

Tasting Sweet Possibilities

Ice cream brand for lactose-intolerant people is part of a global food culture mission **BY EDITH G. TOLCHIN**

Who doesn't love ice cream? Who is lactose intolerant? According to Coco Fro co-inventor Pierce Freelon of Durham, North Carolina—who learned at a young age that he couldn't have ice cream—“65 percent of the human population is lactose intolerant, with the highest rates among Asian (90 percent), indigenous (79 percent) and black (75 percent) folks.”

Freelon and his wife, co-inventor Kathryn (Katie), invented a freeze-dried, plant-based (non-dairy) snack with winning flavors such as Sweet Potato Pie, Vanilla Cardamom and a few other standards.

Edith G. Tolchin (EGT): Please tell us about yourself and how Coco Fro came about.

Pierce Freelon (PF): I was born and raised in Durham, where I still live with my wife, Katie, and our two kids. I grew up within walking distance of the North Carolina Museum of Life and Science—where I was thrilled to discover

Astronaut Ice Cream. It's a freeze-dried snack developed for astronauts by NASA which tastes just like frozen ice cream, except it's crunchy, bursting with astronomical flavor, and doesn't melt until you put it in your mouth!

I used to love Astronaut Ice Cream, but I can't eat it anymore because I am lactose intolerant. I created Coco Fro to offer the millions of other ice cream lovers a delicious, dairy free, plant-based, freeze-dried ice cream experience.

This year, we're excited to launch a “nice cream shop” and creative community space in Durham. The project reimagines ice cream by centering the dietary realities and flavor traditions of the global majority—billions of people worldwide who cannot digest dairy.

Inspired by Afrofuturism and global food culture, Coco Fro will combine plant-based frozen desserts, storytelling, music and children's literature to imagine a more inclusive future of food. (*Editor's note: Afrofuturism is a cultural movement that incorporates art, science and technology with African and African diasporic history to envision alternate futures.*)

Over the next year, I will build Coco Fro as both a physical space and a creative platform: a neighborhood ice cream shop, a hub for community gatherings and the launchpad for a children's picture book that helps lactose-intolerant kids see themselves in the story of ice cream.

“Inspired by Afrofuturism and global food culture, Coco Fro will combine plant-based frozen desserts, storytelling, music and children's literature to imagine a more inclusive future of food.”

—PIERCE FREELON, CO-INVENTOR OF COCO FRO

EGT: How many different flavors are you selling?

PF: We have four flavors right now: Vanilla Cardamom, Rich Chocolate, Strawberry Cream and Sweet Potato Pie.

Coco Fro is more than a dessert; it's a cultural and culinary movement. Our mission is to reclaim that joy by crafting better-for-you, shelf-stable, plant-based ice cream that everyone can enjoy, with bold and culturally inspired flavors.

Our Sweet Potato Pie is an example of that. We're also working on a Caramel Plantain flavor.

EGT: Was it difficult developing a food invention?

PF: Developing a new food took a lot of experimentation, and it was worth it. Coco Fro's delightful bites are "poppable," yummy, melty and more delectable than the dairy version.

EGT: During manufacturing, must you follow any local or government regulations relating to a "freeze-dried" food product?

PF: Yes; we follow local food and national regulations with the North Carolina Department of Agriculture and the Food and Drug Administration.

EGT: Is any special certification required to certify a vegan product?

PF: Vegan products are not required to be certified in order to be advertised as such—in the same way that USDA Organic, for example, requires an official certification. There are, however, independent accreditors, such as "BeVeg."

EGT: Which startup or ongoing business challenges have you experienced?

PF: Our biggest challenge has been determining how to scale. We considered two options: partner with a co-manufacturer, or build our own production facility.



Katie and Pierce Freelon want to build Coco Fro as "both a physical space and a creative platform: a neighborhood ice cream shop, a hub for community gatherings and the launchpad for a children's picture book that helps lactose-intolerant kids see themselves in the story of ice cream," Pierce said.

We had so much demand in our first quarter that we could barely produce enough freeze-dried ice cream to keep up. It was overwhelming! Since then, we have reached out to several major co-manufacturing partners in the "freeze-drying space" but have yet to find a good fit for our product.

This year, we purchased a new production facility and are working on enhancing our capacity to produce a larger volume; however, we foresee this being a challenge as we continue to scale—a good problem to have!

We launched Coco Fro using the crowdfunding platform Kickstarter, garnering hundreds of



Coco Fro comes in four flavors, with more to come soon.

pre-orders and email list subscribers in 2024. Kickstarter helped us raise some startup capital for Coco Fro.

EGT: Have you done any research to determine the best flavors to develop?

PF: We have done research on popular flavors and will be launching Mint Chocolate Chip this year. We're also developing Caramel Plantain and a few others.

EGT: Where are you selling? Website? Amazon? Retail pricing?

PF: We are selling Coco Fro on our website coco-fro.com, as well as [via] multiple physical and online retailers, including Faire and Grommet.

Our focus is on expanding into more museum gift shops, onboarding new wholesale accounts, and increasing direct-to-consumer sales through digital marketing. With higher production volume and stronger distribution, we're positioned to increase revenue quickly and build brand visibility in retail markets and beyond. Our pricing is \$8.99-\$9.99, depending on the flavor.

EGT: What shipping methods do you use?

PF: We pack and ship every order by hand, via our Shopify store.

EGT: Are there or will there be any seasonal flavor offerings?

PF: Yes. Our Sweet Potato Pie flavor was initially seasonal, but it was so popular we kept it year-round. We will be developing other seasonal flavors in the coming months.

EGT: Have you any advice for inventors thinking about creating a new food product?

PF: Try lots of different recipes. Making a new food product requires a lot of trial and error.

Make sure you love whatever it is that you're developing, because you're going to be eating a whole lot of it! Get your taste buds ready for some research and recruit your friends and family to chime in on their favorites. Consider your inner circle to be your first set of customers, but don't stop there.

Develop a plan for customer discovery, so you can make informed decisions on where to take your product. We have interviewed dozens of customers and uncovered key pain points and exciting new directions through those processes.

EGT: What are your future plans for Coco Fro?

PF: Our future plans include Coco Fro operating as a vibrant, neighborhood ice cream shop and cultural hub – serving dairy-free frozen desserts inspired by global traditions. Families will gather for ice cream, storytelling, music and community events that celebrate imagination and belonging.

Beyond my wildest dreams, Coco Fro has become the beginning of a new category of ice cream—one that centers the tastes and dietary realities of the global majority. Our flavors travel beyond Durham through products, books and creative collaborations, inspiring people to rethink what ice cream can be and who it's for. 🍦

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Edith G. Tolchin has written for *Inventors Digest* since 2000 (edietolchin.com/portfolio). She is the author of several books, including "Secrets of Successful Women Inventors" (<https://a.co/d/fAGlvZJ>) and "Secrets of Successful Inventing" (<https://a.co/d/8dafJd6>).

1-2-3 Common Invention Questions Answered

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1 How do you know when a prototype is good enough to move forward?

When it answers the questions it was built to answer. It doesn't need to look perfect, but the core function should work consistently enough that you understand what needs to happen next. Inventors can waste enormous amounts of time polishing a prototype that was only meant to prove a concept. Each version should have a purpose. Once you've learned what you needed to learn, move forward.

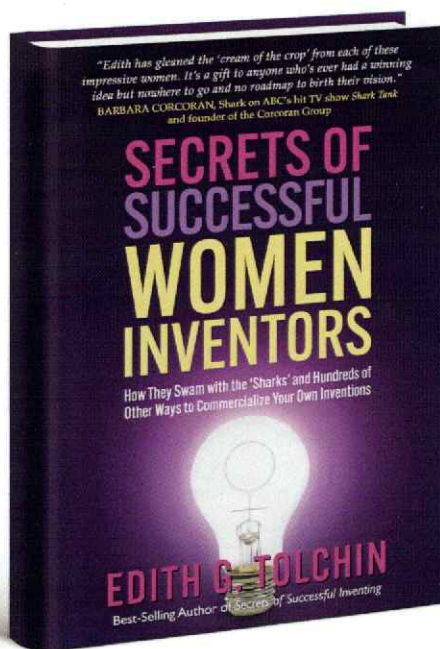
2 What is the difference between proving that an invention works and proving that it is ready for the market?

Making something work is an engineering milestone; making something market ready is a business milestone. A product can function perfectly and still be too expensive, difficult to manufacture, confusing to use, or unwanted by customers. Market readiness requires functionality, demand, manufacturability, pricing, reliability and a clear reason to buy. An invention isn't ready simply because it works. It's ready when the entire business around it starts making sense.

3 Why is simplifying an invention often harder and more valuable than adding features?

Adding features is easy because every new idea feels like an improvement. Removing them forces you to decide what matters. Every additional component can add cost, assembly time, failure points, tooling and complexity. The best products aren't usually the ones that do everything; they're the ones that solve one important problem extremely well. Simplicity isn't removing value. It's removing everything that gets in the way of value.

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Edith G. Tolchin
(photo by Amy Goldstein Photography)

Edith G. Tolchin knows inventors!

Edie has interviewed over 100 inventors for her longtime column in *Inventors Digest* (www.edietolchin.com/portfolio). She has held a prestigious U.S. customs broker license since 2002. She has written five books, including the best-selling *Secrets of Successful Inventing* (2015), and *Fanny on Fire*, a recent finalist in the Foreword Reviews INDIE Book Awards.

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