Durian the King of Fruits
Throughout Asia, durian is considered the King of Fruits. Unfortunately, some say it smells like a combination of garlic, garbage and old sox. In Australia more than 500 people were evacuated from a university campus when the smell of a rotting durian was mistaken for poison gas. “Your breath will smell as though you’d been French-kissing your dead grandmother,” the late chef and TV personality Anthony Bourdain once said.

My wife, Chef Apple, says it smells like “a dead rat in the corner” but, we both eat it. It is banned from eating in our house, but not from our refrigerator. Apple makes me eat it it out on the patio, but her eyes light up with delight when she gets her share. Restaurants NEVER serve them. Hotels post signs banning them. Thai airways bans passengers who try to bring them aboard.
Strangely, durian smells the worst far away and much better when you get closer to it. Once you eat it, you never think about the smell again. When made into ice cream the smell is very diminished but the flavor is not.

Despite smelling like a dead rat, durian’s huge demand and high price tells its own tale. Durian aficionados in China, Malaysia, Thailand and Singapore, where it is highly esteemed, are grousing about rising prices and shortages. Durian poaching is on the rise. Farmers are shooting durian thieves. One can sometimes find entire frozen durians in Thai supermarkets as far away as the US.

China imports over $1 billion durians a year, up from $180 million a decade ago. The demand is growing so quickly that Alibaba e-commerce in Thailand sold 80,000 durians in one minute.
The finest durian fruit has a yellow-orange color and is shiny. The best are very esteemed, more like a custard than a fruit and it overwhelms the senses. The cheaper, “kampong” or “village” durians look similar, but have less flavor. They are ivory colored, come from the lowlands and have a more textured finish.
Durian is grown all over Asia but we think the best comes from the hills of Thailand. My first experience with mountain durian was on Samui, a small island in the Gulf of Thailand.

The hardest part was getting to them. The best were high up, beyond the dirt road, after the jeep track petered out and all that was left of the path was ancient elephant track made by beasts long gone who had once hauled rubber trees down the mountain.

To get there Apple and I used to scramble up thru a jungle dominated by ticks and leeches on my motorcycle. If one arrived late in the day, the air was alive with huge dragonflies, which zoomed by like little bombers in the waning light. That high up, there was always a long sunset. The fruit bats would come later. They alone pollinate the durian.

Cold mountain nights and sudden storms kept the durian small, but intense sunlight give it a powerful flavor. Grown thus it is the most esteemed of all fruits, as precious and valuable as fine wine.
Durian is spiky and hostile on the outside, it can’t be handled without gloves. A large, sharp knife is needed to cut into it. The dark yellowish-green rind is thick, tough, semi-woody, much like a thick grapefruit and densely set with stout, sharply pointed spines. The big ones go up to 8 Kg but the smaller varieties are more esteemed. The fruit consists of 6 lobes, separated on the outside by seams in the spiky rind. The rind is cut apart and once the fruit is removed, the discarded rind is used to smoke fish. The rind is cut away, revealing 6 large, custard-like fruits, each about the shape of a large, fat, banana, pleasantly aromatic, very rich, very slightly fibrous, very sweet and intensely-flavored. During the short season we process about 2 tons per week.
After trying to get the good ones in Bangkok, we could never find the best in sufficient quantity and there was never enough and there is a sort of a rationing system. It is the only fruit for which one must pay a bribe. Everyone wanted it, so, we decided to go up to the durian grove of Apple’s cousin and make the basic paste right there, bring it off the mountain in a motorcycle side car and then finish it in the factory.

You have no idea how much work there is picking and cooking two tons of durian.
There is no mechanical way to either pick durian or extract the fruit. The trees are surprisingly delicate and if pruned, do not deliver their full load of fruit that season. Every durian is slightly different. There will never be a durian-shucking robot.
Like all our fruit flavors, durian is “cooked” at about 65 C (150F), hot enough to burn the hand but nowhere near boiling temperature. This preserves the delicate flavor. The “paste’ is so think water has to be added during cooking but it steams away yielding a thick, dark, very gooey paste.
In the factory, the paste is further enhanced in a rotating heated mixer, adding aromatic oils and flavoring. Unlike most ice cream flavors, durian paste is mostly flavored with brown sugar and dextrose. Most of the sweetness comes from the durian itself. Vitamin C is added as a preservative and color stabilizer.

There is a growing trend in Thailand to pack durian gelato into a durian-shaped mold and produce ice cream-on-a-stick. Since this is a premium treat, the unique shape adds to its marketing appeal.

After cooking, adding to the mix and making into ice cream, the durian smell is highly diminished, but not the flavor. It is a treat that assaults the senses and leaves a lingering delightful taste in the mouth. Its aficionados enjoy it, hardly knowing the trouble and effort the people at Dream Cones go thru to bring it to them.