Robyn, on the other hand, is a diehard butterscotch fan, a flavour that's been her favourite since childhood. The only difference, she notes, is that nowadays, it's called "buttery butter brickle." She eats it two or three times a week -- usually at the end of the day.

And what a day. Like every retail business, finding reliable staff is tricky these days, and in the summer, the shop is open seven days a week, from 10 a.m. to 10 p.m. On a summer weekend, between 3,500 and 4,500 people go through the doors each day.

The busiest time of the day? Around 3 p.m. on hot, sunny Saturdays and Sundays.

Many of the people in the lineups are regulars. Like Robyn and Rhona, they've grown up eating the ice cream, and now they're bringing their kids -- or they're finally old enough to go to the store by themselves.

"I don't always remember who they all are, but I know them well enough to say, 'Hey, how are you? You got your driver's licence, didn't you?'" says Robyn. "And how's your mom?"

Those connections are part of what makes the store so special, says Robyn.

"It becomes a journey of memories for people," she says. "It's a happy place, a way to spend time together."

Speaking of time, what does the future hold for the MacKay ice cream dynasty? If Robyn knows, she isn't telling.

She, for one, doesn't have any children who may one day want to take over the business. Then again, she doesn't plan to retire any time soon either. ("I still feel like I'm 25," she laughs.)

Rhona has two daughters, now grown; one, Katie MacKay, 23, is helping to make ice cream this summer. (She's already invented a new flavour, ambrosia salad, that's made with marshmallows and pineapple.)

Heather and Allan both have grown children, too.

Will they one day decide to take it over, to keep their grandfather's dream alive for yet another generation?

"We don't know what's going to happen. Our hopes have always been to keep it," Robyn says.

"For the fast pace of the Alberta economy, it's nice to have something that's consistent, something that you can go back to year after year.

"Plus, it's still really good-quality ice cream."

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If You Go:

The original MacKay's Cochrane Ice Cream

(220 1st St. W., Cochrane) is open from 10 a.m. to 10 p.m. seven days in the summer months.

For more information, call 932-2455 or visit mackaysicecream.com.

MacKay's ice cream is also for sale at other retailers throughout Alberta and British Columbia, including Sunterra Markets and Calgary Farmers' Market.

For a full list of retailers, see the website.

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Trivia Time

Here's a look at what Calgarians were paying for groceries in 1948, when MacKay's Cochrane Ice Cream was founded:

- Bread cost 10 to 12 cents per loaf.
- Eggs cost 49 cents per dozen.
- A pound of apples cost 35 cents.
- A pound of coffee cost 59 cents.
- A pound of Cadbury's Milk Chocolate cost \$1.60.

Source: Calgary Herald Archive

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Frozen Mud Pie

The recipe for this sweet treat comes from the MacKay family, owners of MacKay's Ice Cream in Cochrane. For the genuine MacKay taste, of course, use MacKay's own ice cream, available at the Cochrane store or at retailers throughout Alberta and British Columbia. For a full list of retailers, go to mackaysicecream.com.

6 oz (175 mL) semisweet chocolate, melted

12/3 cups (400 mL) heavy cream

2 cups (500 mL) vanilla, chocolate or coffee ice cream, softened

1 (9-inch/23 cm) chocolate-cookie piecrust

1 tbsp (15 mL) icing sugar

Chocolate syrup for drizzling

Chocolate curls for garnish

Place the melted chocolate in a large bowl and whisk in 2/3 cup (150 mL) of the cream. Cover and refrigerate for 45 minutes. Meanwhile, spread the ice cream in the piecrust. Cover and place in the freezer for 30 minutes.

Beat the chocolate mixture with an electric mixer at high speed just until fluffy. Spread over the ice cream. Cover and freeze for 1 1/2 hours or longer.

In a medium bowl, beat the remaining 1 cup (250 mL) cream and the icing sugar with clean beaters until soft peaks form. Top the pie with the whipped cream; let stand 10 minutes.

Drizzle with chocolate syrup and garnish with the chocolate curls.

Serves 10.

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