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01Aug91 CUBA: ICE CREAM IS SERIOUS BUSINESS IN CUBA.

By Lionel Martin

HAVANA, Aug 1, Reuter - Cubans call it the biggest ice cream parlour in the world, a one-block area of central Havana that is a child's delight and a mother's nightmare.

But in present-day Cuba, where nearly all food is strictly rationed, eating ice cream can be a serious business. Children of the world might well be envious, but ice cream has practically become a staple of the Cuban diet.

Long queues form outside "Coppelia" before it opens at 10:45 a.m. each day and continue until the two-storey ice cream parlour closes at 1:45 a.m. the next day.

It is located across the street from the Hotel Havana Libre, the capital's main hotel for tourists which is bursting at the seams from an influx of visitor's for this month's Pan American Games.

A woman queued with two young children on Thursday morning explained why a trip to the ice cream parlour is not just to quiet bored children.

She said she regularly brings her family to Coppelia because ice cream is nourishing and supplements the limited amount of rationed food available to each family.

A man in his twenties had a similar story, adding that sometimes his lunch is 10 scoops of ice cream at one sitting. He claims to have never had a stomach upset.

A look at how food is rationed in Cuba shows how ice cream has come to mean more than just dessert. Each person is allowed only two small bread rolls a day, four eggs a week, and less than one pound (about .5 kg) of meat every 10 days.

What is less clear is why despite milk rationing, ice cream is the one food that is always available.

Under the rationing system, every child under seven is assured a quart of milk a day and adults receive two cans of condensed milk each month.

Coppelia's manager Pedro Delgado is not giving away his secret, but he boasts that in the 25 years since Coppelia opened "the supply of ice cream has never failed."

He said Coppelia serves its sole product to more than 35,000 customers a day. The government-owned ice cream parlour employs over 400 workers during its two shifts. It takes in an average of one million pesos a month, somewhat more than one million dollars at the official exchange rate.

Customers stand in line to buy tickets for entry to the modern, circular two-storey building.

A big scoop of ice cream costs a half a peso and a "salad," with five somewhat smaller scoops, costs 1.50 pesos. The average monthly wage in Cuba is about 175 pesos.

Many customers bring a thermos or a bottle and take 10 or 20 scoops home with them.

The ice cream parlour was the idea of Celia Sanchez, an intimate collaborator of Fidel Castro who served as his personal secretary when he led his guerrilla army in the mountains of eastern Cuba during the 1950's.

She chose the name Coppelia because it was one of her favourite ballets.

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