

ICE-CREAMS whip up mental images of 'wintry' delights, with reference not to the chill that characterises the season but to the icy lattice-wrapped concoctions of milk — with emphasis on the nature or composition which qualifies the product. Quite certainly, ice-cream ranks high on our list of favourite treats.

Cashing in on the near-universal appeal of these frosty palate-enticers are the manufacturers who, in their quest to leave no stone unturned when it comes to pleasing fickle taste buds, have let their creative instincts and imagination run riot in churning out exotic ice-creams incorporating various ingredients, flavours and toppings. Thus, we are accosted with 'baked' as well as 'fried' ice-creams, sandwich and float ice-creams, ice-creams with fancy garnishes, and so on and so forth.

Standing cheek-by-jowl with the major players in the business, though not very large in size but big in reputation, is the brand Natural Ice-cream, produced and marketed by Sidhant Ice-cream Private Ltd (SIPL). Led by the astute Raghunand Srinivas Kamath (not to be confused with the Kamat Group), this family-run enterprise has indeed come a long way since its inception in '84. Situated in the hub of the sprawling Juhu-Vile Parle Scheme — Juhu — Natural is now an only ice-creams' place, unlike a few years ago, when *pav bhaji* used to jostle for attention and space along with the ice-cream.

Kamat and his advisor, Ramkrishna Mallya, are particular about projecting the ice-cream as a 'pure vegetarian' product and the same description is prominently printed on its stationery and packages. Beginning with a predominantly Gujarati clientele in the past, the brand has since become so well-entrenched that it now succeeds in drawing a diverse crowd — young, old, vegetarians, non-vegetarians — to its parlours.

Past reticence concerning expansion has faded, and in its place stands a bold, exuberant confidence that has expressed itself in the number of parlours (Breach Candy, Bandra, Vile Par-



SCOOPS OF FUN : Natural ice-creams have been a runaway success

NATURAL, NATURALLY

Consistent production of a quality product wins markets even when one of the publicity claims made is debatable, report Arup Isaacs and Rai Yashendra

le, Lokhandwala Complex, Malad, Borivali and Mulund) that have been stamped with the Natural franchise. Advertising, too — in the form of press releases — is slowly but surely taking root. A press campaign amounting to Rs. one lakh marked Natural's recent foray into the world of print advertising. This campaign marks a drastic change in a policy which had, over the years, relied exclusively on word-of-mouth publicity. Major plans, Kamath states, are in the offing in the field of promotion of the brand name. Plans are also under way to spread the franchise network to four other places (Chembur, Shivaji Park, Ghatkopar and King's Circle) in the near future. Natural intends diversifying into the production of other milk-based products such as *kulfi* and *shrikhand*. An ice-cream with a pure vanilla extract, unlike anything else of its kind in the market, will in addition soon make an entry on its menu.

Natural started off with a capacity of ten kilos of hand-churned ice-cream per day. Today, at the newly-acquired SIPL factory at Mira Road, it produces 1,000 kilos of the same every day in five automated churners using the 'traditional' technique in which the milk, fruit and sugar are churned together, on a base of ice and common salt (as a freezing agent) to the desired consistency.

Mallya claims that 800 to 900 kilos of their produce is sold daily through their various outlets. They however prefer to market Natural only in Bombay and have no intention, unlike other brands, of broadening their base. As part of their comprehensive strategy, which commenced with franchising, four to five refrigerated vans will soon be pressed into service so as to ensure quick and cold delivery of the product.

With soaring sales and a greater market presence, Natural has

naturally opted to move away from personalised kitchen production into the brisk, no-nonsense automated environs of a factory. In response to a query as to whether this move would affect the quality of the ice-cream, Kamath says: "The introduction of automation does not in any way take away from the quality of our ice-creams...it's the taste, quality and traditional method of preparation (TQT) which ultimately counts and underscores Natural's excellence."

Kamath adds: "Our ice-creams have gained in recognition due to the quality control measures that we have introduced at every stage, which begins with the milk (we purchase 16,000 litres per day at the rate of Rs 15.25 per litre) and the choicest dry and fresh fruits. We regularly conduct stringent quality tests on the milk by getting samples of it tested in approved laboratories to determine the fat content. The

milk (which is buffalo milk) is also subjected to a traditional method of testing which involves reducing a litre of it to exactly 250 gm of *mava*, or residue, failing which the consignment is rejected."

In keeping with its 'pure vegetarian' claim, Natural does not use gelatine (which is animal-based) or egg in any of its products. Yet, despite the absence of non-vegetarian inputs, can Natural still be classified as a 'pure vegetarian' ice-cream (as its manufacturers boldly proclaim), since milk, as it is well known from the medical (and common-sense) point of view, is of animal origin? Both, Kamath and Mallya accept this contention as true but opine that "Milk, in spite of its animal origin, has still been accepted as vegetarian. We are only catering to popular demand and the mass conception of what is vegetarian."

Why, then, the controversy arising out of labelling other ice-creams as non-vegetarian? Addressing this issue, Kamath reluctantly concedes that other brands, too, especially the major ones, cannot be classified as being non-veg.

Natural is not the only ice-cream in town that incorporates the TQT and so-called 'pure vegetarian' concept. There are other firms, too, where ice-cream preparation is based on the same formula. However, Natural is in the bigger league when compared to these smaller firms. In terms of retail, it claims to gross, on an average, Rs 50,000 per day at its Juhu parlour. This, Kamath claims, is the highest in the country from any one single outlet. Earnings for '94-95 from all Natural parlours, he adds, are in the range of Rs 3.2-3.5 crore, and the year-end target is to touch Rs five crore.

Natural is a brand to reckon with. But its claim to 'uniqueness' which banks rather too heavily on the 'pure vegetarian' factor is misleading and overstated. Nevertheless, by any yardstick of assessment, consistency over the years with a premium being placed on the three most important factors — quality, taste and method — have undoubtedly contributed to the resounding success of Natural Ice-cream.