

# Get Out

Arizona's Premier Entertainment Guide

*Get Out*  
Jan. 29, 2004

## Cold Stone crazy

By ADRIENNE FRANK

There's a secret something in the ice cream at Cold Stone Creamery — some magic ingredient that helps to explain all the satisfied customers, the enthusiastic employees (who sing, without a hint of embarrassment, for tips) and the \$358,000 in sales each of its 500-plus stores churns out annually.

And according to David Andow, Cold Stone's executive vice president, that ingredient isn't sugar, milk or vanilla.

"It's not the ice cream alone. Ice cream's good, no matter what, no matter where you go. At Cold Stone, the secret to our success is our passion."

It sounds trite, even cliché, like some sort of corporate mumbo-jumbo — until you discover, for the folks at the Scottsdale-based Cold Stone, appreciation of quality service and a genuine love of ice cream is everything. (In fact, the love for the cream runs so deep that a medium-sized cup is referred to as a "love it" size while a large cup is a "gotta have it.")

"I've never come into the store and not been greeted with a smile," says Cold Stone regular Amalia Hernandez of Chandler. "That's so rare these days and that's part of the reason we keep coming back."

Hernandez says her kids also get a kick out of tipping the employees.

"You give them a dollar and they sing some silly song about ice cream. The kids love it. I think they want to work here someday, themselves."

Donald and Susan Sutherland opened the first Cold Stone store in a Tempe strip-mall in 1988. The concept was simple: Customers picked a flavor of ice cream, selected a couple mix-ins (Oreo cookies for example, or maybe M&Ms) and watched as all the ingredients were folded together, thus creating the ultimate custom cone.

Today, the concept is the same (though the menu — featuring nearly 30 flavors of homemade ice cream and about 40 mix-ins — is much larger), though instead of being a mom 'n' pop shop, Cold Stone is emerging as one of the country's hottest franchises. (In fact, last year the Creamery was No. 35 on Entrepreneur magazine's list of the fastest-growing franchises, up from No. 54 in 2002.)

According to Andow — who oversees Cold Stone's franchise development — only 2 percent of franchise applications are approved. (In the company's history, about 1,250 stores have been awarded — that's half as many franchise applications as were received in September 2003, alone.)

“If you’re looking for an investment and you’re going to be hands-off, that’s not what we’re looking for. If you’re looking for an investment, we’ll send you down to Wall Street. Cold Stone is a very hands-on kind of business.”

Brian and Jean Davis, both of Mesa, can attest to that.

The brother and sister team — along with Brian’s wife, Sue Ann — own a Cold Stone store in east Mesa, which has been open for about four months. The Davises always knew they wanted their own business and when it came time to map out the details, Brian Davis says it was a no-brainer to go with Cold Stone.

“I had a good friend in California who had gone into business with Cold Stone and who just raved about it. Also, the ice cream is just incredible.”

“It’s just a fun place. And it’s weird, because every time I come here, it seems like the employees are just so happy to be working (here),” explains Leslie Johnson of Chandler. “How often do you see people so happy to be on the clock?”

All those smiling faces behind the counter come as no surprise to Andow. At Cold Stone, he says, that’s the norm.

“Someone once told me that if you find what you’re passionate about, you’ll never work another day in your life,” he says. “That’s the power of Cold Stone.”

Lots of people claim the title, but Ray Karam just might have the best job in the world.

As Cold Stone’s Taste Master, Karam gets paid to experiment with ice cream, tasting mix-ins and creating the delicious combos on the menu at your neighborhood parlor.

“I have to say, it never gets old,” says Karam who’s been in the dairy and ice cream industry for 26 years, putting his tastebuds to work for Carnation and Nestle. “I just think ice cream is the most fun food ever and there’s a great pleasure (derived) from ice-cream eating. “The best part of my job is when I make something and I give it to someone and their eyes just light up.”

Karam, the master mind behind cake batter and candy cane ice creams, among other sweet delights, has been with Cold Stone for about two years. And while the Taste Master — who has a college degree in biology and chemistry and who’s done grad work in food science — gets a kick out of dreaming up new ice cream flavors, he says “the real excitement is the mix-ins.”

Karam’s days consist of taste-testing different combinations of mix-ins — everything from exotic fruits and candies to vegetables — with a particular flavor of ice cream. “We’re always experimenting. Some things don’t work out, but when they do, boy, that’s exciting.”

One of Karam’s favorite “successful experiments” is Paradise Found — white chocolate ice cream with bananas, coconut, macadamia nuts and pineapple.

“It’s a little taste of Hawaii,” he says with a laugh.

And while there are a few downsides to Karam’s job (“I’m a big guy to begin with, and if I don’t go to the gym on a regular basis ...), his kids couldn’t be more happy about his VIP status with Cold Stone.

“A lot of times, that’s how they get their dates. They’ll say, ‘Hey, you know where my dad works?’ ”