

How do you lure the kids back to the farm? With local, organic ice cream, of course

Summer's Last Sweet Gasp



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Sometimes Minneapolis summertime is so beautiful it hurts. Sometimes the sun is setting, sinking out towards the Dakotas, throwing rose light back at us, and the leaves of the elms and oaks shiver in the sky like distant castanets, while the clouds above them look like nothing so much as pulled pink pinches of cotton candy, offered grandly in the depthless dome of summer twilight.

Sometimes you can look at the cheerful, oh-so-cheerful, stenciled glass of an ice cream shop and see all the happiness of domesticity, layered upon itself like the leaves upon leaves of a forest: Bikes are locked to poles with candy-colored helmets looped on their handle bars, like tipped baskets waiting to be filled with well-loved heads; an immigrant dad with the telltale shortness of the poverty-born walks beside his foot-taller-and-still-shooting-skyward son, a son who, slightly stooped, carries a flame-painted skateboard, yet is neither too cool nor too angry to have his dad buy him an ice cream cone; a six-year-old flings himself around a sapling with all the energy and direction of a tetherball, round and round and round for so long that you think, *This child is surely destined for speed skating, Nascar, or madness*. And everywhere babies, babies, babies on wheels, wheels, wheels. Babies in jogging strollers, babies in folding strollers, in showcase prams with two generations ringed around their soft oblivion, babies in bike seats, in bike trailers.... It seems in life these days to have babies you must have rubber wheels, servants, or suffering.

In a series of summer nights in Minneapolis I saw all this in front of the new Pumphouse Creamery at 48th Street and Chicago Avenue South, an ice cream shop that seems to draw domestic happiness to it, coaxing it from the surrounding groves of cozy Tudors like a hummingbird feeder draws little scarlet breasts. Why do they come? For the ice cream, of course, which is made from all-local, all-organic Minnesota dairy, provided to Pumphouse from the Sauk Centre farmers' co-op Pride of Main Street. This local, super-rich, super-fresh cream gives the ice cream a gooey, almost fudgelike mouth feel.

Get one of the many flavors with bakery products added in--Oreo, of course, but also malted vanilla with the Turtle Bread Company's chocolate bread, sweet cream with the Baker's Wife's oatmeal cookies, chocolate with devil's food cake--and that fudgy mouth feel becomes downright licking-the-batter bowl.

Licking the batter bowl is very much the essence of Pumphouse, which I'll have you kindly record as the most seriously innocent, seriously dirty-sounding sentence ever written. Ahem. Because in fact Pumphouse is the dream of Barb Zapzalka, who gave up a successful career as a systems analyst for a big insurance company in order to devote her life to the treats and triumphs of her childhood, which she spent on a farm in Little Falls.

"I was burned out from my job," explained Zapzalka when I talked to her on the phone for this story. "It was like I had a midlife crisis, early. I just needed to do something where people were happy, and when people come in to get ice cream, they're happy. They're going to get a treat." Not like when people call their systems analyst? Zapzalka laughs, and I can almost hear her shaking her head on the other end of the phone.

What about that childhood? "We had a large garden, and canned or froze everything to have through the winter--for the 10 of us," she says. "There were 10 kids. We were poor. I never even had fast food till I was 18 or 19. I wanted to go back to that. We used to bargain with our neighbors, who were dairy farmers, for milk. We'd set it out and let the cream rise, and then make ice cream in a hand-crank mixer. It was such a big treat to have this big, rich, creamy ice cream. We had a creamery about a half-mile from the farm, and that was the one other treat; once in a while you'd get to go over there and get a glass-bottle soda from the old-fashioned glass-bottle soda machine." So now, in her little shop, Zapzalka sells both those treats of her youth, organic ice cream and glass-bottle sodas: Sun Drop, Dad's Root Beer, Peach Nehi, Kickapoo Joy Juice, Black Raspberry Faygo, and maybe 20 more.

The name of Zapzalka's ice cream shop is the final tribute to life growing up on the farm. "Our farm had a pump house, an above-ground water well with a little house around it that looked like a dollhouse," she remembers. "When you go to the farm it's the first thing you see." And now, says Zapzalka, hopefully a new generation will associate the idea of a pump house with the simplest of simple pleasures available to poor, rural Minnesota farm kids, namely glass-bottle sodas and real Minnesota dairy farm ice cream.

Doesn't it seem like that's something we're losing? That in modern memory, everyone in Minneapolis was just a generation off the farm, or rather The Farm, the place of

unconditional love from the grandparents and unconditional freedom to raise hell in the woods? Nowadays the connection is tenuous to vanishing. We all have jobs that would have sounded Orwellian to our forbears, those folks who dwelt in the realm of cloth and chickens, and never could have imagined systems analysis, information technology, or brand management. Luckily for us, I think, we are still equipped with the same eyes, ears, mouths, babies, and hands to hold ice cream that they were.

And so there's a certain universal timelessness available, if you only avail yourself of it before complaints about the mosquitoes and the humidity are replaced by complaints about the cold and how apple-orchard season flew by yet again.

Here's my suggestion: Get your ice cream, nay, get the decadence of a five-scoop sampler, for merely \$3.50--and they're little scoops, about the same as two regular ones, but still--doesn't it sound extravagantly rich? Carry it down Chicago towards the crick (Minnehaha Creek, for you geographical sticklers). On the way down Chicago, look for hummingbird feeders and planters of flamingo-colored hibiscus opened as wide as they can bear. Look for squirrels poised on the top of Tudor gables, leaping into the last of our precious elm trees, above lighted windows showing a man watching football and a woman sewing. Look for the last houses in America with un-ironic white picket fences, American flags, and butterfly gardens.

When you get to the crick, follow it west as the path touches again and again our little urban river, look for willow branches, ever drooping as they touch the dark water, look for families lighting off Jumping Jacks near their portable basketball hoops, as Grandma crouches in the glass porch. And above all, look for the gigantic brass bunny. Did you know about the brass bunny? I didn't. He--or she, I suppose--lives near the southeast corner of Portland and the crick. He has a head the size of an elephant's, eyes the size of dinner plates, and the kind of back that can support an entire family reunion.

I found him as I walked and wandered after a Pumphouse Creamery visit one night, and as I saw it I dripped some ice cream on a fresh mosquito bite on my leg. I knelt down to wipe up this ridiculously perfect summer moment, mosquito, ice cream, sneaker, and as I did the bronze bunny's majestic ears rose up into the speckled and rustling canopy of trees, and I thought, "Oh, this town. This beautiful, beautiful town."