

## Foodographer

Nikki's Custard



# Better Than ICE CREAM?

Travel to the Jersey Shore or to the Midwest, and you'll find abundant options of frozen custard. In Lancaster, the place to go is Nikki's Custard, where both traditional and modern-day flavors are creating a growing fan base. Once you've tasted the custard, a new standard is set.

TEXT AND PHOTOGRAPHS BY JORDAN BUSH

Frozen custard brings some nostalgia to the 21st century tasting experience. Back in the '50s and '60s, signs advertising frozen custard beckoned Lancaster residents to pull into many a drive-in on a hot summer's day and savor a cup or cone of the confection. Custard then seemed to disappear, replaced by gourmet ice cream and other frozen

desserts. Thanks to Nicole Dannehl, frozen custard has made a comeback.

### A Moment of Zen

Driving down Oregon Pike in Lancaster, a bright and colorful building stands out: Nikki's Custard. "I grew up in the Quad Cities," says Nicole, the owner of the frozen-custard and soft-serve shop. For the

unfamiliar, the Quad Cities refers to the metropolitan area along the Mississippi River in Iowa and Illinois. It started as three cities, then four, now five (Bettendorf, Davenport, Moline, East Moline and Rock Island). "It's ice cream heaven out there, and I loved it," she says.

It's not just nostalgia that drives her interest in frozen custard. Nicole's husband, Bill, lived in St. Louis before they married and moved to Wisconsin. "Between the two connection points, we were exposed to traditional Midwestern custard, and that's where the love for it [started]" Nicole explains. "The first week we had it, we went every day. Five days straight of having custard! By the end of the

Opposite: On the menu: orange custard, an Orange Dreamsicle, soft-serve vanilla and vanilla and chocolate custard topped with sprinkles. New to the menu (not shown) is a collaboration with KelSas Sweetbox: custard cookie sandwiches.

Top to bottom:

Nikki's Custard is hard to miss! Outdoor seating is available, as is a window for mobile take-out orders.

The idea of opening a custard shop occurred to owner Nicole Dannehl during a yoga class.

week, between the burgers, fries and the custards, I don't think I fit in my jeans anymore. It was so good!"

PURSuing THEIR CAREER PATHS, the family moved to York and later to Lancaster, where Nicole worked behind the scenes in the healthcare system. "In 2020, 2021, nobody knew what was going to happen," she recalls. "The project I was on was almost done, my kids were all in college." Ready for a career change, she said goodbye and took some time to consider what she would take on next. "My iPhone had a Notes list [asking]: Am I going to go to culinary school? Be a yoga instructor? Volunteer? Run a marathon? Whatever it was, it didn't matter."

Then, a light-bulb moment occurred. "All of a sudden, I'm in a yoga class going, 'Oh, my God, you know what I miss? Custard!'" In that moment of zen, Nicole decided to open a custard shop. "I don't know how to do it, but I'm gonna do it," she promised herself.

Upon arriving home, Nicole explained her vision and ideas to Bill. "He had a glazed look in his eyes, I can tell he's thinking," Nicole recalls. As it turned out, Bill was supportive and thought it could work. "So I put my business plan together," she continues. "It was detailed. I would expound on my ideas. We would do research. He would go right, I'd go left, we'd come back together."

### Scoop School

Once the business plan was solid, they needed to go to school. Scoop School, to be precise. "I didn't work at an ice cream shop," she explains of the need to learn how to make custard. As a family, the Dannehls traveled to



St. Louis to attend Scoop School, helmed by Steve Christensen. The program self-describes as “an internationally recognized education and training facility helping entrepreneurs open and grow their own ice cream or frozen dessert business.” They set up a weeklong course just for the three of them with Christensen, who started a chain of frozen custard shops in Australia before moving to the United States. He’s trained entrepreneurs and businesses globally, working with companies such as Costco, Whole Foods and Shake Shack. With formal training, Nicole could start to build the business.

### Custard, Compared

What differentiates custard from ice cream? Frozen custard and ice cream are similar in that both use milk, cream and sugar (but in varying amounts). The key difference is that egg yolks are added to frozen custard. The FDA classifies custard as containing 1.4% egg yolk or higher. If kept frozen for too long, custard will become solid, meaning it requires calculated planning and is more labor-intensive than making ice cream. Gauging how much frozen custard to make each day, essentially on demand, is part of the juggling act.

If you like soft serve, custard is on another level. While dense, it has a clean, refreshing finish. The chocolate has a fudge-like sweetness and creamy texture. You can expect to find familiar flavors such as chocolate, vanilla, cookies & cream, birthday cake and rocky road, as well as combinations such as Oreo cheesecake, coffee caramel pretzel and other flavors.

There are also daily special flavors – recently, the Dubai chocolate was a huge hit – outlined on a massive, 365-day calendar filling the better part of a wall of Nicole’s office. Visualizing each day of the year in a comprehensive manner puts life and work into a unique perspective.

The flavors are also used to create specialties such as milkshakes, cold brew floats, Rocksolids (think very thick, concrete-like shakes), and Orange Dreamsicles that are made

with custard, orange soft serve, orange juice and whipped cream. Sorbet and low-sugar soft serve are also on the menu. Of course, there’s the old standby: custard served in a cup or a cone.

An interesting sidenote: As the story goes, frozen custard first appeared in the United States at Coney Island, New York, in 1919, courtesy of Archie and Elton Kohr, the Kohr Bros. They sought to solve a functional problem: creating a firmer ice cream that doesn’t melt as quickly in the salty ocean air.

### A Cashless Business

Operating as an independent business, not as a franchisee, Nicole had to develop her own operational manual in order to create the Nikki’s Custard experience.

Many business owners will say “cash is king” in order to eliminate significant credit card processing fees as a way to keep costs down. In the food world, Nicole sees cash as having strings attached, so Nikki’s operates as a cashless business. “There are three reasons why we do this,” says Nicole. First, ease of closing at the end of the day. “We had young people who worked for other smaller businesses, and they told us they were sometimes there until 10:30 p.m. on a school night. That’s not good for them,” she states. “They work hard, they’re good students, they do everything we ask. I like this next generation. I think they’re gonna do great. When we close at 9 p.m., everybody’s out of here by 9:30. It’s a 30-minute close.”

The second is efficiency. Cashless operations have fewer tasks to manage, no trips to the bank, and no cash registers to reconcile or close. Real-time tracking of revenue, sales and demand metrics informs and improves the business. It integrates with mobile ordering platforms for delivery pickup at their walk-up window, particularly for offering a daily flavor.

“Third, it’s to protect the kids,” Nicole notes. Without cash on hand, the business is more secure. “Shops like ours have been robbed,” Nicole says.

### No Tipping

At checkout, there are no requests for tips. “It’s simpler, and it usually means that employees are well cared for,” says Nicole. “Why don’t you want to treat your staff well?” As a result, employees stay with the business for the long haul, help with social media suggestions, and provide feedback to improve the business. “How do I take care of my employees responsibly as an owner? That’s partly why we are slow and methodical,” says Nicole. For their managers, “Our next big thing is, how are we going to [provide] health insurance?”

Nicole has taken more than good wages into consideration for the staff, some of which are simple but impactful. Benefits include snacks and personal hygiene items like hair ties and employee uniforms that are washed onsite. “You know a high school kid’s going to go home, drop their shirt on the floor, [then] go to the next thing. That shirt’s not going to be washed every day. So part of what we do is wash uniforms here so that they smell clean and they look presentable. We work hard to take care of our people so they don’t want to leave,” says Nicole.

### The Taste Test

That Nicole is from the Midwest and brought her love of frozen custard to Lancaster County is serendipitous. In the 1900s, the Midwest, with bountiful access to dairies and ice harvesting, made ice cream and frozen custard mainstream delights. As for current day, all I can say is try it; you may find yourself enamored of custard. Its velvety, rich texture makes for a divine experience. It’s not frozen solid or so dense that enjoying a bowl becomes heavy. (However, first-timers might want to go easy on toppings, as custard can be rich.) A bowl of chocolate or vanilla custard with caramel sauce is perfection. Zen, indeed.

**Nikki’s Custard. 1831 Oregon Pike, Lancaster. [Nikkiscustard.com](http://Nikkiscustard.com).**



**Jordan Bush** is a commercial photographer. His work has allowed him to discover and document cultures and food across five continents. A graduate of Garden Spot High School and Millersville University, Jordan and his fiancée, Jessica, reside and cook together in Ephrata.



Clockwise from top right:

Nicole begins the process of making batches of chocolate (and vanilla) custard. As custard is made each morning, so too is the day’s special flavor. The week’s special flavors are posted on social media.

Fresh batches of frozen custard move through the machine. After each batch is prepared, the machine is thoroughly cleaned and sanitized.

A limited selection of frozen custard is available for purchase.

Perfect on a hot summer’s day (or anytime): a cone (or cup) of frozen custard.

