When I was little, I thought going out with my parents to the ice cream shop down the road was the best thing in the world; but, my aunt’s home-churned vanilla was a close second. It was overly sweet and vanilla and icy—all things I know now are signs of poor execution, now that I had culinary training—but, I loved it all the same as a child. As an adult, I have reproduced many of her recipes (she died before I could pry them out of her), but I never learned her ice cream recipe. Yet, I feel confident in mine, and I feel that I’m building a beloved memory with my nephews and nieces every time I make it.

Ice cream falls into two camps: premium and non-premium recipes, and two styles: Philadelphia and French. Premium ice creams have a higher butterfat content (25-35% of volume) than non-premium ice creams (10-18% of volume), and less air churned in (25-50% of volume, compared to 75% or more for some supermarket brands). These results in a silkier, smoother mouth feel in the finished ice cream. Philadelphia style ice cream is traditionally made without eggs, while French style or custard ice creams are made with a cooked crème anglais mixture of dairy, sugar, and eggs. The highest quality supermarket brands—Haagen Dazs, Ben & Jerry’s, Edy’s, etc.—are premium French style ice creams, and so is my recipe.

Makes 1 quart:

1 ½ cups whole milk  
1 ½ cups heavy cream  
1 vanilla bean, cut lengthwise and scrapped (reserve seeds)  
6 large egg yolks  
½ cup and 2 tablespoons granulated sugar

We will start with the crème anglais. Place a heavy 2 quarts saucepan over medium heat, and add 1 cup of the cream, all of the milk, the vanilla bean and the scraped seeds. Cook until bubbles lightly form around the edge of the pot; it will take about five minutes. Remove the pot from the heat. In a glass or metal bowl, whisk the remainder of the cream, the egg yolks and sugar until the sugar is fully dissolved.

Temper the egg mixture by whisking about ½ cup of the hot milk mixture into the egg mixture. The eggs have a different viscosity and temperature than the cream, and mixing them together too quickly while form large egg curds through the crème anglais. By slowing integrating the milk, the egg mixtures’ viscosity will thin and the temperature will rise; this is known as tempering. Regardless of all of this, we will still strain the mixture through a fine-mesh strainer—it never hurts to be cautious; but, that’s later. Pour the tempered egg mixture into the pot, whishing the mixture continuously. When the mixture coats the back of a spoon so thickly that you can cleanly cut a line through the coat with your finger, remove from heat. This is called nappe. Remove and discard the vanilla bean (or not—you can use it to make vanilla sugar; but, that’s another article), and strain into a bowl that is sitting in an ice bath (that you conveniently made in a larger bowl). Stir until cool, cover the crème with plastic foil—pushing the film down onto the surface to avoid a skin forming—and refrigerate for at least three hours, but no more than twenty-four.

What is happening during that three hours’ wait is this: the proteins that coagulated and entangled while cooking relaxes. The butterfat stabilizes and recrystallizes into smaller crystals than it would form if it was allowed to drop temperature quickly, as would happen if hot crème was churned in an ice cream churner. Finally, the cooler crème would freeze more evenly and with less stress to your churner. All of this would lead to a smoother ice cream with smaller ice crystals. In baking, this wait is called autolyse. Ice cream makers call it aging.

At this point, you would pull out the manual of your churner, and churn your ice cream per the instructions listed. After the churn, you would have soft-serve ice cream. You would put your ice cream in a freezer-safe container, cover, freeze until firm, and enjoy thoroughly.

But, all of this overlooks the elephant in the room: what kind of churner to get? My aunt had a hand-cranked salt-and-ice cooled contraction I called “the Devil’s Little Joke”. The thing was hideous, it was a monster to use, and I think it personally was the cause of her rosy disposition. I can’t really give you a recommendation on what to buy—short of nothing with a crank—but, I can tell you what to look for:

--Look for a model with a removable churn chamber. This allows you to make more than one batch without cleaning and recharging the unit.

--Look for a model with removable agitators. This makes cleaning easier.

--Look for a model that does not requires pre-charging (putting any of the parts in the freezer to get cold). You will put your chamber and your agitator in the freezer, anyways, to prep them; but, any system that requires the user “to bring the cold” will never produce as smooth a product as an electrically cooled model.

If you omitted the vanilla bean, you would have what is known as sweet base. As it names suggest, it’s the base of most ice cream flavors (excluding chocolate). If you was to add a teaspoon of mint extract to the base before churning, and six ounces of chocolate chip after churning, you would have mint chocolate chip ice cream. If you would add one and a half teaspoons instant espresso and a half teaspoon of vanilla extract to the base before churning, you would have coffee ice cream. If you would take half a cup strawberry preserves to the mix before churning, and mix vigorously, you would have strawberry ice cream. Ultimately, you are the author of your own recipes.

One day in the not-so-distant future, maybe your niece or your daughter will reminisce about hot summer days and your famous ice cream and will push you—not so gently—toward revealing your recipes. I can imagine worse fates than that. It all starts with a gentle push, and hopefully, this article will push you in the right direction.