

Tasting ice-cream and sorbet all day sounds like a job that exists only in your dreams, right? For Christine Clark, senior research and development officer for the ice-cream company Weis, it's just another day at the office. Christine is responsible for developing Weis' new ice-cream recipes, a trial-by-error process that can involve more than 100 recipes for a single product. "It's just like cooking at home really, using the freshest ingredients we can and tasting as we go," explains Christine.

A family-owned company based in the Queensland town of Toowoomba, Weis prides itself on full-flavoured ice-creams that are a just little bit different from the usual offerings. Its signature product is the dual-flavoured ice-cream bar, with its distinctive striped appearance. Best known these days for the top-selling mango and cream version,

And the results speak for themselves. After more than four decades of production, Weis bars enjoy iconic status around Australia. Now Weis is looking to expand its horizons, with plans to increase its export markets – which currently include Japan and Singapore – over the next five years.

This international expansion is something family patriarch Cyril Weis could not have predicted when he developed the Frito Bar recipe at his corner store in the 1930s. The passionfruit, banana and pineapple concoction was a hit, but production stopped when wartime rationing took hold. Julie has fond memories of her grandfather, a "born trader" who delighted the kids with treats from the lolly factory under his house. "He was a very popular grandfather," she laughs.

In 1957, Cyril's son Les decided to relaunch the Frito from his milk bar. A roaring trade developed,

weis ice-cream

Take lots of top-quality fruits, plenty of local talent and a large dose of passion and what do you get? A recipe for success, says SALLY WILSON

die-hard fans swear by the original Frito Bar, while other Weis devotees fondly recall obscure flavours from decades past, such as rockmelon and the favourite '70s combination of apricot and brandy.

These days you're more likely to see flavours such as guava with mango, passionfruit and cream rolling along a production line that produces about 100,000 bars a day. The current range includes five bars and seven tub varieties, one of which is a tangy Italian-style red orange sorbet.

"We've always done our own thing," says Julie Weis, joint managing director with her brother Peter. "Our approach is quite experimental, and development takes longer because we're doing things that haven't necessarily been done before."

For Christine, a self-confessed perfectionist, this means starting with the best ingredients then testing and re-testing until she's happy – a process that can take anywhere from two months to two years.

"I never ask for the price first, I always go for the best quality," she says. "Sometimes I have to throw a lot down the sink before I actually come up with something that is nice." In an industry where the bottom line rules, it is a highly unusual approach but one that is practised by the Weis family. "If we can't get the flavour we want out of the best produce, then we know a product is not going to work," says Julie.

with patrons flocking from the nearby Empire Theatre. Word quickly spread, so Les shut up shop and established a production factory to cope with demand. To further the company's expansion, Les drove around to regional centres with large chests of Weis bars packed in dry ice.

Consistently producing an innovative product does come with its challenges, however. Weis' strict flavour tests demand the tastiest seasonal fruit, so production schedules can be frantic. When *Table* visited, staff were anxiously awaiting a delivery of mangoes – all of which had to be examined by hand. Changing tastes also have to be accommodated.

"What was popular 10 years ago isn't popular now," says Julie. "These days, people are willing to be adventurous and try new things." Then there are certain fruits that are difficult to process, such as peaches, berries and guava. And with Weis' refusal to use unnatural additives, the company certainly doesn't make life easy for itself.

So what are the secrets of Weis' success? Apart from excellent produce, closely guarded recipes and top-secret production methods, Julie puts it down to focusing on what they do best and being a hands-on family company. "We stick to what we know and do it really well." Plus, there's the vigorous recipe testing – just take a bite and it's clear that it has paid off.



serving suggestions

Classic Weis bars are great on their own, but if you've bought a tub of sorbet or ice-cream, you may like to try one of these serving suggestions:

- * Make canned peaches special by serving them with Weis' Peaches and Cream. Drizzle with a coulis made from thawed frozen raspberries pureed with a little sugar.
- * Weis' Guava with Passionfruit, Mango and Cream is fabulous with a tropical fruit salad - this would be a perfect way to finish an Asian meal.
- * For an excellent accompaniment to a slice of chocolate cake, look no further than Weis' Italian Red Orange Sorbet.
- * All sorbets and ice-creams are delicious served with meringues.

Pictured clockwise from top left: Peter and Julie Weis; a delivery van as they used to be; Les Weis with a few products from the range; a tub of the best-selling mango and cream rolls along the production line; raspberry mixture that looks good enough to dive into; freshly frozen raspberry and cream bars.



How to open a Weis bar

It's a special trick to opening the classic Weis bar - simply hold the bottom corner and peel up fairly with your thumb. Try and enjoy!



Left: Tubs of mango and cream ice-cream in final stages of production. Above: company advertisements of yesteryear.