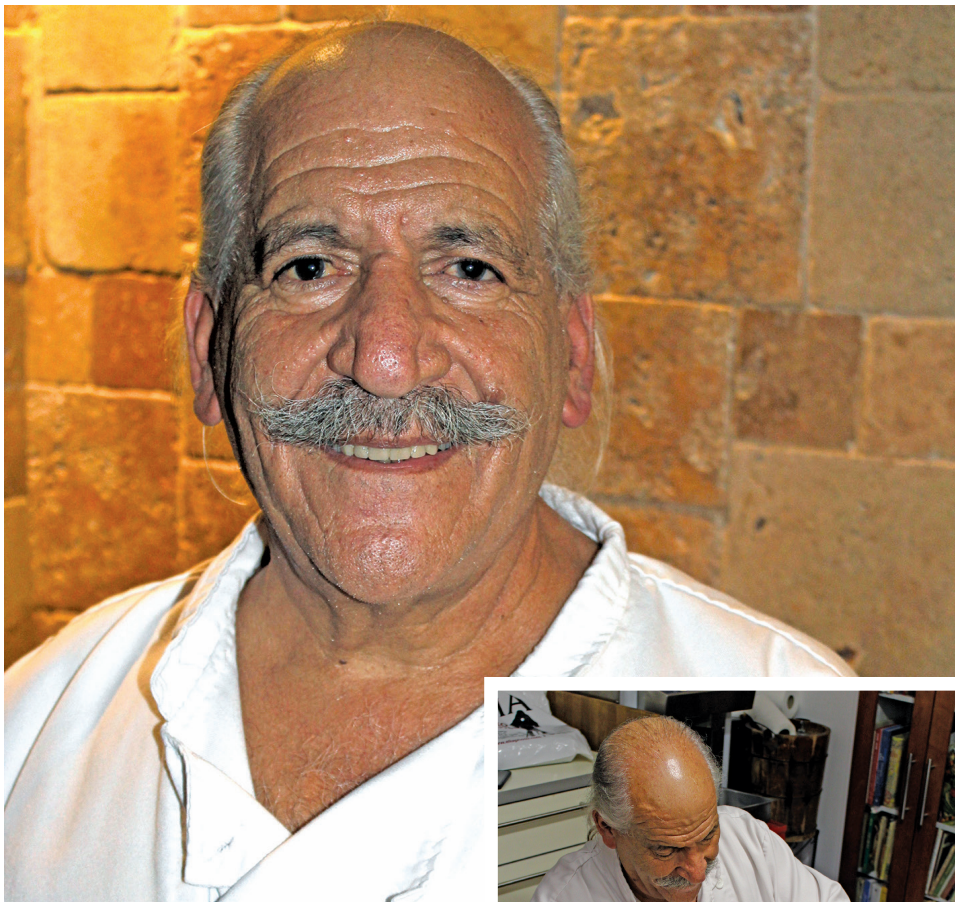


The 'Leich Cream' man



Above: American-Israeli David Leichman brings cold joy to visitors to his kibbutz kitchen.
Inset: David Leichman at work.



By HILLEL KUTTLER

LIKE AN ARTIST swiping a paintbrush on canvas just so, David Leichman gently scraped his spoon along a block of ice cream, creating an eight-inch curl of yumminess he deposited in a cup.

Wine aficionados experience tastings, as do cheese mavens—and so, Leichman believes, should lovers of ice cream.

On this rainy mid-December day, a comforting chill reigned in three visitors' stomachs at the kitchen table during a two-hour presentation Leichman delivered at his home on Kibbutz Gezer in central Israel. Leichman, 67, does this regularly for acquaintances,

groups, and tourists.

"It was a fun time," said ex-Cubs third baseman Ron Cey of a past visit with his wife. "He loves his ice cream."

Ice cream has been Leichman's passion since even before his parents hosted his eighth birthday party at Jahn's ice cream parlor in the Richmond Hill neighborhood of Queens, N.Y.

Ten hand-crank ice cream machines are scattered throughout the home Leichman shares with his wife, Miri

Gold, 69. An electric, \$9,000 Italian ice cream machine rests on a kitchen cabinet. One living room shelf holds just ice cream recipe books. A freezer upstairs is where his creations, Leich Cream, are stored, rock-hard, until being transferred to the kitchen freezer's more moderate temperature prior to consumption.

Leichman knows what's what. He'll leave a shop if bright hues emanate from ice cream jugs' display cases, evidence of food coloring. His Leich Cream contains all-natural ingredients—no preservatives, emulsifiers, or coloring. We sample 12 flavors, interspersed with plentiful explanations by the pony-tailed man with the handlebar moustache and a white chef's shirt featuring his own caricature.

A Gezer resident since 1976, Leichman is retired from a hodgepodge kibbutz career: planting vineyards, working in a glue factory, building homes, staffing the kitchen. Throughout, he's taught Jewish identity in various postings in the United States and in Israel.

In 1982, Leichman, a lifelong softball player, carved a baseball field from a farm pasture. He built it, and they come; his field remains among Israel's best, hosting games in leagues and in the Maccabiah sports tournament. It's where Leichman's son Alon, 29—who coaches baseball in the United States but on this day was visiting for two weeks—established himself as a pitcher.

In 1992, in another kibbutz field, Leichman planted a seven-acre garden that teaches three types of roots: those of plants, Hebrew words, and Judaism. The plot growing sage features signs with Jewish sages' quotations. Schoolchildren, rabbinical students, new immigrants, and even prisoners helped develop its plantings and sculptures. Approximately 150,000 people visited in the 18 years he ran Roots Corner as a nonprofit organization, Leichman said.

"It's all about Jewish education," he said. "I have two passions: ice cream and teaching."

On this evening, he indulged both. Miri, a Reform rabbi who shares her husband's food-preparation passion, brought over a plastic container of Leich Cream: vanilla. Leichman explained that a recent insect infestation in Madagascar greatly damaged

a key vanilla-growing region, spiking pure vanilla's price. Next, Miri delivered Leichman's proudest concoction: vanilla-like, with orange shavings and Valrhona chocolate flakes. "Oakland 1906" is its name, Leichman's tribute to the Creamsicle's origin.

And on we go: oatmeal with blueberries soaked in bourbon; banana; pistachio, lacking its commercial version's neon green coloring; nectarine; and plum. After polishing off the salted caramel, Leichman announced, "Miri's taking out the chocolate. We're now about to eat dessert. Then, we'll have coffee, an after-dinner mint, and a chaser."

The coffee wasn't steaming and poured—rather, another ice cream flavor. Leichman uses Arabica, rather than a blend, "so it has a distinct flavor," he explained. "I grind the coffee, cook it at 70 degrees Celsius, put it in the refrigerator, take it out to make the ice cream, then freeze it," he said. "It's a process of love."

The after-dinner mint? Mint chip; Leichman grows the mint himself. The chaser? Rum raisin, the latter generously doused in the former.

The Leich Cream man never uses recipes. The results tend to be too heavy, fatty, eggy. "When I go out to eat, I never order ice cream unless I know it was made by a chef," he said.

As to his flavor fave, Leichman takes an open-tent approach. "It's like in Judaism: Orthodox, Conservative, and Reform are all legitimate, and you have to find the one you like the most. The more flavors, the more people enter the store," said the man who makes avocado ice cream, too.

By 8:00 p.m., we were stuffed and couldn't fathom eating dinner. David's son Alon grabbed an insulated bag and several containers from the freezer. He was heading out to visit friends in Tel Aviv. As a California college student, Alon had received a gift from his dad: an ice cream machine. He still uses it.

"No one invites me for dinner and doesn't tell me to bring ice cream," Alon's dad said. "And, by the way," he added jokingly, "look at my last name in Hebrew: 'to the god of fat!'" ■

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