



photos by Eurydice Galka

Let's Eat Vacaville

a culinary perspective

Fentons Creamery

by: Gigi Warshawsky

It was a sunny afternoon when Pete and I visited Fentons Creamery for a bite to eat and to partake in their famous ice cream wizardry. One step in and I instantly regressed in time to my childhood. After a day of working in my grandparent's gift shop (I was seven years old), my Grandmother would take me to Woolworth's on Market Street in San Francisco for a Black Cow (a root beer float with chocolate syrup); while we sat at their never-ending counter and enjoyed our time together. The atmosphere here at Fentons is equally as nostalgic, pure Americana; counter, booths, soda jerk, open grill, retro uniforms, colors of red, black and white; I knew we were in for a treat.

I had heard of Fentons and their ice cream legacy during my years in the Bay Area, but had never had the opportunity to visit them in the East Bay. We are fortunate that in May of 2007, Fentons decided to open a store at the Nut Tree in Vacaville. Selecting Vacaville for its sister store was a simple one, "The Nut Tree represents nostalgic times, entertaining generations for decades, much like Fentons Creamery does." Manager Troy Garot added, "Fentons wanted to be a part of it (The Nut Tree), there has always been an emphasis on family and kids of all ages."

The history is as rich as their ice cream. It all began in 1894 when E.S. Fenton founded the creamery at its first location in Oakland. That site thrived throughout the many years while being operated by E.S. and his thirteen children. Upon retirement, E.S. eventually handed the business down to three of his children and lastly to eight of his grandchildren.

Grandson Melvin had persuaded his Grandfather to start producing ice cream at the family creamery where Melvin ultimately took on the responsibility of "ice cream maker." He has been credited with creating many of their signature flavors such as Toasted Almond, Swiss Milk Chocolate and Rocky Road.

In 1922, the family added a restaurant and soda fountain to the creamery's location. Eventually, the creamery and restaurant were sold to what would become Foremost, although it still remained under the direction of family. Foremost discontinued the dairy operation in 1961 and moved the restaurant to its present day location at 4226 Piedmont Ave. in Oakland. Success continued throughout the years and in 1987 its current owner, Scott Whidden, purchased Fentons from Foremost-McKesson. To this day the tradition of family, recipes and ice cream favorites continue to thrive as it always has.

Pete and I were seated at a window booth and then were introduced to managers Troy Garot and eventually Jeff Pearson. Troy sat down with us to chat and give us the scoop on what makes Fentons unique in the ice cream world. He shared with us how the 40 flavors (at any given time, including seasonal offerings) are hand crafted, in small batches, on-site at both locations. The "hands-on" approach takes much more care, love and skill versus the mass production route. Jeff added, "It takes five days from the cow to you. We make 450-600 gallons of ice cream per month."

We were told that Miguel, who has been the "Master Blender" for the past 11 years, comes to Vacaville

on Saturdays to guide in production and assure all meets the high standards. The exceptional quality of the ingredients used (i.e. cream from *Happy California Cows*, Guittard Chocolate and 100% Madagascar Vanilla) and the all-important butterfat content (up to 14% and even 16% for special blends) is what sets this “Super Premium” ice cream apart from the average.

Troy was quick to stress that by producing the ice cream at the store level, it alleviates any temperature abuse which might occur when the ice cream is produced offsite followed by the transferring to warehouses, grocery stores and eventually to the home. By utilizing Fentons blast chiller freezer unit, with temperatures registering anywhere from -20° to -90° (with the fans blowing), the ice cream freezes faster than water molecules, hence, no ice crystals form which lends to a creamier texture and better quality. The ice cream travels mere yards versus miles.

After a nice conversation with Troy and Jeff, Travis, our server, introduced himself and proceeded to take our order. I always inquire if there are any recommendations before I finalize my decision. Travis was quick to point out that the Crab Salad Sandwich, featuring *real* Alaskan crab, is one of their house specialties and extremely popular. He continued to add that he always suggests it be accompanied with the potato chips offered instead of an alternative of fries or onion rings. He stated that the saltiness of the chips really enhances the taste of the crab salad. Travis also shared that the bread and butter pickles that come as a garnish are a favorite of many of his customers.

I really appreciated that Travis really knew the menu and flavor profiles to the smallest of detail. I was

convinced; crab sandwich is what I shall have! Pete ordered the steak sandwich with onion rings and a chocolate malt. Travis proceeded to ask Pete how he wanted the malt, made with vanilla or chocolate ice cream. Pete opted for vanilla ice cream (I would have gone with as much chocolate

as I could get, but that’s a girl thing). The attention to detail from Travis once again surfaced. I rarely have ever been asked my ice cream flavor preference when ordering a chocolate malt or shake at any establishment.

The food was cooked and served promptly, the place was packed. All food was served hot, a major plus. Pete’s steak was nicely charred and the roll was fresh and soft. Pete appreciated that no ingredient “smothered the steak flavor.”

My sandwich was very tasty. I am glad I opted for the recommended chips and stuffed some into my sandwich. Travis was correct, the saltiness and the crunchiness were very complimentary. I am a fan of the sweet pickles, so all was good.

My initial intent was that I was only going to eat half my meal, so I could save room for an ice cream creation. Well, that didn’t go as planned. I ate almost my entire meal but was still anticipating what was to come, ice cream! Oh, the decisions! How does one decide when two pages are jam-packed with choices?

I remember that Troy had mentioned the “Myrtle Sundae of the Month.” These are created as part of fundraising in which 25% of each sundae sold goes to selected charities; this month featured the Vacaville Neighborhood Boys & Girls Club. March’s Myrtle Sundae was Leprechaun’s Treasure, which included a scoop of rocky road and mint chip ice cream, cold fudge, marshmallow topping, green sprinkles all on top of a warm brownie. It was up my alley.

Be warned, if you have never been to Fentons, you must brace yourself for the massive concoction that is delivered to you. Let’s just say this, I am usually well satisfied with a Petite Sundae which has one “petite” scoop (which is the size of a giant scoop anywhere else.)

Oh, my, this gargantuan mountain of ice cream had arrived at the table! Pete was full from his lunch and malt and wouldn’t even attempt to help me out. Firstly, if the petite scoops are large, can you imagine what a “generous” (their term) scoop is? Each one must have been close to a pint. Not to mention that the fudge (I requested hot instead of the cold) and marshmallow topping was oozing down the side of the schooner dish and completely filling the saucer. The marshmallow topping was nothing like I have experienced, it was chock full of mini marshmallows and very creamy. Note: I also tasted the hot caramel sauce, on request. It is made on site in giant kettles. The homemade buttery taste was a “Mom” moment. Well, I only made it through about 1/4 of the sundae, if that. I never even reached the brownie. Before I knew it, not only was my napkin covered with fudge, but so was my chin and lips. I was a “kid in ice cream





heaven!" Now I understand when it is said that "memories are created at Fentons."

Along that same subject, during our meal all of a sudden Travis yelled out to the entire dining room, "Oh, my gosh, it is Elizabeth's birthday today, let's sing her Happy Birthday." The entire dining room burst out into song. Afterwards, one of the members of that birthday table came up to manager

Jeff, who at that moment was recalling more stories with us. The gentleman shared that he was 90 years old and that he had many fond memories going to the original Fentons as a child. They would drive for 25 miles navigating through the city roads, way before the interstate freeway was built. He continued to chat with us for about ten minutes. According to Jeff, this is commonplace. "This is the best part of working here, all the stories and history." Travis also similarly commented, "After 16 years in the restaurant business, Fentons is my favorite; people are always happy when they get ice cream."

And I second that motion and emotion. I was very happy, extremely messy and stuffed to the gills.

A few quick facts: Fentons offers "Artic Tours" with Troy as a gracious leader. This includes a narration of the hanging photographs that align the walls, a tour of the ice cream making kitchen, blast chiller freezer and regular freezer store room. Let me sum it up in one word, "BURRRRRRR!"

Fentons was proudly highlighted in the movie *Up* in which the last scene is featured at Fentons. In fact, Miguel even created a special ice cream for the celebration of the Academy Award nomination.

When you stop by, gaze at the large colorful mural on the wall. Many folks have played a version of "Where's Myrtle?" – Myrtle is their mascot cow.

I was told that there is quite a debate with Dryers about who actually invented the famous flavor "Rocky Road." Fentons stands by their claim. There is a difference; Dryers is made with almonds and Fentons is made with walnuts.

It is rumored that Fentons displayed the first neon sign in Oakland.

Fentons is Zagat rated for 2009 and 2010. It has been featured in numerous publications such as *Gourmet* and *New York* magazines, *USA Today*, History Channel, the Food Network as well as the majority of Bay Area publications and media.

Fentons was listed on the Travel Channel's - *Top 101 Chowdown Countdown*.

It featured the top 101 places in the United States to chow down. Fentons came in at #4 in the U.S., #2 in California, #1 in Northern California and #1 in the U.S. for ice cream.

Fentons offers military, senior and "uniformed" (firefighters, police officers and paramedics on duty) discounts.

In conclusion, if I desired to celebrate a special occasion where I would remember it for years to come and possibly become a family tradition; I, like numerous folks before me, would make Fentons that particular place.

To sum it up; Fentons is f-f-frosty fun! ■

Fentons Creamery

1669 East Monte Vista Ave (at The Nut Tree Village),
Vacaville

707-469-7200

www.fentonscreamery.com

Monday – Thursday: 11 am – 8:30 pm

Friday: 11 am – 10 pm

Saturday: 9 am – 10 pm

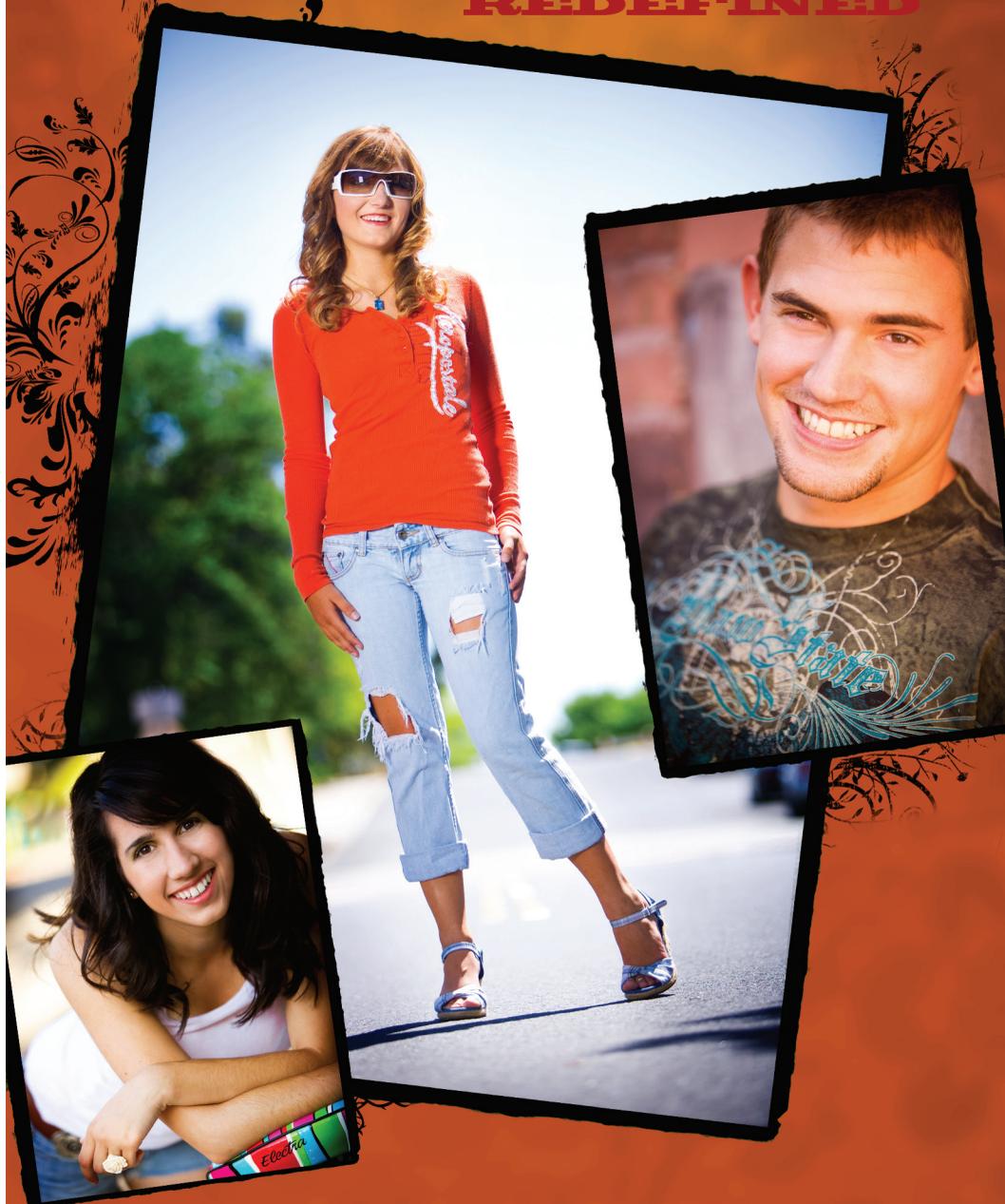
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