

Captiva's Ice Cream Queen

An ice cream addict now feeds other people's habits



by Chelle Koster Walton

When Vanessa “Queenie” Viglione talks ice cream, she begins to sound like a true junkie. By the time she’s finished, you’re rushing to the nearest vendor of Queenie’s Real Homemade Ice Cream for a “fix” of your own.

“I had a horrible ice cream-eating habit,” she admits. When she moved from California to Florida, her dental assistant license became invalid, so she was out a career and, to make matters worse, she couldn’t find any ice cream that she liked. To melt her double-dip dilemma, Queenie went to work baking at Captiva Island Yacht Club and start-

ed ordering her favorite premium brand of ice cream by overnight delivery—twelve pints every two weeks. “I had a \$260 a month habit.”

Because of her love for ice cream and because her “significant other,” Dave Jensen (one of the three brothers who own Jensen’s Twin Palm Resort on Captiva Island), is “the sweet fellow he is,” she ended up at Penn State University’s ice cream-making school as a birthday present from Dave. There she learned ice cream-making from the bottom up, so to speak, starting with how to milk a cow.

“When they passed around the microphone the first day, there were

people there from Ben & Jerry’s, M&M, Taiwan, and all over the world,” said Queenie, who was bestowed her regal nickname by Dave when she first came to Captiva because of a funny, crown-like hat she was wearing. “When I got the microphone, I said, ‘My name is Queenie and I just like to eat ice cream.’ Everyone cracked up. They made me the course’s 106th year class president because it was so ridiculous to be there just to eat ice cream.”

After the two-week course she returned to her job at the yacht club and to her ice cream addiction. Sometimes she would disguise her voice when calling to place her order, so the person on



Queenie puts her heart and soul into a dozen superior flavors of ice cream made with natural and often local ingredients.

the other end wouldn't figure out how much she was consuming.

"I found I just couldn't eat mediocre ice cream anymore," she remembers. "Finally, Dave said to me, 'It would probably be cheaper if you opened your own shop.'" Her then 19-year-old daughter Amber, a fellow ice cream junkie, was excited at the proposition, and so it happened in February 1999.

"It wasn't like the usual reasons people open a business," says Queenie. "It's not to make a million dollars; it was more to cover my habit and to make ourselves and other people happy.

Ice cream is a common denominator that all people share. It brings back good childhood memories."

She opened her factory at Kingston Square, just off the island on McGregor Boulevard, to retail business six days a week. Eventually the wholesale end took over and Queenie had to shut down the retail shop, even though she hated missing out on watching people enjoy her completely fresh and natural product. Today Queenie runs the operation virtually by herself, with on-and-off help from Amber, now the mother of two, and Queenie's 70-year-old mother, Vera, whose business card reads "The Queen's Mom."

You know the minute you call Queenie's shop that she has a sense of humor. A cow moos on the voice mail message, a noise that at first sounds like someone who might have overindulged in Queenie's products. She says she auditioned her friends for the part and gets a kick out of people's reactions when they leave their message "after the moo." "I can tell people have a smile on their face when they leave their message."

Queenie is in the business of smiles. What's her secret? The adaptation of expert knowledge to the locality, says Queenie. In warm climates, you can use less fat, which lets the flavor come through, whether it's Pine Island

mangoes in season, key limes, fresh bananas, or her most popular, butter pecan, for which she first roasts the pecans to improve flavor and keep them crunchy. Queenie's brand also tastes less sugary than mass-produced ice cream, which also lets the flavors exert themselves more fully.

"Ours is better because it has heart in it," Queenie sums up. "It's truly made from my soul. It is art, it is science, and then it's the very best ingredients."

Year-round flavors include Butter Pecan, Pure Vanilla, Dutch Chocolate, Toasted Coconut, Black Raspberry Chip, Mint Chocolate Chip, Very Strawberry, Fresh Banana, Cup O' Joe Coffee, Cookies & Sweet Cream, and Key Lime Pie (only available at Latte Da on Captiva). Besides the Pine Island Mango flavor, Queenie scoops up other seasonal delights such as Cinnamon, Candy Cane, and Pumpkin Pie.

"I saw so many misguided youth that actually thought ice cream was the fat-free-sugar-free-soft-serve-stuff that was being offered in 100 flavors pumped continuously from two dispensers," Queenie wrote in a recent flyer in the Sanibel-Captiva Chamber newsletter, her only form of advertising. "My philosophy was to perfectly produce a dozen superior flavors that I would be proud to serve to my own family."

Want to be part of Queenie's ice cream-addicted family? Get your fix at various local restaurants and stores, including Tween Waters Inn, McCarthy's Marina, Captiva's Island Store, Captiva Island Yacht Club, Latte Da on Captiva, Santiva General Store, Gasparilla Grill, Bailey's on Sanibel, and Starz Pizza in Fort Myers. She encourages distributors to give out free samples, as she once did at her own storefront—"just like a heroin dealer," she laughs.

And just that easily, you too are hooked. 🍦

Chelle Koster Walton is the Times of the Islands travel editor and contributor to several travel publications nationwide.

PHOTOS BY CHELLE KOSTER WALTON