Ice Cream vs. Gelato vs. Sherbet vs. Sorbet: What’s the Difference?

Last updated: Sep 28, 2021

Frozen desserts are popular treats around the world, and with so many kinds there are only subtle differences between them. Ice cream, gelato, sherbet, and sorbet are all frozen dessert with their own distinct characteristics.

What Is Ice Cream?

Ice cream is a frozen dessert made from a custard made of milk, cream, sweetener, and often egg yolks.

* **Fat content**. Ice cream has the highest milk fat content of any frozen dessert, usually ranging between 14 to 25 percent (the USDA requires that ice cream have at least 10 percent milkfat).
* **Texture**. Ice cream’s fluffy, creamy texture is unique among frozen desserts. Ice cream is churned (in an ice cream maker) at high speeds to add air bubbles to the mixture, resulting in its unique texture. It can also be served in a style called “soft serve,” which has more air bubbles and is served at a slightly higher temperature for an ultra soft swirl.
* **Flavor**. Ice cream is incredibly versatile in flavor, and ice cream flavors can include anything from caramel to strawberry to pistachio to chocolate. Adding toppings like chocolate sauce or nuts to vanilla ice cream, creates an ice cream dessert variation called a sundae.
* **Temperature**. Ice cream is served at the coldest temperature of most frozen desserts (between 6 degrees and 10 degrees Fahrenheit). This affects its flavor—the cold temperature numbs your taste buds and doesn’t allow strong flavors to come through in ice cream as well as they do in gelato, sherbet, or sorbet.

What Is Gelato?

[Gelato is a frozen dessert](https://www.masterclass.com/articles/how-to-make-authentic-italian-gelato) made from a mixture of milk, cream, and sweetener. It originated in Italy and is widely sold in Italian shops called “gelaterias” around the country.

* **Fat content**. Gelato is made with less cream than ice cream, which means gelato has less fat. Gelato usually has a butterfat content of around 4 to 9 percent, considerably lower than ice cream, but considerably higher than either sherbet or sorbet.
* **Texture**. Unlike ice cream, gelato’s creamy texture is thick and dense, because it is churned slowly to allow less air in the mixture.
* **Flavor**. Gelato is just as versatile in flavorings as ice cream, and it can be made with flavors ranging from sweet cream to raspberry to stracciatella.
* **Temperature**. Gelato is served at higher temperatures than ice cream (between 10 degrees to 22 degrees Fahrenheit), in order to keep gelato’s dense texture from becoming too solid and difficult to eat. Warmer serving temperature means its flavor comes across much richer than ice cream.

What Is Sherbet?

Sherbet (sometimes called “sherbert”) is a frozen dessert made from a mixture of fruit purée (or fruit juice), sweetener, and a little bit of milk or buttermilk.

* **Fat content**. Sherbet’s small amount of dairy gives it a butterfat content of between 1 and 2 percent—significantly lower than both ice cream and gelato, but still higher than sorbet.
* **Texture**. With less cream than either ice cream or gelato, sherbet is less rich than either. However, sherbet’s small amount of dairy gives it more creaminess than sorbet.
* **Flavor**. Sherbet is less versatile in flavors than ice cream or gelato, because it is limited to mainly limited to fruit flavors.
* **Temperature**. Sherbet is served at similar temperatures to gelato (between 10 degrees to 22 degrees Fahrenheit), because at colder temperatures sherbet’s dense texture causes it to become hard and difficult to eat. Warmer temperatures mean its flavor comes across much richer than ice cream.

What Is Sorbet?

[Sorbet is a frozen dessert made up of just fruit purée](https://www.masterclass.com/articles/a-guide-to-making-homemade-sorbet) (or fruit juice, like lemon juice) and sweetener (commonly sugar, simple syrup, or liqueur). While ice cream, gelato, and sherbet are dairy products, sorbet is dairy-free and therefore vegan. Sorbet was originally used as a [palate cleanser](https://masterclass.com/articles/guide-to-classic-palate-cleansers) between courses of large meals, and its first use as a dessert came about in French cafes in the seventeenth century.

* **Fat content**. Sorbet is the most low-fat compared to most other frozen desserts, because it doesn’t include cream.
* **Texture**. Due to its lack of cream, sorbet has the lightest, iciest texture compared to other frozen desserts. One variation on sorbet, called granita (also called Italian ice or water ice) is periodically scraped during freezing so the ice crystals are especially flaky.
* **Flavor**. Similar to sherbet, sorbet is limited in its flavors to fruit-based flavors. Sorbet recipes often incorporate fresh fruit, and popular sorbet flavors include watermelon and strawberry sorbet.
* **Temperature**. Sorbet is served at similar warmer temperatures to gelato and sherbet (between 10 degrees to 22 degrees Fahrenheit) to keep it soft enough to eat. Warmer temperatures mean its flavor comes across much richer than ice cream.