

Rage Against the Ice Cream

A visit to the Ben & Jerry's factory proves two things—the company's been playing down its politics for a while, and no one seems to care.

1.

We live in the age of the Internet rumor. I can prove this with [big examples](#), and I can prove it with small ones. Let's go small. Various sources have suggested that ice cream impresarios Ben Cohen and Jerry Greenfield donated to the legal fund of Mumia Abu-Jabal or—which is worse?—developed a new flavor based on his case. One [email](#) demands that readers “call your local grocer and tell them about Ben & Jerry's support of a cop killer.”

Now, Internet rumors confirm suspicions instead of creating them. The Mumia episode fits the perception of Ben & Jerry's—a socially progressive company run by hippies—and thus lasted long enough to earn a reply from the company itself. The PR team separated truth from rumor, which, in this case, meant separating an owner from his company. “Neither Ben & Jerry's Homemade, Inc. nor the Ben & Jerry's Foundation have ever taken a position—formal or informal—on any aspect of the Mumia Abu-Jamal case,” says [the company's Web site](#). “Ben Cohen, one of our co-founders, acting as a private citizen, . . . sign[ed] a petition in 1995.”

I revive this rumor not to attack Ben and Jerry. For every angry emailer, they can claim thousands of loyal patrons, people who adore them for their politics as much their ice cream—or, at least, that's how the media tell it. When writing on Ben & Jerry's, most journalists follow a formula of summarizing its social commitments, then its raging success, then its rabid fans, and then the Irony of It All. (This narrative has only intensified since Unilever, an international conglomerate, bought the boys out in 2000.)

The conservative/liberal, capitalist/hippie dichotomy was [tired in 1991](#), when Ben and Jerry still capped the CEO's salary at seven times the janitor's, when they still charged \$1 for a tour of their factory, and when they still gave half of that to charity. So I decided to visit the Ben & Jerry's factory and report on the current state of affairs. If, along the way, I could pull an [Eric Schlosser](#) and uncover the equivalent of the New Jersey flavor industry creating the smell of hamburger on a paper strip—well, so much the better. But who wants to go to Jersey, especially when you can go to Vermont?

2.

So head to Vermont I did, as an interloper, a non-native son with a weekend to burn. The state did not disappoint. I encountered *Moose Crossing* signs, an intimidating array of granolas, and some Nader supporters passing out free DVDs. (“A vote for Obama is a vote for McCain.”)

With so much to see, I didn't get to the Ben & Jerry's factory until the tail-end of my trip. The factory sits on the outskirts of Waterbury, a small, sleepy town whose clock read nine in the morning, even on the August afternoon of my visit. I got the feeling it would rather not be disturbed.

The factory itself doesn't have much choice. Each year, it attracts more than 300,000 visitors. In its gravel parking lots, license plates from New England and the Midwest outnumber those from Vermont by a ratio of about six or seven to one. The main building, a pole-barn/airplane-hangar mashup trimmed in forest green, is surrounded by picnic tables and playground equipment, tents selling tie-dyed shirts, a minefield of photo-ops, and a "Scoop Shop" briskly dispensing the company's treats. Inside, a gift shop offers more lasting remembrances—stuffed animals, magnets, mouse pads, ice cream cozies.

The gift shop also sells tickets for the factory tour, which now run \$3 per person. Every 30 minutes, a tour guide vigorously rings a cowbell to call the next group to order. I had serious doubts about whether my guide, Taylor, could legally enjoy a pint of Bananas on the Rum. Taylor exhibited a stop-and-start peppiness that marks her as a member of the Red Bull generation; she wore a smart fleece vest, khaki shorts, and side-ponytail. After issuing a stern warning against photography, Taylor led us up a narrow flight of stairs. We were off.

Even [Upton](#) would struggle to find something negative about this tour. With its bright colors, peaceful cartoon cows, and mazes and mirrors and tubes, the tour resembled a county-fair funhouse. Of course, it's easy to emphasize the presentation of something that consists of three rooms and around 300 steps.

In the first room, the "Moo-vie Theater," we watched a short video on the history of Ben & Jerry's; it was less objective than the Nader DVD, but had better production values. The second room was really more of an elevated hallway overlooking the factory floor. Through glass windows on each side, we peered down at the production area, crowded with vats, pipes, and freezers. Here, Taylor played a second video, since the factory wasn't making ice cream that day.

After the movie and observation area, Taylor herded us to the final stop. Reverently, she explained that in the Tasting Room—"this very room"—Ben and Jerry created epochal flavors like Cherry Garcia. These were talking points, of course, but when someone sticks to the script, her own passions often become more visible. So you'll forgive me if I note that earlier, and much more casually, Taylor explained that "our ice cream is wrapped in recycled shrink wrap, and stuff like that." OK, then.

When Taylor finished her lines, it was time for ice cream samples, scooped into small paper cups like the ones hospitals use to sort out pills. Taylor thanked us and gestured toward a short hallway. The tour ended where it began. At the Ben & Jerry's factory, it seems, all roads lead to the gift shop.

3.

The factory tour is only one example of Ben & Jerry's [rich corporate history](#). A \$5 correspondence course in ice cream-making. A guerrilla marketing war against Pillsbury and Häagen-Dazs ("What's the Doughboy afraid of?"). A clause guaranteeing employees three free pints a day. Empires have been built on lesser facts.

Dig past these particulars, though, and you'll find a more ambiguous reality. Perhaps the best example of this now rests in the Ben & Jerry's Flavor Graveyard, a small, fenced-in plot tucked behind the factory, past the overflow parking for semi trucks and charter buses.

The story feels almost too stereotypical to be true. Ben Cohen hatched the idea for Rainforest Crunch, or vanilla ice cream with chunks of "Cashew and Brazil nut butter crunch," after befriending an anthropologist at a Grateful Dead benefit concert. By purchasing the nuts from a farming co-op in the Amazon, Ben & Jerry's could develop the local economy and fend off those trying to buzz-saw the Rainforest.

The flavor launched in 1990, a huge and immediate success. Each pint included the following label: "Money from these nuts will help Brazilian forest peoples start a nut-shelling cooperative that they'll own and operate." Customers and reporters both ate it up. Ben & Jerry's even added a mural celebrating the co-op to their factory.

If it was a stateside success, the flavor was an Amazonian flop. From the beginning, the co-op struggled to supply nuts with a low enough bacteria count to satisfy the FDA; at their peak, the farmers produced only 5 percent of the nuts needed for Rainforest Crunch, eventually dropping out and forcing Ben & Jerry's to remove the feel-good label in 1994.

But Ben & Jerry's didn't pull Rainforest Crunch. It remained a popular flavor, comfortably nestled in the company's top 10. In fact, in 1996, when Ben & Jerry's finally stopped making Rainforest Crunch, it did so because the manufacturer of the "butter crunch," Community Products, Inc., filed for bankruptcy. Ben Cohen had founded Community Products in 1989 as an independent company—a spinoff—and it failed primarily for [boring, business-y reasons](#).

The life and death of Rainforest Crunch, then, should remind us that Ben & Jerry's has always been a business—just like in 1988, when Ronald Reagan presented its founders with the National Small Business Person of the Year award, and just like today, when its "Scoop Shop" franchises are facing the same problems as Cold Stone Creamery's (namely, too much expansion and overstated earnings).

Instead, Rainforest Crunch has been refashioned into another irony. If the media loved the story on the way up, they loved it even more on the way down, selling it as a snapshot of Ben & Jerry's corporate practice and, more importantly, of the values and hypocrisies of its fans. It became a symbolic example of liberal largesse, the national health care of super premium ice cream.

4.

Most people who write about the Ben & Jerry's factory are of the low-rent travel-writerish variety, but there are exceptions. In 2005, Stephen Moore [wrote the tour up](#) for the *Wall Street Journal*, lampooning the company's "anti-free-market liberal causes" and name-checking Rainforest Crunch, even a decade after its demise. (The coverage of this flavor really does border on fetishistic: Moore also winkingly mentions it in [his book](#).)

The *Journal* article is a perfect example of how the media keeps sensationalizing the company and its fans. Moore's fellow tour-takers, physically, "are a bit on the chubby side." (There's subtext here! It's personal responsibility!) Politically, they're liberal and euphoric, twenty-first century pilgrims awash in some kind of gushing groupthink.

This did not match my experience.

While waiting in the Tasting Room, our tour played a game. Taylor would show a 30-second commercial for Ben & Jerry's, and we would shout out the corresponding flavor. Our group, which, at 25 or so people, was one of the smaller ones, did quite well, with one exception. It was a stupidly obvious stoner send-up—two guys on a couch, mellow, dude, trying to decide what to eat—paired with Ben & Jerry's Half-Baked ice cream. No one got it. There wasn't even a slow chuckle of recognition.

In other words, these people didn't strike me as devotees of hippie culture. In fact, they didn't strike me as anything. They weren't especially fat, but they weren't especially thin; their kids didn't cry, but they didn't cheer either. The whole thing defied analysis or interpretation. I couldn't even read this crowd along brand lines. I saw Radiohead T-shirts, but I saw Toby Keith ones too. While I didn't find any Priuses, I did spot a hybrid, but even it was a Chevy Tahoe.

After our game, a middle-aged woman asked Taylor if Ben & Jerry's European ice cream was "made under the same standards" as the American original (it is), but that's the only thing one could construe as political interest or awareness. The most heated discussion I heard all day, principled on both sides, came from a couple deciding whether to carry their stroller up the stairs or to take the elevator.

5.

Two thousand words, and I still haven't mentioned the weirdest thing about Ben & Jerry's: their Web site. Along with online standards like a store locator and product hype, benjerry.com offers a frighteningly robust "FAQ Database." This lets the company counter negative stories, but they'll answer just about any question. Students frequently seek help on class projects—"I'm doing a presentation on Ben & Jerry's for my marketing class, [and...](#)"—and the company's statement on Ben and Mumia Abu-Jabal was also a response to customer queries.

Here, in this database, you can glimpse something approaching the expected Ben & Jerry's fans. Consider the thread "How socially responsible are the bananas?": "I really enjoy Chunky Monkey® ice cream, but I am not sure I could conscientiously eat it knowing the Costa Rican environment is in danger." While this customer stops short of an ultimatum—*not sure*, after all, isn't *can't*—the Ben & Jerry's rapid-response team provided a [prompt, detailed answer](#). And that's the thing: no matter how bland the factory feels, no matter how indifferent my tour guide sounds, no matter how apathetic my tourmates seem, there still exists a body of people who buy and eat Ben & Jerry's because of its politics. And this minority continues to dominate the news coverage.

It was only after spending an afternoon with the company's tepid every-fans that I began to understand this situation. The hyper-political Ben & Jerry's fans—the ones fretting about socially responsible bananas—are the structural equivalent of the Netroots. There's a better link

here than Howard Dean. Like the Netroots, the progressive Ben & Jerry's fans drive and distort a bigger portion of the news than they have any right to. They're the media darlings, the ones who must be pacified quickly and quietly.

To test this theory, I called Ben & Jerry's and started asking socially responsible questions. After a typically harrowing touch-tone phone experience—the company's hold music, sadly, is not Phish—I ended up leaving a voicemail, convinced my experiment was over.

But someone got back to me the next day. And not just someone: Rob Michalak, Ben & Jerry's current Director of Social Mission and a top PR guy during the company's early-90s boom, spoke with me for almost an hour. While he was still smarting from the coverage of Rainforest Crunch, Michalak remained, for the most part, upbeat and on message. "We're still Ben & Jerry's. We're still extremely proactive in working on ways to manifest our three-part statement and having it reflect the core values of our founders."

I decided to get specific. Why, after 18 straight "Social and Environmental Assessments"—basically a progressive self-audit—had the company not put one out since 2006? Michalak promised the 2007 version was in its "final draft," adding that "I realize it's almost 2009." I asked about the company's current charity work, and he replied that "people confuse the philanthropic side with the social mission investment." Well, was it fair to say the philanthropic side had declined? "We're keeping strong levels," said Michalak, before smoothly transitioning into how the company pays a premium for fair-trade cocoa and milk from family farms.

The point here is not that Ben & Jerry's sold out. Admittedly, Unilever makes this conclusion an easy one—I question the progressive credentials of any company behind the marketing of Axe Body Spray—but Ben & Jerry's still caters to its Netroots-like fans. It just does so on a smaller scale, by responding to message boards and returning phone calls.

Given what I saw in Vermont, it's fair to wonder why Ben & Jerry's does even this. Is it out of guilt? As a micro-marketing strategy? Or because some people—like, I think, Rob Michalak—genuinely care about things like a social mission investment? I don't know the answer, but I do know that the majority of Ben & Jerry's fans, even those committed enough to trek to the factory, don't appear to be especially concerned with the company's politics.

To its credit, Ben & Jerry's seems to have figured this out. At the gift shop, trinkets relating to the company's latest progressive cause, the "Priority Pie," are buried in the back corner, next to an unplugged freezer designated for ice cream cakes; it doesn't feel like Ben & Jerry's is hiding them, just that they're not very popular. Instead of something ambitious like Rainforest Crunch, the company is promoting ONE Cheesecake Brownie, a new flavor whose politics amount to little more than a snazzy Web site and a loose affiliation with Bono. (This was actually the flavor we tried on our tour—it's horrendous stuff, to the point that we couldn't even finish the allotted samples—but Taylor never mentioned its social agenda.)

This shift is why Stephen Colbert is the perfect face of Ben and Jerry's. In a heralded attempt to "bring balance back to the freezer case," Colbert now boasts his own flavor of Ben & Jerry's. During the first wave of promotion, he invited Ben and Jerry on his show. The exchange, of

course, was pure pageantry, not least because Ben and Jerry are longer in charge of the company. But the value of this comparison has nothing to do with Colbert's "conservatism" or "authenticity." In fact, it's just the opposite. No one's clamoring for Colbert's personal, reasoned views on abortion or Obama. We watch him not for his politics, or even for his political analysis, but because he's fun. We don't need to understand Stephen, we just need to enjoy him. It's the same thing with Ben and Jerry.