

Rice Dream® Non-Dairy Frozen Dessert Pints (Vegan, Gluten-Free, Soy-Free)

Whenever there is mention of using a dairy alternative, it seems the first thought that comes to everyone's mind is soy. In some cases, soy is the only option. But as the non-dairy market continues to expand, manufacturers are beginning to create "creamy" products from other core foods. One that I have been particularly eager to trial is rice-based "ice cream." Though I have been quite pleased with two of the soy-based brands, one can not live on soy alone. As soy cheeses and tofu have begun sneaking into my refrigerator, the need to swap out some other soy treats for rice or nut based options has crossed my mind.

So began my first non-soy, non-dairy frozen dessert adventure. In my local area, there are two mainstream brands. After checking both out online, I went for the most alluring slogan first. Yes, the marketing gurus of Rice Dream deserve (dairy-free) brownie points for coming up with, "Discover how delicious dairy-free can be."

For our first trials, I reached for pints of Orange/Vanilla, Carob Almond, and Mint Carob Chip. With scoops and bowls in hand, I called in some eager taste-testers. Somehow there is never any shortage of samplers when frozen dessert is involved. Orange / Vanilla

Okay, I admit it, I took a sneak peak on this one. I opened one of the pints to a smooth sea of orange and vanilla, parted, yet softly commingling. I should have taken a picture, but I had to trial it at that very moment. The small spoonful hit my taste buds with pure creamsicle delight. After my brief preview, I showed restraint and held out for further tasting with the others.

As I attempted to scoop the Rice Dream from the pint, I noticed a difference between this rice-based dessert and its soy and dairy rivals. It tended to "chunk" rather than roll smoothly within our utensils. Nonetheless, the creamy appearance still held promise.

The solid texture melted quickly on my tongue into a deliciously sweet "milk" as the creamsicle memories returned. But then, the smooth flavors gave way to a an unfamiliar bitterness. We all concurred that it must be a natural side affect of the brown rice base, and possibly unavoidable. The vanilla side seemed the most directly affected, while the orange had a lingering aftertaste that was slightly bitter and syrupy.

Aside from this after effect, I was quite pleased with the natural vanilla and orange flavors. In small quantities I continued to enjoy this take on an old favorite, but too many consecutive bites seemed to stockpile the bitter-syrup combination. Of course, the reviews were quite mixed. One taste tester enjoyed the flavors and could detect only sweetness, while another proclaimed the frozen dessert far to bitter and immediately moved onto the next flavor. I fell somewhere in between, somewhat pleased, but not sold. Carob Almond

The curiosity was killing me on this selection. I had never before trialled a carob frozen dessert. The color reminded me of a coffee flavored ice cream, and when scooped it exuded the same hard texture as the Orange / Vanilla.

Nonetheless, the first bite melted on my tongue with ease, leaving a creamy pool of sweet, dulce de leche like flavor. It was positively delicious! This flavor combination worked. Unfamiliar with carob in ice cream form, I would say it had a smooth, almost coffee-caramel vibe, though milder. A slight chocolate-like aftertaste made its presence known, but then quickly flattened in carob fashion.

Like the Orange / Vanilla, the Carob Almond variety was smooth and creamy, yet more like an ice milk. It leaned ever so slightly towards the frosty and refreshing side, rather than Ben & Jerry's rich. Big nut chunks were liberally scattered throughout. Considering the very affordable cost of this brand, I was quite surprised by the generosity.

Even after an entire bowlful I strained to detect the bitter undertones that our super-bitter taster swore he could still identify. Nothing, just the wonderful harmony of sweet and creamy goodness. I would definitely purchase this flavor again. Mint Carob Chip

I was a bit hesitant on this flavor. The Mint Pies from Rice Dream that we tasted the week prior seemed to be injected with extreme peppermint. I feared the same for this pint, but felt it was our duty to put it to the test with no preconceptions.

This was the perfect flavor for the cool and refreshing ice milk feel of Rice Dream. Alas, it was still too minty for any of our taste-testers. The concept worked: light, creamy, peppermint dotted with small chunks of carob. If only we could get the "ice cream" crafters at Imagine Foods to use a lighter hand with the peppermint oil. The strong minty flavor seemed to enhance the bitter undertones.

Luckily, all was not lost. Though this flavor was too potent when solo, I suddenly had the craving for a chocolate mint shake! We pulled out a package of chocolate hemp milk (to keep the soy-free theme) and fired up the blender. With equal parts Rice Dream Mint Carob Chip and chocolate hemp milk (okay, I added a bit more frozen dessert) we reached "milk" shake perfection. Even our bitter-taster was thoroughly satisfied. In this form, everyone enjoyed the cool minty aftertaste that seemed to linger on indefinitely.

My Extra Notes & Tips:

- Rice Dream products seem to go on sale regularly and are quite the bargain for a dairy-free ice "cream." For this reason, I would likely pick some up, even if for milkshake purposes alone.
- For the most part, Rice Dream is soy-free. A few of the varieties contain soy lecithin. This is rarely a problem with soy allergies, but be sure to check the labels if allergies are a concern.
- The Mint Carob Chip flavor is not gluten-free, it contains malted barley. The other two (and several other Rice Dream flavors) are gluten-free though.

Where to Purchase: At present Rice Dream Frozen Dessert is only available within the U.S., but it is widely distributed. I have even spotted Rice Dream at my local large grocery chain. See the Taste The Dream Website for a store locator.