



[Home](#)

## Welcome to the Ice Cream Club

The Ice Cream Club started as a small scoop shop on Florida's Atlantic Coast.

May 5, 2014



If you are the second- or third-generation family member running a dairy operation, chances are you were too young (or not yet born) to recall the enormity of starting up the business. Often, these dairy entrepreneurs did not have a lot of cash, reams of marketing data or industry-specific knowledge. They had dreams and a belief in their ability to succeed. They rolled up their sleeves and built their businesses hour by hour, customer by customer.

This is the story of the first generation of The Ice Cream Club and how the owners built it from a single scoop shop into a wholesaler selling throughout the southeastern United States.

A little more than 32 years ago, Illinois natives and college buddies Tom Jackson and Rich Draper moved to Florida. At the University of Illinois-Champaign, Draper studied business and Jackson studied engineering and economics. They thought about starting various businesses, including a candy store and a cookie bakery. Then they met the developer of the yet-to-be-built Plaza del Mar shopping center in Manalapan, Fla., who wanted an ice cream store as a tenant. Draper and Jackson signed a lease.

Before they sold their first cone, they were in their new store painting walls, varnishing woodwork and doing any other build-out task they could in order to save their cash. Draper and Jackson went to Chicago and bought an ice cream freezer at the National Restaurant Show. The vendor introduced them to other suppliers and they picked up some recipes from flavor houses. Their business was under way.

From that single scoop shop, they have grown to become an award-winning wholesaler, selling ice cream and frozen yogurt to other stores, restaurants and foodservice operators. The Ice Cream Club remains the first and oldest tenant in the Plaza del Mar.

Senior Vice President Jackson and Chief Executive Officer Draper knew the name for their business had to include the words “ice cream.” The owners added the word “club” as a nod to the multitude of private clubs between West Palm Beach and Boca Raton. Draper joked that he liked that the word was short because he would not have to buy extra letters.

## **Sell by day, produce by night**

In those early days of The Ice Cream Club, Jackson and Draper did everything themselves. After scooping ice cream all day, they hung up their aprons, turned off the lights in the front of the store and retreated to the back of the shop to make ice cream all night. The freezer could churn out two 3-gallon tubs of ice cream at a time. It was slow going, but Jackson and Draper stayed with it.

Customers liked what they were buying and came back again and again. Any good club has membership cards, and The Ice Cream Club was no exception. Loyalty card marketing in the travel industry was a new concept at the time. American Airlines had launched its AAdvantage frequent flyer program in 1981, and the next year United and other airlines followed suit.

The Ice Cream Club’s loyalty card (\$1 a year or \$5 for life) entitles the holder and everyone in his party to receive a 10% discount on the day’s purchase. The card was an immediate hit and the storeowners quickly recognized their frequent shoppers. Even today, more than 30 years later, Draper and Jackson can recall not only the names but also the membership numbers of their early customers.

Another funny thing happened. The shop became so well-known and popular that it became a selling point in real estate listings. Director Heather Draper, who worked in banking before she married Rich, said “walking distance to The Ice Cream Club” appears on descriptions of residential real estate.

Without a doubt, the store’s location on Highway A1A (opposite the Ritz-Carlton Hotel, now the Eau Palm Beach Resort & Spa) helped, too. Vacationing A-list celebrities walk across the street for a cone, and musicians and actors living in south Florida come in for a treat.

As their business grew, Draper and Jackson opened up more stores and made ice cream in a second location. Then they reached a point where they had to ask: Do we build a bigger factory or do we add more stores? They rejected the idea of franchising and committed to wholesaling. They needed a bigger manufacturing facility and in 1992 found a location in Boynton Beach, about a 15-minute drive from the store. ([See related article "This artisan premium ice cream maker uses old-fashioned production techniques."](#))

## **Flavor, variety, service**

What differentiates The Ice Cream Club from other wholesalers? In part, it is the taste and creamy texture of

the dairy processor's premium ice cream, and its old-fashioned production methods (hand ladling fudge sauces and inclusions). The company also touts its wide variety of original flavors not found in grocery stores. The Ice Cream Club makes 176 flavors of ice cream and 70 soft-serve yogurt flavors. One long-time customer who had moved away from Florida called the company seeking its Smurf flavor (blue raspberry ice cream with miniature marshmallows). The woman used the ice cream in a birthday cake for her child. Even though the plant isn't set up to produce pints, it made some pints and shipped them to her.

The company also focuses intensively on customer service. The Ice Cream Club developed operation guidelines for its customers, and it uses the store as a training academy for entrepreneurs wanting to open their own scoop shops. The materials in the thick, three-ring binder show step-by-step how to open a store, purchase supplies, train employees, serve ice cream and make ice cream cakes. The Ice Cream Club sells all the supplies an owner needs, including cones, cups, spoons, napkins and scoops. The company also supports store owners who participate in community fund-raising events by matching contributions, up to \$900 a year.

The Drapers and Jackson downplay the role their own business plays in community events. The Ice Cream Club has participated in fund-raisers supporting the March of Dimes, hospices, churches and Alzheimer's associations, to name a few. The company provides ice cream and scoopers but doesn't promote its involvement. Instead, it lets the charity be the star. Rich Draper and Jackson attribute their Midwestern roots (Heather is from Long Island, N.Y.) as the reason they stay in the background.

Their Midwestern traits are also the reason they don't have a wall of autographed photos of the celebrities who patronize the store. The Drapers admit that they would probably not recognize most of their bold-faced-name customers, but their employees do. Besides the A-listers, retirees are fans, too. Retirement communities have turned The Ice Cream Club store into a day-trip destination. Busloads are delivered to the store's doorstep to buy ice cream and enjoy a day away from home.

## **Giving back to the industry**

Although ice cream retailing is competitive (especially in grocery stores), executives running ice cream businesses and related suppliers readily share their knowledge. The Drapers and Jackson acknowledge the help they have received from suppliers, customers and industry associations to grow The Ice Cream Club. The business belongs to the All Star Association, the International Dairy Foods Association, the National Ice Cream Retailers Association, the Florida Dairy Products Association and the Florida Restaurant and Lodging Association.

Being involved in these industry associations is one way the company can give back to the industry that helped them on their way up, Rich Draper said. He serves on the board of the All Star Association (formerly All Star Dairy), which offers members purchasing discounts, educational programs and networking events. He said it also is helpful for finding solutions to energy, transportation and ingredient issues. Draper also is a director of the International Ice Cream Association of the International Dairy Foods Association. IDFA's annual Washington conference puts dairy processors in front of legislators and their aides. The Drapers say representatives learn how their policies affect real people and businesses.

The company's ice cream and yogurt products have been consumers' favorites. Its ice cream has been honored by The Palm Beach Post, Palm Beach Illustrated Magazine, Palm Beach Life, South Florida Magazine and the Miami Herald.

Even though The Ice Cream Club has moved into wholesaling, that original ice cream shop has become the

face of the business. It creates brand awareness for the company's products and it is an incubator for new flavor ideas proposed by consumers.

## **Staying relevant**

Building on an established base of senior citizen customers, The Ice Cream Club is taking steps to become the favorite of a new generation of ice cream consumers.

"We are the ambassadors of ice cream," Draper said. "We want to keep it relevant."

Recognizing that Generation X and the Millennials want to know the story behind the foods they eat, the ice cream processor touts its locally sourced cream from rBST-free cows. The company can tell a farm-to-table story. "We support dairy farmers, the bedrock of the industry," Draper said.

And riding along with the demand for food made with better ingredients, The Ice Cream Club offers a premium, artisan-quality product. The dairy processor offers a range of better-for-you desserts, ones with probiotics or no sugar added.

Consumer demand has reached a point where The Ice Cream Club finally launched a mail-order website. For a minimum order of six pints, shoppers can make their own selections or order a variety pack of best-sellers, Heather Draper said. Corporate gift buyers seeking unusual presents are another potential market for the premium ice cream.

On the wholesale side, The Ice Cream Club wants to broaden its geographical footprint. The company can support its current volume but in order to grow, it is going to need additional freezer space. More sales would allow the company to smooth out the seasonal peaks and valleys in the production cycle. The owners are looking in northern Florida for a location that will allow it to truck orders north and west in a more efficient and timely manner.

"We have worked hard to get where we're at: a specialty products processor," Draper said. He's steered the company on a controlled path to growth and has not incurred a lot of debt over the last 32 years. The Drapers do not have children, but one of Jackson's sons is working in the company. None of the founders are ready to step aside any time soon, however. They are making ice cream the old-fashioned way, and selling it with old-fashioned values like hard work and honest relationships.



Some of the 46 employees of The Ice Cream Club pose in front of the office and production plant in Boynton Beach, Fla. Back row (from left): Tom Jackson, Jose Silverio, Chace Jackson, Coleman Kelleher, Rich Draper, Jamie Hunt, Mike Scott, Mike Brouillet and Maria Rodriguez. Front row (from left): Ramiro Solis, Greg Rivera, Phil Brouillet, Jim Cummins, Heather Draper and Errol Hewitt.



Director Heather Draper, Co-founder and CEO Rich Draper and Co-founder and Senior VP Tom Jackson enjoy some freshly made ice cream.



CEO Rich Draper has steered the company on a controlled path to growth. He says, "We have worked hard to get where we're at: a specialty products processor."



Tom Jackson, the co-founder and senior vice president, runs the production side of The Ice Cream Club. He and Rich Draper met in college in Illinois. After graduation, they moved to Florida where they decided to start a business.



The Ice Cream Club makes 3-gallon tubs for foodservice operations. Its new consumer-oriented website will sell pints to the general public.