

# KEEPING THE FLAVOR

From serving up Americana with their ice cream and burgers, Mullen's has ventured from Watertown to a store near you





By Randall Dullum

For nearly 90 years, Mullen's Dairy Bar has remained a throwback to a simpler day, when the pace of life was less harried and people took time to savor the sweeter things in life.

A fixture in downtown Watertown since 1932, Mullen's is revered as a slice of Americana. Inside, customers immediately are transported to a bygone era when milk still was delivered in glass bottles and service was with a smile.

Today, as then, people stop in off the street to savor a cold, creamy and sweet treat.

From its opaque block-glass windows to its counter lined with cherry-red barstools, the venerable eatery exudes the charm of an authentic ice cream parlor and soda fountain.

While wait staff prepare their order, patrons can be swept back in time, hearing music and admiring the antique ceiling, lights and assortment of dairy memorabilia that adorn the walls.

As a purveyor of premium home-made ice cream, connoisseurs need look no further than Mullen's to satisfy their craving for this most celebrated concoction.

Mullen's still employs old-style mixing machines to churn out rich and thick shakes and malts, and from its original soda fountain deluxe sundaes are served, appropriately, in



TOP: Mullen's Dairy Bar has been a fixture in downtown Watertown since 1932, and is revered as a slice of Americana. Pictured here, Rylie Glascock serves a scrumptious hot fudge sundae for a waiting customer. From its original soda fountain, Mullen's serves deluxe sundaes in authentic tulip-style glasses.

Randall Dullum



authentic tulip-style glasses.

After generations of owners, Mullen's Dairy Bar today is run by a "band of brothers," Adam, Josh and Matt Keepman, a family who, like many from the area, developed a love for the Mullen's Dairy legacy. That legacy includes the fact that by the mid-1970s Mullen's Dairy was processing milk and ice cream three to four days per week, and it was one of the last Wisconsin dairies to use glass bottles for distributing its milk to homes.

After purchasing the business from the previous owner in 2016, the Keepman brothers made substantial investments, remodeling the kitchen and restaurant, and revamping the ice cream production facility located directly off the kitchen. They reopened the shop on May 1, 2017.

"We've tried to retain a lot of the same character and charm — we were lucky enough to get some of the (dairy-related) artifacts," Adam Keepman said, noting he found, upstairs, a letter addressed to Mullen's from McDonald's founder Ray Kroc. The letter is dated May 10, 1945.

"Kroc used to work for this malt mixer company (in Chicago) and he sold those (units) to Mullen's, and I have the letter," he added. "I have it framed under glass."

## GETTING THE SCOOP

When it comes to their ice cream, Mullen's incorporates only the finest, natural ingredients available to ramp up flavors.

"I took over ice cream recipe formation, so I started to put fresh ingredients into the barrel because they (Mullen's) had never done that before," Keepman said. "I learned that

if you throw 40 ripe bananas into a barrel, like, Holy Cow, you've got some great banana ice cream.

"People recognize the natural flavor when they lick," he added. "We have a pumpkin (flavor) that's natural pumpkin; we have a milk and honey flavor with Sullivan Honey — wonderful local honey. PB&J has a homemade jelly in there."

In early fall, Mullen's was featuring 28 decadent flavors of ice cream.

"It's hard to imagine sometimes that we have all those flavors in these cases, but we do," Keepman said, noting that nothing goes to waste creating exciting flavor combinations. "The idea is to just kind of use what (ingredients) you have."

And Dirt Cake is considered the parlor's most popular flavor.

"Dirt Cake was a flavor that I created to kind of mimic our ice cream cakes, so you could have the experience without going all in," Keepman said. "You may remember grandma's dirt cake recipe — it's like that. Extremely rich, like death by chocolate."

Beyond that, he said, he really enjoys the Blueberry Cheesecake ice cream, along with other traditional favorites like Butter Pecan, Cookie Dough, Really Reese's and Mint Chip.

"Eighty percent of our business is vanilla for all the shakes, malts and sundaes," Keepman said. "But the kids like Blue Moon, Birthday Cake and Bubblegum."

The shop also produced a Double Dough flavor, a mix of cookie dough and brownie that he described as "excellent."



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Mullen's employs the same consistent ice cream-making methods that it has over the decades and still uses Classic Mix from Galloway Co. in Neenah. And it's the high butterfat content that sets Mullen's dairy products apart.

"We use a 12% butterfat mix — Classic Mix that we get from Galloway," Keepman said. "We mix it in a machine and add our ingredients throughout the process."

Not for the faint of heart, Mullen's offers the Bigger 'n Bill sundae, which consists of seven scoops of ice cream, a choice of three toppings, banana, and whipped cream and crushed nuts.

"We get some people that order that sometimes," Keepman stated. "It's enormous!"

Additionally, Mullen's serves root beer floats, ice cream sodas and freezes, ice cream cookie sandwiches and kids' sundaes. And for those who are lactose-intolerant, the dairy bar offers non-dairy treats as well.

"Cookie sandwiches do very well here," Keepman said. "We serve ice cream cakes, too. We do an eight-inch cake or a 10-inch cake. We do different styles or different flavor

combinations for people if they order ahead."

Traditionally, the cake comes with a layer of chocolate, a layer of vanilla ice cream, and in between are fudge and crushed Oreos, surrounded by butter cream frosting, he said, "so it's delicious."

### COMFORT FOOD

While ice cream's the star at Mullen's Dairy Bar, customers hungry for something more can select from a line of hot food including charbroiled burgers, all-beef hot dogs, crispy chicken and fish sandwiches, homemade chili and soups, salads and various sides. Kids' meals also are offered.

"We have great burgers — we sell a ton of burgers here," said Keepman, who previously had worked as a chef for Sendek's grocery stores in the Milwaukee area. "I make homemade cheese sauce — I put that on a burger with (cheese) curds. It's called the Sconnie burger."

He said he's heard customers remark: "Best burger I've ever had — hand's down." I get that a lot. It's an old-fashioned-type burger that's not thin and pressed. It's got some

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Adam Keepman, who along with his brothers Josh and Matt, own Mullen's Dairy Bar and Eatery. Here, Adam shows off the counter featuring an old mixing machine. The old-fashioned eatery exudes the charm of an ice cream parlor and soda fountain.

substance to it.

"But you don't fill them (customers) up too much because you want them to get to the ice cream," Keepman added. "You come here because the ice cream's great."

Mullen's also derives its cheese, milk and cream from Kraemer Wisconsin Cheese in Watertown, he noted.

"They do our frozen breaded cheese curds — we go through about 50 pounds per week," Keepman said. "It's actually Muenster cheese that they use."

The chef also creates Mullen's savory soups by using whatever's left over in the kitchen.

"People will say, 'What is your soup schedule?'" Keepman said. "Well, I can't really tell you that. When the mushrooms are getting older, I'm going to make 'em into soup. Or tomatoes, or whatever."

And as autumn has arrived, his homemade soups are back in season.

"I make a killer creamy blue mushroom stew, tomato basil



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and beef vegetable (soups)," Keepman said.

A popular regional destination, Mullen's recently opened a store in Oconomowoc.

"It's a scoop shop — no food there, just ice cream," Keepman pointed out. "People can walk off their \$50 steak dinners, then come over and have a cone."

And if you can't come to Mullen's, Mullen's can "come to you." In 2018, for the first time in its history, Mullen's started distributing its quality small batch, hand-packed ice cream to select supermarkets and retail outlets throughout the state.

"Our ice cream's in close to 40 to 50 stores throughout the region," Keepman said. "We got into the wholesale (business), so we sell Mullen's all over the state."

The love and appreciation for Mullen's transcends generations, he said, noting that nothing brings people together like ice cream and comfort food.

"There's just a lot of goodwill here — there's a lot of people that have a lot of great memories here," Keepman said. "The older folks, the younger kids — we get 'em all. And there's new faces all the time."

Mullen's is committed to both its history and tradition of

quality—especially its customer service, he emphasized.

"It's really important to remember that when we're serving (people)," Keepman said. "All the dishes have to look just stellar every time. People expect the best because we are the best in town. And we try to give them our best."

And seeing customers make a connection with the past is truly remarkable, he said.

"I think when people come here — especially in the modern era with all the troubles that we're fed every day — when they have a retro sale, it's a comfort sale for a lot of people," Keepman said. "It's the history, the timelessness and the idea of the good old days. You can come here and have a really good classic meal and an American dining experience."

He said he feels very blessed to work at Mullen's where things are kept simple and real.

"Especially with the modern world and the way things are, I just absolutely love the fact that it's, like, always 1972 here, or that sort of feeling," Keepman concluded. "I can kind of treat it like the good old days in a way and serve people well. I appreciate meeting new people and sharing my food with them."

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