

# But Naturally

Natural Icecream has created ripples in the frozen dessert market in a very short time



FOR A person hailing from Mangalore, the obvious choice of business would have been an Udipi restaurant. He would have made a success of it like all others of his fraternity. Life would have run smoothly for R.S. Kamat and he would have been another *idli-dosa* restaurateur. But Kamat decided to choose the proverbial untrodden path and blaze a new trail.

Today, icecreams are no more bread and butter for Kamat. To him, frozen, delicious icecreams are colours in an edible palette with which he paints on the canvas of human appetite. What started off on a small scale in 1983 is being mass produced since 1994.

Reminiscing over how Natural Icecream started, Kamat says, "There

came a time when I wanted to branch out on my own. I already had some experience in icecream making because my family is in the same business. Gokul Icecream belongs to my family. Initially I started off by selling *pav bhaji*. But then I realised that one can be a master of only one item, not two. So I decided to concentrate only on icecreams, since that was what I had learnt under my father's tutelage," says this youngest one in the family. "I studied the market and found that our traditional method of producing icecream had a market which was untapped. So I stepped in."

Kamat bought a place in Juhu opposite the Garware Club in the early '80s "At that time land prices had not shot up in that area. So we

purchased the shop fairly cheap. We had the affluent strata of society staying in Juhu and just behind the shop was the *gaathan* (village) comprising the middle class. Both classes indulge in what is essentially a luxury item," explains Kamat.

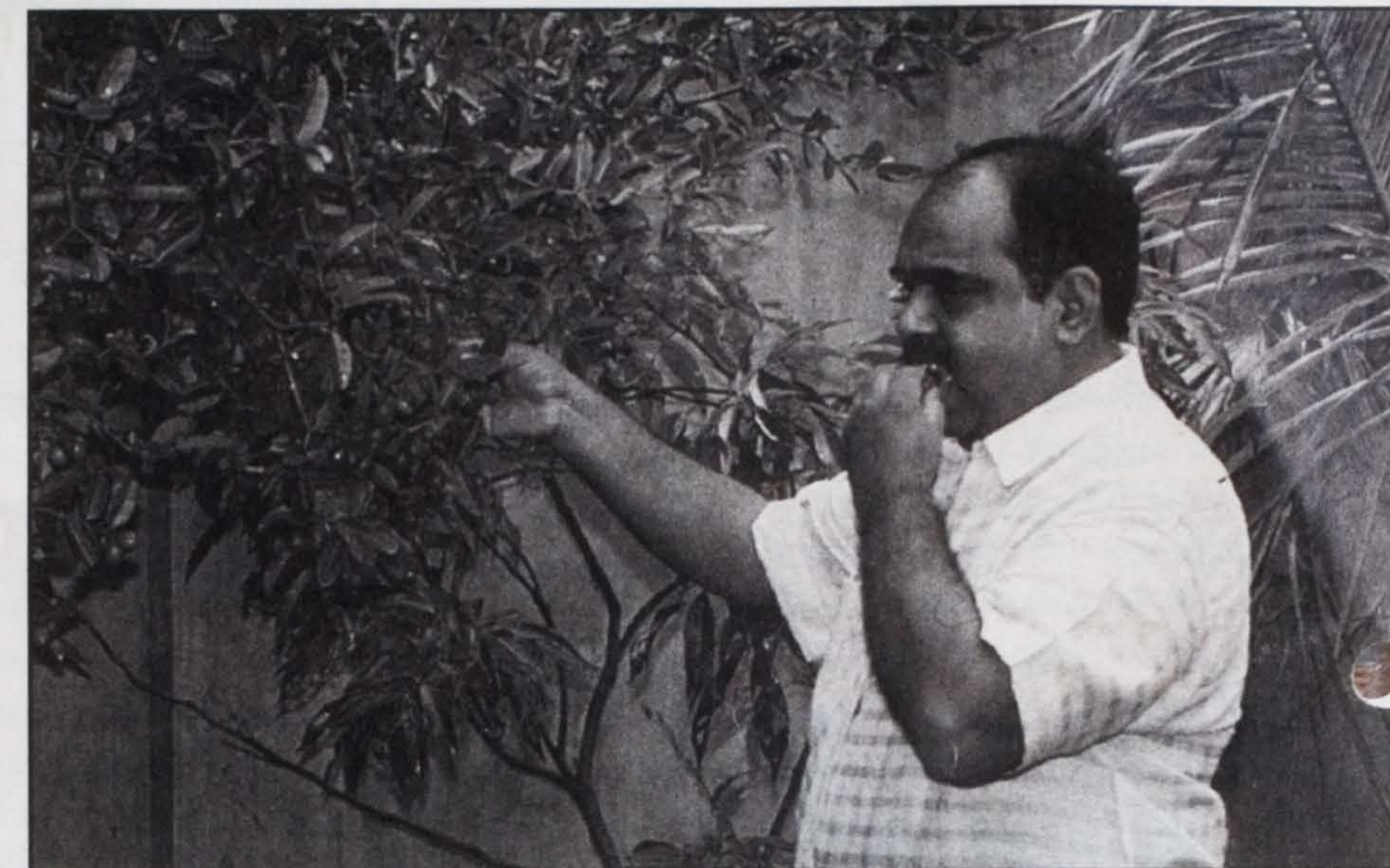
The late '80s was a turning point for Natural Icecream. Citizens of this megapolis, who went crazy over pizzas, burgers, *pav bhaji* and *idli-dosas*, went for this icecream with a gusto. At all social gatherings the password for an exciting dessert was Natural. Teenie boppers had a new address to hang out and late Saturday night drives with kids for a Natural meant a peaceful Sunday for doting papas. Birthday and anniversary celebrations were incomplete without a Natural.

The craze continues even today,

despite international brands making an entry into the country. What is so special about this icecream? Kamat attributes it to the fact that this icecream uses no eggs, gelatine or artificial flavours and is made in a purely traditional manner in *sanchas* (pots). Fresh milk with 14 per cent fat content is obtained from local dairies. Fresh and seasonal fruits are used to make the icecream. "All fruits cannot be used in making icecreams because they do not have a distinct flavour when mixed with milk. For example pears taste quite bland in icecream."

Their tender coconut icecream created ripples when was introduced and has been aped by others in the market. Kamat tells an interesting anecdote about how this taste was formulated. "During any Hindu *pooja*, milk, honey, coconut water, ghee, sugar and curd are mixed and offered to the gods. This is called *panchamrit*. We all loved the taste and then I set about making this flavour," Kamat reveals. Their black grape flavour has also been a runaway success. Today, there are 14 flavours on the list — all pure and of course, natural, claims Kamat.

Whenever a new flavour is introduced, family and friends are the guinea pigs. Their opinions are sought and then the marketability worked out. Kamat has tried flavours like jackfruit and though it tastes good, there is hardly any demand for this flavour, especially since the fruit ripens during the same time as the king of all fruits, mango. "Who would like to have jackfruit icecream when fresh mango is in season?" he counters. The pulp of various fruits are not preserved and frozen for off season use simply because the machinery is not available for it. "We do not believe in using preserved and frozen pulp, as they will never taste the same as the fresh ones," says Kamat. Besides, he says,



people want variety.

Today, the company has a turnover of Rs four crore and a staff strength of 30 at the factory. The total consumption of milk is 2,000 litres per day. From an initial investment of Rs four lakh which was borrowed from friends and family, Natural has been granted a loan of Rs. 65 lakh by the Saraswat Bank. Kamat had been to Italy recently to look up some machinery. "But it is very different from our process since it is for low fat milk whereas we use the high fat variety. But it was an educative experience for me and my future plan is to set up a commercial icecream factory. I say commercial because I consider Natural an artistic icecream based on the traditional method of preparation."

From Rs. five for a scoop, the price has gone up three times, which is rather expensive for a middle class family. "That is because of inflation and the fact that the government has slapped a 10 per cent excise duty on icecream since 1990 because it is a luxury item. The prices of sugar, milk and fruits have also gone up. What else can we do but increase prices?" Kamat asks.

Keeping control of the now expanding business — there are 10 outlets in various parts of the city — is a tough job and Kamat tries his best to see that customers are kept happy. "For me the customer is king and it is his opinion that is of utmost value. If I have been successful, it is because my customers have given me invaluable suggestions. Many a time people bring in foreign guests and whenever I have been at the outlets, they have told me about icecreams in their country. I try to improvise on my own stuff," says Kamat.

His row house in the western suburbs has a green patch in the backyard and he has grown *karwand*, *jaam*, *papanus*, jackfruit, star fruit and even red *jaam*, which is very unusual. Apart from icecreams, the other passion in Kamat's life is growing various fruits. "That is because I come from a farming family," he says with a grin.

From a country bumpkin who came to this city in 1969, Kamat has made it to the top within two decades all because he serves a real coool concoction in exciting varieties. ❶

— Shubhda Dharwadkar