

FORK IN THE ROAD

WHAT TO EAT WHEN YOU GET THERE



VISIT MILWAUKEE

Though it's not a stop on the itinerary with Milwaukee Food & City Tours, Kopp's Frozen Custard is worth a visit at any of its three suburban Milwaukee locations.

HOT SPOTS TO COOL DOWN

Where to find Milwaukee's signature treat – frozen custard

BY KATHERINE RODEGHIER
Chicago Tribune

MILWAUKEE — Don't call it ice cream.

Not if you're in Milwaukee. Not if you don't want to be ridiculed as rude, clueless, a rube.

Folks in Wisconsin's largest city take their signature dish seriously — no offense, cheese curds — and consider it an insult to confuse their rich dairy dessert with ordinary supermarket ice cream.

You'll find frozen custard stands scattered across the Milwaukee metro area. So many that tourism bureau Visit Milwaukee claims it's home to the world's largest concentration, making Milwaukee the unofficial "Frozen Custard Capital of the World."

But ask 10 natives to name the best spots and you can expect to get 10 different answers.

To find your own favorite, you could set out with a short list from Visit Milwaukee or book a tour with Milwaukee Food & City Tours and get a sprinkling of frozen custard history and anecdotes as you ride a bus between tastings on a Sunday afternoon.

Tour guide Caitlin Weitzel gave us the scoop on frozen custard vs. ice cream. Both are made with milk, cream and sugar, but frozen custard adds egg yolk. The Food and Drug Administration weighs in with a regulation: Frozen custard must contain 1.4% egg yolk solids and at least 10% butterfat.

Another difference comes down to something called overrun, the air that gets pumped into the creamy concoction in the production process. A dish of soft-serve ice cream might have an overrun of 100%, meaning it's half air. Frozen custard averages 15 to 30%.

The quick freeze machine that makes the stuff — so massive it's nicknamed an "iron lung" — churns out thick, delicious swirls about 8 degrees warmer than ice cream. Grab a cupful or cone and eat up. See if you don't agree that it's denser, richer, smoother and has a silkier texture than ice cream.

Despite its local fame, frozen custard did not originate in Milwaukee. Weitzel said recipes calling for egg yolks in ice cream date to 17th-century France, and Thomas Jefferson is responsible for the first recorded recipe in the U.S.

Around the early 1900s, ice cream vendors at New York's Coney Island amusement park

began adding egg yolks to ice cream, and their frozen custard quickly became a favorite carnival treat. A stand at the 1933-34 World's Fair in Chicago popularized frozen custard in the Midwest. It spread north to the Dairy State and took root in Milwaukee.

While frozen custard tastes especially great on a hot summer day, most establishments in the city and suburbs stay open year-round and also serve sandwiches and other fast-food fare.

Sample three on tour

After a stop for a burger at the '50s-themed Miss Katie's Diner, Milwaukee Food & City Tours' custard crawl begins at the city's oldest surviving frozen custard establishment.

Paul Gilles opened Gilles Frozen Custard in 1938 on Milwaukee's west side. Weitzel said at least 50 romances between Gilles car hops and customers resulted in marriages. Gilles' brother, Tom, and Tom's future bride, Doris, were among them. Sadly for Cupid, Gilles no longer has car hops. The restaurant, remodeled in 2017 by owner Tom Linscott, has inside seating and a pickup window. Along with cones and dishes, it serves shakes, malts, floats, a mind-boggling variety of sundaes and novelties including pies, cookie sandwiches and a log roll. On the tour, you usually get a sundae often served by the new owner, Linscott's son, Willy.

In suburban Greendale, Ferch's Malt Shoppe and Grille claims more than a million flavors of frozen custard thanks to the magic of mix-ins. Shelves hold an array of brightly colored bottles of extracts in 44 flavors. Add one to your frozen custard and watch a muscled worker hunker over a marble counter to mix it with your choice of candies, nuts, fruits, cookies and other goodies. Ferch's opened in 1987 but has a '50s feel with booths, a jukebox and party room. Ferch's also has a seasonal location at Grant Park Beach in South Milwaukee.

You'll stand outside or sit in the tour bus to stuff your face at walk-up-only Leon's Frozen Custard. It serves four flavors — vanilla, chocolate, butter pecan and a flavor of the day — in cups, cones and fountain creations. Leon Schneider, a cookie salesman who went on to run a frozen custard trailer at carnivals, opened this old-school stand in 1942. Customers love to take Instagram-worthy shots of its vintage neon sign.

Speaking of social media,



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A vintage neon sign adds to the old-school feel of Leon's Frozen Custard in Milwaukee.



KATHERINE RODEGHIER/FOR THE CHICAGO TRIBUNE

Willy Linscott, owner of Gilles Frozen Custard in Milwaukee, holds a tray of sundaes.



KATHERINE RODEGHIER/FOR THE CHICAGO TRIBUNE

Extracts are added to frozen custard to create myriad flavors at Ferch's Malt Shoppe and Grille.

Leon's starred in a photo on a Twitter post by singer Harry Connick Jr. in May 2016: "during milwaukee show last night, 2 ppl volunteered 2 buy me frozen custard. came back with ice cream. so custrating. #needsomesocustard." Connick got his frozen custard fix the next day at Leon's when, in a skit for his now-canceled TV talk show, he donned the Leon's uniform, walked up to the order window and began engaging with customers.

Also worth a taste

Milwaukee's frozen custard stands enjoy a friendly rivalry, Weitzel said. Leon Schneider, for example, schooled Elsa Kopp in frozen custard-making before

Kopp's Frozen Custard opened in 1950. Though it's not on the tour, Kopp's is worth a stop at one of the suburban locations in Greendale, Brookfield and Glendale. In 1981, it won a blind taste test during a black-tie affair in Milwaukee dubbed Custard's Best Stand, and it has become one of the "trifecta" of major Milwaukee-area frozen custard shops along with Leon's and Gilles, Weitzel said. Kopp's is credited with coming up with the idea for flavors of the day and now offers two in addition to vanilla and Swiss chocolate.

A few more to try:

■ **AJ Bombers:** Bar and burger restaurant that's one of the few places serving frozen custard in downtown Milwaukee; known

for concrete concoctions and boozy shakes; also in Wauwatosa.

■ **Georgie Porgie's Burgers & Custard Treefort:** Indoor seating and heated patio at Oak Creek location; also in Mount Pleasant; known for its thick blitzes, where the frozen custard is mixed with a choice of one of the 25-plus toppings.

■ **Oscar's Frozen Custard & Sandwiches:** Sundae and shake of the month; noted for homemade waffle cones; in West Allis, Franklin and Waukesha.

■ **Osgood's:** Vanilla, chocolate or swirl served in cups, cones and fountain creations inside or at a double drive-thru window in Wauwatosa.

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