

Cold Stone dips into market

Singing employees are part of the appeal of creamery

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"Gotta, gotta have it!," employees scream from behind the counter at Cold Stone Creamery on Rehoboth Avenue, every time a customer orders a "Gotta Have It," the largest order of ice cream available at the new eatery in downtown Rehoboth.

The outbursts don't end there. Singing and chanting is part of the enticement for customers.

Employees chant the familiar "I don't know, but I've been told," reworded to fit the Cold Stone theme. Spades, the utensils used to scoop the ice cream and mix in the toppings, are banged to the beat.

Sarah Hyde, 5, celebrated her graduation from Great Beginnings Preschool in Rehoboth at Cold Stone Creamery.

Owner Mary Manskers lifted the tow-headed Hyde, in her little, pink graduation dress, over the counter so that she could make her own ice cream creation. The whole store stopped to watch an overjoyed Hyde, now a "Mix Master," mix banana ice cream and Oreo cookies.

Manskers, an energetic blonde outfitted in a Cold Stone cap and uniform like the other employees, moved back to California with her husband, a contractor, from their home in Leesburg, Va., in the 1990s. They were fleeing from the recession that was inhibiting new home construction at the time - that had yet to hit California. The Manskers had noticed that even during a recession people will still treat themselves to an ice cream cone. Manskers said owning an ice cream parlor was something that they had always talked about and when the opportunity arose to buy an existing Cold Stone franchise, the couple took it.

Franchising opportunities quickly sold out in California and the Manskers, who were interested in opening another store, looked for new locations. They had vacationed in the Rehoboth area every summer when they lived in Washington, , D.C., and recognized a market for a new Cold Stone. By this time next summer there are to be five Cold Stone Creameries in Rehoboth, Salisbury, Md., and Ocean City, Md., -- all owned by the Manskers.

The franchise phenomenon began in 1988 with the first Cold Stone Creamery, opened by Don and Susan Sutherland. Focused on the idea of fresh and personalized ice cream, the Sutherland's created



Cold Stone Creamery employees sing as they create ice cream flavors at the store on Rehoboth Avenue.

the "Ultimate Ice Cream Experience" concept. The creamery features super-premium ice cream made fresh daily with a range of "mix-ins" custom blended to order on a cold stone, officials said.

In February 2004 Entrepreneur magazine ranked Cold Stone Creamery No. 25 of the "101 Fastest Growing Franchises." In 2003 alone, 23,000 franchise applications were received, and 514 franchise agreements were executed. To date, there are more than 600 stores operating across the country and in the Caribbean.

Officials said becoming a Cold Stone Creamery franchisee that takes more than six months to complete. Approval takes about three months and it takes another two months to find a suitable location. The company provides assistance. According to company-produced prospective franchise information, the "perfect demographics" include a population of 15,000 within one mile, an average age of 18 to 36, and an average household income of \$35,000 and up. The "perfect location" has 1,200 square feet, an active nightlife, and the "perfect neighbors" include movie theaters, restaurants, college campuses, book stores, and coffee shops. The average initial investment is \$260,335 and accounts for the franchise fee, signage, training, employee uniforms, and other opening costs.

According to Manskers, the super-premium ice cream sells itself -- about 800 dishes and cones a day. This does not include the countless ice creams that they give away each day. On occasion, employees will ask people in line when Cold Stone was founded, 1988, and if they can find a coin minted in 1988 they win a free ice cream.

Super-premium ice cream has very low overrun (air), high fat content, and uses only the highest quality ingredients, officials said. The smallest serving of just the ice cream contains upwards of 23 grams of fat. Sinless, the flavor available for the diet-conscious customer contains no calories and no fat.

This same ice cream is used in the store's signature cakes which Manskers said she has a hard time keeping in the store. In fact, there is talk of hiring a full time cake person to meet the high demand. Manskers explained, "We have a hard time building enough to keep that freezer full. They send secret shoppers through, to make sure every store is operating at the same level. We got dinged on our report because we could not keep them in stock."

There are 15 flavors of ice cream that are always available, the "Founder's Favorites," and countless ways of mixing and matching ice cream flavors like cheesecake and country pumpkin pie. Yellow sponge cake, honey, cinnamon, and cookie dough are available as mix-ins and toppings.

"Cold Stone Originals" are ice cream concoctions that have been developed over time and have been found to be customer favorites. Apple pie à la Cold Stone features sweet cream ice cream, cinnamon, graham cracker pie crust, apple pie filling, and caramel. Candyland is cake batter ice cream and Snickers, M&M and Kit-Kat candies. Paradise Found combines white chocolate ice cream, coconut, pineapple and banana.

The "cold stone" is a large slab of granite installed in the countertop in front of the dipping cabinets that is kept cold by a refrigeration unit that runs all day keeping it at constant temperature. A sanitizing solution flushes and washes the stone at night.

The appeal

The Rehoboth Cold Stone Creamery is surrounded by ice cream and frozen custard stores like perennial favorites Ben and Jerry's and Kohr Bros. Manskers is unfazed by the local competition, "Honestly, I never even gave it a thought. This is completely different. It's a different concept, a different product. I'm not saying their's isn't good, I like all ice cream -- I'm happy to eat a McDonald's ice cream -- but this is just different."

A large part of this concept is the store's entertainment value. Initially, the store held auditions for singers and actors to get customers involved and make the store more interactive. When there was little response to that casting call, Manskers abandoned the idea of strolling minstrels. Instead, employees behind the counter sing and chant, often jumping on the counter and tap dancing, or juggling bottles of caramel like Tom Cruise in "Cocktail."

While the atmosphere is a big hit with parents and small children, some customers could be a little uncomfortable. Carly McCall, 20, a York College student was eating an ice cream cone with a friend outside the store. "The ice cream is really good," she said. "But the singing's really annoying. We were trying to sit and eat and talk."

Manskers said she recognizes that not everyone is a fan of the entertainment, but everyone loves the ice cream. And it is clear Cold Stone employees love their jobs. The average teenager might have a hard time singing in public and interacting with complete strangers in an overly familiar manner, but not these kids.

Employee Mario Lugo 19, of Dover, a student at Clemson University, said, "It's a lot of fun. You get to meet a lot of people. It's great to see the kids come in here and get excited."

Annie Heller, 18, a student at George Washington University walked in off the street looking for a job. "I just walked in here and it looked like a lot of fun, the environment, everyone's really nice. I'm having a great time, I love it here. I wouldn't want to work anywhere else."