

Party Scoopers

DANDY DON'S HOMEMADE ICE CREAM ISN'T SOLD IN STORES, ONLY AT CELEBRATIONS, WHERE THE SUNDAE CATERER HAS DISCOVERED A NICHE

By **NOLA L. SARKISIAN**
Staff Reporter

WHO did Mayor Richard Riordan call when he needed 125 ice cream sundaes to feed a team of attorneys?

Dandy Don's HomeMade Ice Cream.

And who did the producers of the new Austin Powers movie hire when they wanted to treat their 300-member cast and crew to a "Fun Friday?" Again, Dandy Don's got the call.

You won't find these confections at the local supermarket. Owner Don Whittemore, who makes hundreds of gallons of ice cream each week at his Van Nuys plant, is hired to handle ice cream socials with guest lists numbering from 25 to 5,000. He has catered parties at Disneyland, Geffen Records, **Galpin Motors**, and **CB Richard Ellis** – as well as on the sets of "Beverly Hills 90210" and "Buffy the Vampire Slayer."

"It's a happy business. And it's a business model that's working," said Whittemore, who runs the business with his wife Linda. As Dandy Don's client roster grows, so does its

revenues, which reached \$471,000 in 1998, nearly double what they were two years earlier. In 1999, the company expects revenues to reach \$525,000.

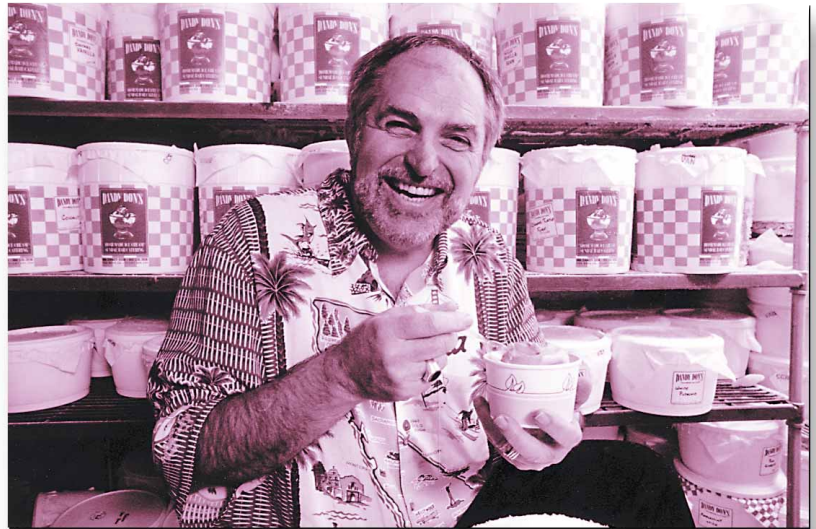
Not bad considering that the ice cream industry has shown lackluster growth of 1 percent to 3 percent in recent years, compared with the double-digit increases during the '70s and '80s when premium brands like Haagen Dazs and Ben & Jerry's made major debuts.

Lynda Utterback, publisher of National Dipper magazine, says Whittemore has a major advantage over many of the giants.

"He makes his own ice cream, which turns out to be much fresher than in grocery stores," Utterback said. "What he sells is as little as two to three days old compared to the grocery store, which can sell ice cream that's two months old."

Charges for the catering service vary depending on the size of the party. Typically, a 50-person event breaks down to about \$5.05 per sundae, plus labor and travel costs.

To save time and money, workers pre-scoop ice cream in disposable cups, keeping them



TODD FRANKEL/LABJ

Confections: Don Whittemore went into catering because of stiff competition in retail.

frozen with dry ice until the party begins. The crew works in aprons designed like tuxedos and guests are served from booths with red-and-white canopies.

"Sundaes are fun. They're a nice treat, especially when you're shooting 14 hours a day," said production assistant Heather Plott, who coordinated the event for the Austin Powers crew. "This rates up there with our 10-minute massages and our pizza lunches."

The Riordan ice cream social took place in the backyard of the mayor's Brentwood home when he threw a party to honor law students interning this summer at his firm, **Riordan & McKinzie**.

"Every year we've had different additions, from cigar rollers to fortune tellers, and this year we tried the ice cream sundae bar, which turned out to be a big hit with everyone," said Managing Partner Richard Welch.

In addition to catering, Whittemore has contracts with a number of area restaurants, hotels and country clubs that buy his ice cream – including Crustacean, Lawry's The Prime Rib, Maria's Italian Kitchen and the Wilshire Grand Hotel & Centre.

"He customizes things for me and is the only supplier I've found to be so flexible," said Walter Neuhold, executive chef at the Wilshire Grand. "For instance, at Christmas, he'll provide me with baked Alaska. I also use his ice cream as toppings for my desserts – like a scoop of vanilla bean on baked apple cobbler."

Whittemore has created more than 100 flavors, although vanilla bean still accounts for 80 percent of his sales. His latest creations include green tea, coconut, pink ginger and jalapeno grapefruit.

Despite the revenue growth, the food sales business requires lots of promotional skills – an area that Whittemore honed nearly three decades ago in the record industry. Back then, he worked as a promoter at **Capitol Records** and later **RCA**, helping introduce David Bowie, Anne Murray and John Denver, among others.

But the nomadic lifestyle made family life difficult, so he left the business in 1979 to seek new ventures.

A newspaper story about the ice cream business caught his eye and he bought a neighborhood store in Tarzana in 1981. He paid \$74,000 – "way too much" – and promptly realized that he hadn't done his homework.

"Summer was great, then the kids went back to school and my business dropped 50 percent," he said. "Then Penguin's Yogurt opened down the street. I was starving. I had to find other ways to make the business flourish."

Eventually, the retail overhead became too much to bear. He sold the business in 1987 at a loss and began concentrating on the wholesale market. In 1995, Whittemore moved into his own building and bought his own equipment.

Now the company is looking to expand its plant and plans to launch a Web site in the next 90 days. He also is looking for investors to open retail stores and currently has a licensing agreement with nine stores in China.

"We're always looking for new opportunities. Otherwise, you're singing the blues if you don't innovate and seek out new ventures," he said.

Spotlight

Dandy Don's HomeMade Ice Cream

Year Founded: 1995

Core Business: Making ice cream and catering sundae parties

Employees in 1995: 2

Employees in 1999: 7

Revenues in 1995 (first full year): \$55,000

Revenues in 1998: \$471,000

Revenues in 1999 (projected): \$525,000

Goal: To improve existing flavors and concoct new ones while expanding the catering business and increasing sales to restaurants

Driving Force: To further capitalize on a popular product and service while having fun in a variety of settings