Ice cream aficionados can be divided into two camps. There are those who love experimenting with innovative, exotic flavors like fennel, Parmesan, pepper, rose petal, or even puréed asparagus. Then there are the purists, who remain loyal to vanilla, often quoting Escoffier’s dictum: “Surtout faites simple.” But when it comes to ice cream, innovation is tradition. None of the above splendidly creative ideas—or ice cream travesties, depending on which camp you belong to—is modern. The most recent is the puréed asparagus,¹ and that came from Escoffier himself at the turn of the twentieth century.

In late seventeenth- and early eighteenth-century Europe, when ice cream making was brand new, confectioners were unsure about freezing techniques. They worried about the amount of ice they needed, the kind and amount of salt to mix with the ice, and how to prevent the salt from getting into the ice cream. They were anxious about storage and drainage and all the things you’d expect to be problems in the days before refrigeration. Flavor seemed less important than freezing. Mrs. Mary Eales’s approach was typical. In 1733 she wrote: “Take Tin Ice-Pots, fill them with any Sort of Cream you like, either plain or approach was typical. In 1733 she wrote: “Take Tin Ice-Pots, fill them with any Sort of Cream you like, either plain or

However, in the early eighteenth century “any sort of cream” offered plenty of options. Creams and custards were ubiquitous, and their flavorings varied enormously. Rose petals, crumbled macaroons, caramel, ginger, lemon, musk—all were among the ingredients that flavored creams. Mrs. Eales’s recipes included a chocolate cream, a cream made with almonds, and one flavored with laurel leaves. She also had a recipe for Trout Cream, which, I’m happy to report, was named for the shape it was molded in, not for its flavoring.

François Menon, the eighteenth-century author of Soupers de la cour, included among his many recipes for creams one titled Crème d’Herbages de ce que l’on veut,³ which appears in English translation as “with Garden-herbs of what kind you please.” The cook is directed to leave the herbs in the mixture just long enough to give it a “taste of whatever it is.” Menon’s suggestions included tea, anise seed, tarragon, celery, and parsley—some of the flavors cooks used when creams were turned into ice creams.

In the same way that custards and creams were transformed into ice creams, the popular sweet drinks known as waters were transformed into ices. L. Audiger’s La Maison Réglée,⁴ published in 1692, didn’t have any recipes specifically for ices. He included recipes for waters and explained that to turn them into ices, it was simply necessary to double the sugar and the flavoring, then freeze the mixture. (Flavors don’t come through as strongly in icy mixtures as they do in warm or even fairly cold ones, and many cooks believe that what tastes just right at room temperature will lack flavor when it’s icy.) Audiger’s drinks were flavored with lemon, strawberry, chervil, fennel, raspberry, pomegranate, pistachio, and cinnamon. Ices made with the same flavorings soon became popular.

By 1768, when M. Emy wrote the first book entirely devoted to ice cream—L’Art de bien faire les glaces d’office; ou Les vrais principes pour congeler tous les rafraîchissements⁵—freezing techniques had largely been worked out,⁶ and flavor experiments were rampant. Emy made ices and ice creams with everything from amber to verjus. He was the first, as far as I know, to make rye bread ice cream. He added rye bread crumbs to a basic ice cream mixture as it cooked, let it thicken a bit, and then strained the mixture before proceeding with the freezing. Other confectioners, probably following his lead, made brown bread ice cream the same way, and it was popular for years, especially in England. Emy also made ice cream with macaroons and with biscuits, or cookies. Again, he crumbled them into the cream mixture, cooked it to reduce the volume, and then passed it through a sieve before freezing. The straining would have produced smooth ice creams rather than today’s crunchy, chunky mixtures. Emy did, however, suggest sprinkling the frozen ice cream with dry, sieved crumbs just before serving, which would have added a bit of crunch. It’s likely that these ice creams were inspired by the many custards and creams that were being made with crumbled cookies or macaroons. In turn, they paved the way for today’s Oreo-cookie and maybe even cookie-dough ice cream.

Throughout L’Art de bien faire les glaces d’office, Emy admonished his readers to taste, taste, taste and then adjust the ingredients accordingly. He even recommended washing one’s mouth out between tastings so that each taste
would be fresh and clean. So how do we explain his truffle ice cream? Emy was not using truffes en chocolat (chocolate truffles). He was not making the delectable Italian tartufo ice cream, with its bittersweet chocolate. Emy’s recipe called for plain truffles—that is, truffles, the fungi that grow underground. He prefaced his recipe by explaining that truffles could be white, gray, or black and said that those from the Piedmont region of Italy tasted like garlic. He advised that to make truffle ice cream, the truffles should be cooked in water and salt, ground, and mixed with the cream. After the cream was cooked, it was strained through a sieve and then frozen. Emy didn’t say what it tasted like.

Emy’s contemporary, Joseph Gilliers, who wrote Le Cannaméliste Français, made an artichoke ice cream, called Neige d’artichaux, which also contained pistachios and candied orange. It’s another oddity I have not seen elsewhere. It doesn’t even seem to have been plagiarized.

Emy made white chocolate ice cream, but it was not what we think of as white chocolate. His was flavored with vanilla, cinnamon, and amber. The amber was likely ambergris, the whale secretion that was also used to add flavor and fragrance to confections. Emy called his white chocolate ice cream “délicieux” (his italics).

Both Gilliers and Emy made ice cream with cheese, a practice that is still being imitated. In the eighteenth century, fromage glacé or iced cheese was, according to most cooks’ accounts, a name given to ice cream frozen in round, fluted, or wedge-shaped molds to resemble different sorts of cheese. The name did not indicate that cheese was among the ingredients. Emy’s fromage d’ananas was simply a pineapple ice cream frozen in a cheese-shaped mold. Gilliers made fromage à la gentilly, an ice cream flavored with zest of citron—no cheese. His fromage de cafà was made with coffee, not cheese. However, Emy made a “glace de crème aux fromages” flavored with grated Parmesan and Gruyère. Gilliers’s fromage de parmesan was made with grated Parmesan, coriander, cinnamon, and cloves and frozen in a mold shaped like a wedge of Parmesan cheese. After unmolding it, he gave it a burnt sugar crust.

Did anyone make plain old vanilla ice cream? Yes, but although vanilla was imported to Europe in the sixteenth century, when a method of artificial pollination was developed.

So even though Emy and a few other eighteenth-century confectioners made vanilla ice cream—with vanilla beans rather than extract—it would be another century before that flavor became the standby we know and love. Emy said that vanilla had a very agreeable flavor and that it was a great help to confectioners, adding that he used it in chocolate, as well as in creams for ices. He warned that unscrupulous dealers often tried to pass off old, dry vanilla beans as fresh by soaking them in oil. To avoid being tricked, he advised, one simply had to smell the beans. Oil-soaked beans might look fresh, but they didn’t have the fragrance of fresh ones.

Flower flavors were much more common than vanilla in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Jasmine, orange flowers, violets, elderflowers, and roses all blossomed in ice creams and other desserts. Even people who think roses taste like soap must admit that Glace de crème à la rose sounds delectable. A typical recipe began: “Take two handfuls of freshly picked roses…”

Mr. Borella, head confectioner to the Spanish Ambassador in England in 1772, introduced his recipe for violet ice by writing, “Found a handful of violets…” He continued, “The jessamine is done after the same manner, to make the liquid taste more of the different flowers; pour it several times from one pan into another before sifting; the same with the orange flowers; those different infusions are also mixed with cream; instead of water.”

We have orange popsicles and orange sorbet, but orange was once a ubiquitous flavoring. Audiger’s 1692 recipe for la crème glacée was flavored with half a spoonful of orange flower water. The orange flowers themselves, plain or candied, were used in ices and ice creams as were the peel, and not just any oranges. Often cooks specified that the peel should be from Bergamot oranges; the pulp, from Portugal or Seville. Emy preferred those from Malta. Orange flower water was the primary flavoring in many ices and ice creams, and a secondary flavoring for many others, including lemon, pistachio, almond, walnut, and nougat. It was the vanilla of its day.

Flavor trends come and go. Perfumed flavors such as musk and jasmine are no longer the favorites they once were. Chestnut, saffron, anise, clove, and cinnamon used to be everyday ice cream flavors; now they are considered rather unusual. Fruits that have fallen from favor include fresh currants, quince, and pomegranate. Tea and coffee are still popular ice cream flavors, but nowhere near as common as they once were. We have coffee; they chose between coffee and white coffee. White coffee ice cream is made by infusing the beans in the hot cream mixture,
then straining them out, which results in a rich coffee flavor and aroma but only a whisper of color.

In Victorian times, upper-crust British families set a sumptuous table, displaying silver, linen, crystal, elaborate floral arrangements, sparkling candelabra, and rich foods presented on ornate platters. Dinners consisted of several courses, with ices served as a culinary intermezzo. Often the ices were molded into fanciful shapes like fish, chickens, cauliflower, pineapples, and, especially, asparagus. The Victorians seemed to love asparagus-shaped ices, whether individual spears or whole bunches, and often served them tied up in pretty ribbons. Plain or vanilla ice cream was generally used to form the asparagus stalks, while pistachio or greengage plum ice cream formed the tips. But some chefs, notably Escoffier, favored parboiled and pounded asparagus tips in his ice cream.14

Spinach was cooked and strained to make green coloring for such frozen confections. Garrett’s nineteenth-century culinary encyclopedia called for both asparagus purée and “spinach-green” for its asparagus ice cream.15 However, one British confectioner suggested using only an “atom” of vegetable green for coloring, since a dark green color was “not generally liked.”16 Was it actually the color he was concerned about or the taste?

A century earlier, an Italian cook had said that there was no vegetable that couldn’t be turned into an ice worthy of the name,17 and it seemed as if many were still willing to take him up on the challenge. Some Victorians even paired their ices with the meat or fish course. Mrs. Sarah Rorer suggested serving her cucumber sorbet with “boiled cod or halibut.” Her gooseberry sorbet was “usually served at Christmas dinner with goose.” Naturally, she served mint sherbet with lamb or mutton and apple ice with roasted duck, goose, or pork. She made a spicy, Bloody-Mary-like tomato sorbet and recommended serving it “in punch glasses at dinner as an accompaniment to roasted beef, or venison, or saddle of mutton.”18 Although Rorer’s tomato sorbet is made without any sugar and the cucumber has only a teaspoonful, the others are as sweet as any dessert sorbet. In fact, her gooseberry sorbet includes both jam and sugar.

Barbara K. Wheaton has described Mrs. Agnes B. Marshall, a well-known culinary entrepreneur in nineteenth-century London: “This versatile woman operated a cooking school and an employment agency for superior cooks; she had a store which sold kitchen equipment, some of it of her own design; she sold imported and specialty foods, lectured, and published a weekly paper and four cookbooks.”19 Marshall’s first cookbook, _The Book of Ices_,20 published in 1885, has some of these mid-meal sorbets which, she wrote elsewhere, “have an acknowledged place in the service of a first-class dinner.”21 Her book includes recipes for a frozen Parmesan and Gruyère soufflé similar to Emy’s Parmesan ice; it also has an _Iced Spinach à la Crème_. Marshall’s _Soufflés of Curry à la Ripon_ were made with apples, onions, coconut, “a raw or cooked sole or whiting,” curry powder,
saffron, whipped aspic, and whipped cream. They were frozen in individual paper cases and served garnished with prawns.22

In Mrs. Marshall’s Cookery Book, she pushed the boundaries—hard—with a recipe for Iced Cream with Foie Gras à la Caneton.23 Marshall lined a duck-shaped mold with ice cream made with a pinch of cayenne and some liquid aspic jelly. For the beak, she tinted a small portion with her own apricot yellow coloring (presumably available from her shop). After the mold was lined, she filled the center with “the contents of a jar or tin of pâté de foie gras,” then froze it for about an hour. The duck was served on a bed of chopped aspic jelly and garnished with sprigs of chervil and small frozen eggs molded with the same cream and foie gras combination. She wrote: “If you have glass eyes for the duck they give it a finished appearance. Serve for an entrée or second course dish, or for any cold collation.”

Just plain vanilla, anyone?

NOTES
5. Envy, L’Art de bien faire les glaces d’office, ou Les vrais principes pour congeler tous les rafraîchissements (Paris: Chez Le Clerc, 1768). Unfortunately, so far it has proved impossible to uncover any details of Envy’s life, even his first name.
6. Until 1846, when Nancy Johnson, an American, invented a hand-cranked ice cream freezer, the process for making ice cream was near-universal. The ice cream mixture was poured into a metal freezing pot, which was covered and set in a bucket filled with ice and salt. The pot had to be shaken and opened from time to time, so that the mixture could be scraped from the container sides and stirred. When ready, the ice cream was either put into decorative molds or left in the pot and stored in a cave or freezer box with ice until being served. For more on freezing techniques and the ice industry, see Elizabeth David, Harvest of the Cold Months: The Social History of Ice and Ices (London: Michael Joseph, 1994).
7. Ibid.
10. Ibid., 74.
13. Audiger, La Maison Réglée, 185.
18. Sarah Tyson Heston Rorer, Ice Creams, water ices, frozen puddings, together with refreshments for all social affairs (Philadelphia: Arnold, ca. 1853), 63–74.