

A scoop of nature

Continuous innovation can determine the path to leadership.

By Pragya Gupta

“Aging is not ‘lost youth’ but a new stage of opportunity and strength,” said American writer and activist, Betty Friedan. At 55, the owner of Mumbai-based Naturals Ice-cream, R. S. Kamath, is still redefining the home-grown and family-owned brand. Kamath, who introduced the untouched flavour of fresh fruits like black grapes, custard apples and even jackfruit in ice-creams, is more than ready for a second coming.

A penchant for ‘right pulp and right taste’ was inherited by Kamath from his father, a fruit merchant. In his early days, Kamath apprenticed with his father in the family business and gradually honed some entrepreneurship skills. On-the-job training meant that Kamath junior rapidly gained ample knowledge about characteristics and textures of fruits, as well as about the trade.

He was also involved in his elder brother’s ice-cream business, which gave him deep insight on the nuances of production and marketing in the ice-cream business. Since his elder brothers could not fathom the ‘natural’ business acumen their younger sibling was blessed with, he eventually moved ahead on his own.

By 1983, Kamath had acquired enough expertise to skilfully carve a niche for himself in the ice-cream business. An idea that had already germinated began to take a firmer hold in his mind; he was determined to start churning ice-creams made

out of natural fruits. The rest, as the legend goes, is history. Kamath successfully created a foodservice brand that swiftly achieved top drawer recall from every dessert buff across Mumbai.

The Journey

Over a quarter of a century on, Kamath describes his journey as anything but easy. During the 1980s, ice-creams were regarded as an indulgence, primarily for the middle class. “I realised that an ice-cream-only business might find the going tough. Consumers would need to be aware of the brand to become our patrons,” he elucidates, ensconced in his plush bungalow at Lokhandwala, Mumbai.

For starters, he served quintessential Mumbai snacks like *pav bhaaji* at the first Naturals outlet in Juhu and topped it with a serving of fruit-based ice-creams. “Fortunately, we made a good start. Gradually,

in with a host of other celebrities at my Juhu outlet.”

Investment & Equipment

“The ice-cream business per se does not require any major investment at the initial stage, when the capacity is low. So, I financed my business partly with help from relatives and some from my savings,” states Kamath. On an initial investment of Rs 3.5 lakh, he started off producing 10 kgs of hand-churned ice-cream per day. Naturals started its journey with a single deep freezer and a couple of basic utensils. Just in capacity building, the growth has been eye-popping – the Naturals plant has a capacity of five tonnes of ice-cream mix per day, and this too will shortly be raised to 12 tonnes per day.

when the dish had found favour with customers, I curtailed its production and served only the ice-creams,” he reminisces.

Over a period of time, Kamath’s concept gained momentum and Naturals developed a huge fan following for the fruit-based ice-creams. Kamath candidly recalls, “I remember cine star Amol Palekar dropping

