

SOUTHERN COMFORT

Writer ROBERT BITTNER spends some melting moments with a **SWEET TREAT** that offers the undeniable lure of limited distribution.

BLUE BELL ICE CREAM is the cold equivalent of the Krispy Kreme doughnut—a melt-in-your-mouth, Southern-born treat capable of inspiring cult-like devotion. But if you live outside the American South, chances are you've never heard of it. And that's probably just fine with the ice-cream fans in the 14 states where Blue Bell is currently available. All on their own, they've made Blue Bell the third-largest-selling ice-cream brand in the country.

If you're inclined to like ice cream, it's your cultural duty to see what all of the fuss is about.

Over 100,000 visitors tour the main Blue Bell plant in tiny Brenham, Texas, each year. During a typical tour, they learn how a two-gallon-a-day creamery in 1911 became a \$100-million-plus company. How the milk of 50,000 cows produces one day's output of ice cream. That 160 drumstick-like cones are produced every minute. That 60 seconds is enough time to create 120 ice-cream sandwiches.

Impressive, sure. But the number in most visitors' minds is how many flavors are available for sampling at the end of the tour.

Not surprisingly, Homemade Vanilla is the biggest seller. Want something a bit more adventurous? Opt for any of the roughly 50 available flavors, including Birthday Cake (dotted with chunks of real cake), Pistachio Almond, Caramel Sundae Crunch, and my personal favorite, Mocha Almond Fudge.

Whatever Blue Bell's secret for success (when pressed, our tour guide, Angie, simply said, "We use the freshest ingredients" and smiled mysteriously), the ice cream is continuing to make its mark on Brenham and beyond.

At the Ant Street Inn across town, owners Tommy and Pam Traylor do their part for local pride by keeping the guest refrigerator stocked with single-serving cartons of Homemade Vanilla. "We wouldn't think of putting any other kind of ice cream in our refrigerator," Pam says. "We joke that we don't count how many cartons people eat."

Don't believe it.

"I think eight or nine cartons is the most that one couple has consumed in a day," she says with a laugh. "And we've had people claim that they're on a dairy-free diet, but we'll still find empty ice-cream cartons in their room." ★

ROBERT BITTNER freelances from his home in Michigan and has written for *Preservation*, *Family Circle*, and many other publications.

THE TICKET
Blue Bell Creamery is located in Brenham, Texas. For directions and info call 800/327-8135 or visit bluebell.com.

