



The art of freezing yoghurt

by Laura Jones

From humble beginnings with only one shop on De Wet Square, Stellenbosch, this frozen yoghurt company has grown to supply even a major retailer, and has opened frozen yoghurt bars all over the Western Cape and distributes as far as Gauteng.

Marcel's product development and factory manager Deon Brand says the base of their product is outsourced to the Dairy Exchange. "Terry Terreblanche has been working with us for a number of years, creating a smooth-textured, low-fat frozen-yoghurt-based product that keeps drawing people to our retail shops. The frozen yoghurt base is kept exclusively for our Marcel's shops and so are the recipes. The probiotics, BB-12(R) are added into the base product right at the beginning with the preparation of the mix."

Brand says the livelihood of the probiotics in their product went through an 18-month test period in which they checked and confirmed that the probiotics exceeded the claimable livelihood expectation by tenfold after a shelf life of nine months. "Simply put, the frozen yoghurt manufacturing process relies on a basis of receiving, where pH, temperature and Brix are checked

and compared to supplier specifications," adds Brand. The ingredients then go into the cold room or ingredient freezer from where they are drawn for production. Because they supply mixed (yoghurt/ice-cream-based) products they are able to focus on adding the flavours, include their bases and do the final blending themselves.

"In other words, we add fruit syrups, chocolate pastes, natural flavouring from carefully selected suppliers to fill our basic needs of supplying a natural product to our customers. There is not a huge difference between what we do at the factory and our shops; it is really just the volumes that make a difference at the end," says Brand.

"The frozen yoghurt recipe is not one we'll deviate from easily. It is a winning recipe and it has come a long way to what it has to offer from a low-fat, probiotic-filled frozen yoghurt."

Of their prime location Brand says, "Logistically, it probably does not make a lot of sense to be situated in Stellenbosch; however, I don't think we'll move easily from where we are, as we own the property. We have just started with quite a large building project to enlarge our freezer space and production capacity."

Marcel's currently push between four and six tons of flavoured mix through their machines on a daily basis. "At the moment, we have two machines running continuously per day. Our monthly production ranges between 150 and 180 tons, with business growing rapidly." Products are stored at between -25 and -30°C from production through to final storage. "We are extremely lucky in the sense that as we produce, our stock is being dispatched. Although we have a nine-month shelf life on our products, we almost produce to order. The process from orders received to orders dispatched is around ten days – ordered, received and produced into final product."

Does the soft-serve approach at franchises have a larger appeal than the product frozen in tubs? Are the ice crystals larger in tubs than in the smoother soft serve and doesn't this affect the product as a whole?

"Over the years, we have found that it is really a much of a muchness and it has proved to be a brilliant cross-reference marketing tool, as the Marcel's shops really do a lot of marketing for our product on the shelf and the vice versa. There is no difference in the crystal formulation of the product. There is a difference in the overrun of the product though. The overrun on the soft serve is less than on the pre-packed tubs, but again, comparing between a soft serve and a continuous freezer you do have a consistency issue because a soft serve machine is a stop-start process and the latter is obviously not.

"Because Marcel's started as a small company with one small shop in the De Wet Square in Stellenbosch, almost 21 years ago, we have basically gone through all the challenges of being a small one-owner company with a few shops and a few freezers in the market place. It was only in 2001 when we signed with Woolworths that our growth started to take momentum. We were dropped by suppliers because our volumes were too low, constantly battling with volumes on packaging, import of

raw materials. All of these were and, to an extent, still are challenges to us because we are still quite small. We have a good footing in the Western Cape and smaller presence but no shops in Gauteng at present. So there is still huge potential for growth for us in South Africa," says Brand.



Of competition Brand says, "There are smaller companies that make frozen yoghurt but we would like to think that they are really spin-offs of what we've been doing for such a long time already. We're busy with a major upgrade of storage and we are changing over from condenser cooling units to cooling tower units (which in itself creates energy savings on the machines) as well as keeping the outside temperatures consistent at 19°C. We try to keep our freezers at a consistent temp of -30°C."

Marcel's is currently hazard analysis and critical control point (HACCP) certified, recognising the company's compliance with international food and safety standards practices. It is also working towards ISO 22 000 certification, which defines food safety management requirements that meet or exceed global food safety regulations.

"Our aim is to do our ISO 22000 accreditation this month, once our building project is finished and we have settled in and ironed out all the teething problems of a new building." **M&J**