

# UP FRONT

BITS AND PIECES FROM AROUND TOWN / edited by Michelle Pilecki

## BBQ

### HIGH TEST OR REGULAR?

Instead of choosing which octane level they want, customers at gas station owner Mitchell Evanitsky's place get to select from 80 ice cream flavors and a list of barbecued treats.

In 1992, after new state regulations threatened to vaporize his profits, Evanitsky pulled out his pumps, remodeled the station by hand and opened Mitchell's Homemade Ice Cream and Real Southwestern Barbeque in Ross Township.

Using true fruit purees and extracts, he sells his own specially formulated super premium ice cream, as well as low fat and nonfat frozen yogurts. He even customizes flavors: he's done persimmon, Heath Bar, Zagnuts and chocolate chili. Though skeptical, he says he'll try asparagus if pressed to.

And that's not all. Last summer, Mitch hooked up with Dave Wasicek, a patron of Mitch's adjacent car wash and coin-operated laundry, who was in the sausage business. Together, they cook to-die-for Southwestern barbecue.

Where the gas pumps used to be are now two steel drums serving as smokers and grills fueled by hardwood fires. The



photo by Richard Kelly

Barbecue is the hottest thing at Mitchell's former gas station. But to be really cool, try a scoop of ice cream.

pork barbecue sandwiches, done North Carolina-style with a splash of spice and vinegar, are superb. Another specialty, skinless and boneless chicken breasts, come Cajun, piri-piri (a Portuguese hot sauce) and herbed. Then there are the ribs, lamb and pork kebabs and whole chickens—all done as devilishly hot or as not as you want.

Mitchell's grows and dries its own peppers, reps the Santa Fe Coyote Cafe line of products and has his own private label for 11 different seasoning blends.

Everything is take-out. Some items require advance order. You can't miss the bright pink and blue building at 3123 Babcock Blvd., but call first: 364-9988.

—Ann Hoyle

## Russian Dressing

### RED SIGN RISING

On a cold January evening, Red Square provides a chilling backdrop for the haunting illumination of the Kremlin. Nearby, a dutiful soldier sternly stands watch over Lenin's tomb, staring coldly into the night air of ... Squirrel Hill?

This nostalgic Russian

retrospective is actually the state-of-the-art digitally designed sign of the Moscow Nights Restaurant at 1722 Murray Avenue. Owned by two Russian couples who dreamed of coming to America to make good, the restaurant offers a change of pace: Russian, Ukrainian and Middle Eastern cuisine at really low prices. On weekends, the entertainment at Pittsburgh's only Russian restaurant ranges from gypsy music to bellydancers. There's also a modest dance floor if you feel inspired to join in.

The eye-catching sign, best appreciated at night, was fused together by The Image Station, also in Squirrel Hill, and Filmet Color Laboratories Inc.

*Moscow Nights is open weekdays 11 a.m.-11 p.m. and weekends 11 a.m.-midnight. Closed on Monday.*

—Brian Lebow

From Squirrel Hill with love: Moscow Nights.



Many Pittsburghers think great local ice cream ended when the Isaly's empire faded, but that's nonsense. We still have a number of great little shops where they take special care with the "product," and where you might be surprised by an unexpected flavor or two. Let's take a tour:

## WASH, WAX & SCOOP

**M**itchell's Homemade Ice Cream & Real Southwestern Barbecue (3123 Babcock Blvd., Ross Township, 364-9988 or 369-9844) might be the area's most unlikely place to find great ice cream. The shop is part of an old gas station-laundry-carwash complex, and the coin-laundry and carwash are still open for business. The gas pumps are gone, and the little office (where you used to get maps and spark plugs) has been converted into a small ice cream production facility with a Taylor batch freezer, shelves of exotic flavorings, and a couple of scooping freezers in the middle of the room.

"This was a dump," says Mitch Evanitsky, pointing out all the extensive remodeling he's done himself, then laughing. "It still is a dump, but better than it was."

Who cares what the place looks like if the flavors are great? I visited on a slow night, so I got to taste many. The lush vanilla. A "death by chocolate" that

impressed me with its fatal flavor (even though I'm not a chocolate lover). Kim Bakaj, the young woman who was working the window, insisted that I try her favorite: amaretto nut fudge (with maraschino cherries). Terrific.

"Freshness is the crucial factor," says Mitch, a long-haired Ambridge native who possesses the kind of energy that lets you know he's probably great fun at parties. "I don't have anything in my freezer that's more than two weeks old, and in the summer, nothing lasts that long even." During the busy months, he experiments a lot, even though adventurous tasters don't always show up.

Mitch says we live in a "mainstream, conservative city" when it comes to flavors. Nonetheless, he makes a tasty mango, a killer kiwi, and a fabled Sacher torte, but his big sellers are still vanilla, chocolate and butter pecan. "Strawberry's not third around here. Pittsburgh is a big

butter pecan town," he says.

Mitch graduated from Penn State, but not in ice cream. He says he didn't appreciate the wonder of foods till the early '80s (when he found himself eating a lot of pints of Ben & Jerry's). He's a self-taught ice-cream maker who knows all the jargon, speaking offhandedly about "overrun" and "double-fold Madagascar vanilla."

Mitch also makes some award-winning barbecue: ribs, chicken, hams, turkey breast, lamb and pork—but that's another story.

If his place weren't so quirky and funky, and his ice cream so superb, where would Mitch want to go for ice cream around here? His reply is immediate: Kerber's.

## DIARY OF A DAIRY

**T**om Kerber says his family started making premium ice cream at their small dairy, Kerber's, (1856 Guffy Road, North Huntingdon, 863-6930) in the early '80s because people started worrying about the fat in milk. "Everybody is buying the skins, the 2 percents, and we end up with excess cream."

So Tom and his son Tommy use that cream to make some fabled ice cream in a wide range of flavors with a robust 14 percent butterfat.

"The amazing thing," says Tom, "is how many people will come in and buy a half gallon of skim milk and a half gallon of ice cream. But we're not complaining."

Tom says one big advantage is that the Kerbers make the basic mix for their ice cream. "Mix" is cream, milk, sugar and stabilizers that together serve as the base for all flavors. All ice cream-makers use a mix, but few have the equipment necessary to take cow's milk and transform it through pasteurization and homogenization into the safe and usable ingredient they need.

Kerber's has everything—and sweetens the mix with cane sugar rather than cheaper corn syrups. Tom thinks people notice the difference—they're just not sure why it tastes so good.

The Kerbers had cows and a farm here till the late 1980s, and they've still got plenty of space for walking and eating and checking out the llamas and other exotic animals in a sort of petting zoo for kids. There's a high hill behind the shop from



Mitch Evanitsky puts an unusual spin on ice cream.