

Ice in the Fast Lane

Reprinted from the Washington Post

How a Pint-Sized, High-Priced Machine Turns Tomatos Into Sorbet at 2000 rpm

In the restaurant kitchen, from all appearances, the modest 29-pound machine could be mistaken for a common coffee maker. A steel beaker is placed where the glass carafe would go. And behind the brushed chrome casing a blade stands ready to emulsify frozen ingredients into micro-thin particles. In 20 seconds, at the touch of button, chunks of pineapple and coconut and a pinch of sugar can be shaved at 2,000 rpm into a single portion of tropical snow.

Why have more than a dozen Washington area chefs equipped their kitchens with this high-tech \$3,000 machine that makes sorbet? There are efficient frozen-dessert machines on the market, suitable for use in a restaurant, for \$600. Still, chefs are willing to plunk down three big ones for the Swiss-made PACOJET.

"It's a matter of making our selection of sorbets as airy and light as possible," says Patrick O'Connell, chef and co-owner of the Inn at Little Washington in Washington, Va.

For O'Connell, the recipient of the 2001 James Beard Foundation Outstanding Chef award, the PACOJET is "the ideal machine" for creating his dessert called Painter's Palette of Sorbets ? six thumb-size portions of barely sweetened, pureed fresh fruits, which, when sampled from left to right, escalate in pure flavor intensity.

Chef Gary Fick spotted the diminutive PACOJET in O'Connell's kitchen and ordered one for himself. Now every night he "pacotizes" sorbet in flavors such as Key lime and blueberry lavender.

"It's a heck of an investment but PACOJET is an incredible machine", says Fick, executive chef at Crossing at Casey Jones in La Plata. "It's fast, easy, durable."

The principal parts of the PACOJET are a base unit equipped with a motor; a 1 1/4-quart, chromium-steel-beaker; and a titanium-coated blade. Most ice cream or sorbet makers require a chef to blend ingredients before they are placed in the machine, where they are churned and frozen. But with the PACOJET, a chef merely adds the raw ingredients (for example, chunks of a fresh mango, water and a pinch of sugar) to the beaker then puts the beaker in the freezer for 24 hours. When it's time to make sorbet, he puts the frozen beaker in the PACOJET and pushes the button. The high-speed blade shaves and blends one portion from the frozen ingredients, leaving the rest of the ingredients ready for the next order. A chef can have a dozen beakers frozen, ready and waiting, and produce a rainbow of sorbets at a moment's notice.

Developed in the early 1980s by Swiss engineer Wilhelm Maurere, the PACOJET was initially manufactured in 1992 for the European market as a multifunctional device for mousses, soups, sauces, fillings and frozen desserts. In 1996 the PACOJET was test-marketed in the United States. Worldwide, 10,000 units have been sold, an estimated 250 in North America. Owners are primarily restaurants and hotels, but there are notable exceptions. "Hollywood stars and other prominent personalities have bought PACOJET for their home kitchens (most employ a private chef), but they have requested anonymity, which we endeavor to respect," said PACOJET managing director Gunter Scheible via e-mail.

Washington area chefs who have invested in PACOJET love this machine.

Chef Gerard Madani's rich, bitter chocolate Valrhona sorbet, served in the Willard Room of the Willard Inter-Continental Hotel downtown, is spun to perfection in a PACOJET.

The PACOJET is the only piece of high-tech equipment in Gerard Pangaud's kitchen. "Other than the Paco, all I have is pots and pans and a stove", says Pangaud, chefowner of Gerard's Place, an intimate, 50-seat French restaurant in McPherson Square. "What's really extraordinary about this machine is how it lets you do unsweetened or barely sweetened sorbets", said Pangaud, explaining that the PACOJET "eliminates the problem of balancing the sugar content of sorbets that makes them either too icy or mush."

For his baked tomato dessert Pangaud starts, one day in advance, by pressing heirloom tomatoes and basil leaves into the PACOJET steel beaker, adding olive oil, tomato juice and a little salt and pepper. The beaker is then stored for 24 hours in a freezer at minus 1 degree Fahrenheit.

At service time, Pangaud places a wedge of Green Zebra tomato beside a baked, baseball-size, yellow Golden Jubilee tomato that has been stuffed with citrus-scented dried nuts and fruit. Time to pacotize.

Seconds before the dish leaves the kitchen the frozen beaker of tomatoes is inserted into the PACOJET. The high-speed blade shaves one serving of tomato-basil sorbet. The unprocessed portion is popped back into the freezer for later use.

Says Pangaud, who purchased his PACOJET three years ago: "The best thing is that this is a reliable machine. Nine out of 10 times with other machines it's the cooling system that breaks down. You're already using a frozen product with the Paco, so there is no problem there."

A PACOJET is in place for the planned Sept. 1 opening of Spezie, a Northern Italian restaurant at 736 L St. NW, which formerly housed the restaurants Ciao Baby and 21 Federal. Chef Enzo Livia also has a PACOJET at his Italian Restaurant, Il Pizzico, in Rockville.

A PACOJET also awaits Emery Santo, formerly chef at Pantheon at the Ritz-Carlton Philadelphia, who on Sept. 1 will become the chef of Kobalt at the Ritz-Carlton Washington in the West End.

Restaurant consultant and pastry chef Steve Klc (pronounced kelch) does not like ice cream and sorbet made with stabilizers ? ingredients that are often added to an ice cream or sorbet base to maintain a smooth emulsion. "Stabilizers give a gummy taste in the mouth. Gummy detracts from the taste of the fruit," says Klc, whose elaborate wedding cakes can be viewed at www.pastryarts.com. "Enter Paco," says Klc, who has used the PACOJET to make an olive oil sorbet, served with grapefruit sections and fresh basil. "You don't need stabilizers. Make your mix. Freeze it rock solid. Pop in the beaker. Bang. Perfect sorbet on demand. No waste."

Sorbet and ice cream are the most popular uses for the PACOJET. But any quick-frozen foods can be pureed to create soups, sauces and mousse. Quail bones can be pureed in seconds for a consommé. Whole red chili peppers, garlic and shallots are frozen and, on command, reduced to a paste.

"It grinds the living daylights out of stuff like nothing I've ever seen," says Doug Anderson, the new executive chef of the Four Seasons Hotel in Georgetown. With the PACOJET at his side, Anderson has created nine infused oils, such as watercress-chive and horseradish, which are used throughout the menu.

Chef Robert Wiedmaier purchased his Paco 10 months ago to take on a variety of tasks. "I am using a traditional meat grinder to make boudin blanc from chicken, squab and foie gras," says Wiedmaier, chef and owner of Marcel's in the West End. "But the PACOJET saves me hours of work because you don't have to pass anything through a tamis (a fine, cloth strainer). In the end you get a superior product."

With the Paco, he blends salmon, white fish and scallops for a salmon soufflé. He takes lobster shells and butter, grinds them into a paste to incorporate into a sauce. "It makes it so fine."

Says Wiedmaier: "More chefs have to experiment, try new things and get the Paco out of the pastry shop."