

What's the Best Dairy-Free Ice Cream?

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Chloe Anello writes about everything from skin care to bedsheets. Most of all, she loves asking celebrities what they can't live without.

Photo-Illustration: The Strategist. Photos: Courtesy of the Retailer

For a long time, the only alternative to dairy-based ice cream was sorbet. While refreshing, anyone who has had ice cream and sorbet knows the latter is far from a perfect dupe because it lacks that rich, creamy flavor that can only come from a dairy product like milk or cream. But as the availability of dairy-free milk made from almonds, oats, coconuts, and even pistachios has grown, so too have dairy-free ice-cream options. Still, as with any product, just because options exist doesn't mean they are created equal. "There are a lot of really good ones out there, but also a lot of bad ones," says Leah Muncy, a Strategist deals writer who is lactose intolerant (like many women in her family).

To find the best dairy-free ice cream, we spoke to Muncy and 43 more lactose-intolerant, vegan, and dairy-allergic folks (as well as a few people who aren't but still eat dairy-free ice cream) about the brands and flavors they like. The reason we asked so many? Because more than half told us one brand makes the best hands down. But the more folks we talked to, the more we heard about other worthy alternatives to that runaway favorite. As many dairy-free ice-cream connoisseurs will tell you, choosing one typically

depends on what base you prefer, whether that's oat milk, coconut milk, or other ingredients like chickpeas. And a note about flavors: Since everyone has different tastes, we focused our reporting on the best brands of dairy-free ice cream. The flavors shown with each brand are the ones we heard about the most. But fans of those brands assured us that, in most cases, you'll enjoy their dairy-free ice cream in whatever flavor you prefer.

Best overall dairy-free ice cream



Van Leeuwen Vegan Chocolate Fudge Brownie

\$12

Photo: Courtesy of the Retailer

Twenty-six people — including folks who identify as lactose intolerant, allergic to dairy, and vegan — say Van Leeuwen is their favorite brand of dairy-free ice cream. The company makes some of its dairy-free ice cream with cashew milk and others with oat milk, something its fans say they appreciate given the strong preferences folks have for dairy-free ice cream's base.

One person who recommended the brand is Sarah Feiner, a New York City–based fundraiser who has been lactose intolerant for more than 15 years. “For most of my childhood and teen years, there were so few options,” she says. “Always a sorbet, which never satisfies that actual ice-cream craving.” According to her, Van Leeuwen’s dairy-free ice cream is “the only good one” because “it’s insanely creamy and actually tastes like real ice cream.” Another fan is Muncy, who says Van Leeuwen makes the “dairy-free ice cream to end all other dairy-free ice creams,” adding that “the texture is spot-on, the taste isn’t overly coconutty or cashew-y (a problem I often find with alt-milk-based ice creams), and they’ve got a ton of actually interesting flavors.” Parker Damato, a senior influencer marketing associate at Obé Fitness, agrees that Van Leeuwen is a good brand for “your weird and slightly off-mainstream flavors” of dairy-free ice cream. While most of those who recommend Van Leeuwen note it is more expensive than other dairy-free ice-cream options, they say you get what you pay for in quality and taste. Of all the brand’s flavors of dairy-free ice cream, the people we talked to mentioned Chocolate Fudge Brownie (which is made with cashew milk) the most. Strategist writer Liza Corsillo describes it as tasting “really creamy and rich, like truffles.” But Muncy promises that when it comes to choosing a flavor, “it’s impossible to go wrong.”

\$12 at VanLeeuwen Ice Cream

Best (less-expensive) dairy-free ice cream



Ben & Jerry's Non-Dairy Phish Food

\$5

The next most-recommended dairy-free ice cream comes from a company most anyone will recognize from their grocery or even corner store's freezer. Ten folks told us Ben & Jerry's is a reliable brand for dairy-free ice cream, with many saying it's what they'll grab when they can't find (or don't want to pay a premium for) Van Leeuwen. As art director Lulu Graham explains, the brand ensures its dairy-averse customers get the same selection as those who aren't: "They've turned all the best flavors into dairy free," she says. Many of those flavors include the same extra ingredients that are a hallmark of the brand's dairy-based ice cream — another plus, according to Strategist junior writer Arielle Avila. "I haven't found another nondairy ice cream that has as many chunks of cookie dough or brownie or other good stuff as theirs does," says Avila, who promises the brand's dairy-free options are "nearly identical to their classic ones." The majority of folks who recommended Ben & Jerry's prefer its almond-milk-based ice-cream options, which include this dairy-free version of Phish Food that came up a lot. But Liz Gonzalez, a creative producer at the Infatuation, notes that the brand's vegan ice-cream flavors made with sunflower butter are worth a try because that base makes them "super-creamy."

\$5 at Target

Best dairy-free ice-cream bar



Magnum Ice-Cream Bar Sea-Salt Caramel (3-Count)

\$5

Those who would rather eat their ice cream off a stick than with a spoon might prefer these dairy-free bars from Magnum that got recommended by five people. Molly Velázquez, a government administrator, is simply “obsessed,” telling us, “They’re so good and super-creamy. Texture- and taste-wise, they’re probably the best nondairy ice cream I’ve ever had.” The bars are made with cocoa butter and coconut oil, both of which give them a creamy, rich texture.

\$5 at Walmart

Best oat-based dairy-free ice cream



Oatly Chocolate Nondairy Frozen Dessert

\$5

Given the prevalence of its oat milk, you might not be too surprised to hear that Oatly's dairy-free ice cream came up the most among folks who prefer oat-based varieties. Damato told us it's the "creamiest" oat-based ice cream (even creamier than Van Leeuwen, she argues), adding that "it isn't too sweet, so it's perfect to pair with a slice of pie or another baked good." Graham says the best flavors are "simple: strawberry, vanilla, chocolate." This writer (Chloe Anello), who was diagnosed as lactose and gluten intolerant a few years ago, has also tried Oatly's ice cream and would have to agree: Basic flavors like vanilla and chocolate are where it shines.

\$5 at Target

Best (slightly less-expensive) oat-based dairy-free ice cream



Planet Oat Non-Dairy Frozen Dessert in Blueberry Oat Crumble

\$4

Planet Oat makes this writer's favorite oat milk — and the company's oat-based ice cream is just as creamy as anything dairy based, with no underlying oat-y taste. Nicoletta Richardson, an entertainment editor at Apartment Therapy, is another fan. She is especially fond of the brand's Blueberry Oat Crumble flavor. "You get either blueberry swirl, oatmeal crumble, or both in every bite, and you can visibly see the blueberry and crumble chunks in there," she told us, promising that, "true to its name, it really does taste like a blueberry-crumble pie."

Best coconut-based dairy-free ice cream



So Delicious Dairy Free Chocolate Coconutmilk Non Dairy Frozen Dessert
\$4

Coconut-based dairy-free ice cream can be quite polarizing. The folks who eat it told us that usually, you either love it or you hate it — there is no in between because in almost all cases, the coconut flavor comes through. We heard about a few brands — NadaMoo, Jeni's, Daily Harvest — but no brand of coconut-milk-based dairy-free ice cream came up more than So Delicious. One of the first brands of vegan ice cream to hit shelves, Graham and Maddy Katz — who has been allergic to dairy since birth — each told us about how light it is. But both say it's another brand that is best for its basic flavors. Corsillo explains why your standard flavor, like chocolate, works well with a coconut-milk-based ice cream: "The rich flavor masks and pairs better with the strong coconut taste."

\$4 at Instacart

Best chickpea-based dairy-free ice cream



SweetPea One 'n Only Cookies 'n Cream Pint
\$8

Photo: Courtesy of the Retailer

While it only came up once, we felt it was worth including SweetPea's chickpea-based dairy-free ice cream on this list given how emphatically it was recommended. "Van Leeuwen is really good, but this beats it," says Strategist writer Jenna Milliner-Waddell, whose favorite flavor is cookies 'n cream. "It's so creamy, like Ample Hills-level creamy, and the consistency is the closest I've ever had to dairy-based ice cream," she says. Importantly, Milliner-Waddell swears that, by taste alone, you would never know the ice cream has a chickpea base. She shares another surprising quality of SweetPea's pints: "A lot of dairy-free ice creams, including Van Leeuwen's, can get freezer burn after just a couple days of being open. But I've worked through one pint of SweetPea over the course of a month and never had that issue until the very end."

\$8 at SweetPea

Best dairy-free ice-cream sandwich



Coolhaus Dairy-Free Dirty Mint Chip Sammie

\$12

Photo: Courtesy of the Retailer

Damato promises that anyone who bites into one of her favorite mint-chip ice-cream sandwiches from Coolhaus will never know the ice cream is made from a blend of yellow peas, brown rice, and cocoa butter. She admits they're "kind of expensive for ice-cream sandwiches" but told us they're very rich, so you can cut one in half or in fourths to make it last longer.

\$12 at COOLHAUS

Best gluten- and dairy-free ice-cream sandwich



Jolly Llama Cool Mint Chocolate Chip Sandwich

\$6

Photo: Courtesy of the Retailer

Those who crave ice-cream sandwiches but are allergic to gluten and dairy (or who would just rather avoid both) should try this one from Jolly Llama, which also comes recommended by Damato. She says it's not as decadent as her favorite from Coolhaus but that it tastes similarly and is made with gluten-free cookies and coconut-based ice cream.

\$6 at Casper's