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Cold Stone Creamery taste master always looking for new flavors

By Chris Betros



Cold Stone Creamery taste master Ray Karam

TOKYO — Ray Karam is a happy guy. Why wouldn't he be, with his job? The jovial 50-year-old has been the taste master and manager of R&D at premium ice cream maker Cold Stone Creamery for the past five years, and his job requires him to eat ice cream every single day of the year — that's right, every day. "But only about 10 ounces," he says, sitting down outside Cold Stone Creamery at Roppongi, one of six stores the company has in Japan.

Karam thinks he was destined to go into this line of work. "In 5th grade, I was the school milk monitor," he jokes. His favorite ice cream memory was as a child growing up in Brooklyn. "There was a truck called Mr Softy that would come around every night. We couldn't wait," he recalls.

Karam has been in the dairy business for 28 years, first with Carnation, then Nestle. He joined Cold Stone Creamery in January of 2002 and is based in Scottsdale, Arizona, though he travels a lot checking out the company's operations abroad. He always has a ball when he comes to Japan, chatting to customers about what they like and, of course, singing with the staff as they mix the ice cream.

He samples ice cream every day, he says, because he needs to watch new flavors develop day by day and monitor any change in the quality. "If you are using natural flavors, over time the taste may change. Natural vanilla, for example, has many subtle flavors and it can change its intensity."

Now he is starting to sound like a scientist ... which he is. Karam has a degree in chemistry and microbiology and completed graduate school work in food science. "It all comes into play," he says. "People often come up to me and say 'I want your job.' I say to them: 'You probably could do it, but when you get into trouble, you're not going to be able to work yourself out of it with the right formulas.'"

Karam is constantly thinking up new ideas. "There is no end to flavor combinations, some which might seem strange at first. In the U.S., I've done things like Tabasco chocolate. No, no, no, don't give me that look. You have to keep an open mind. We also launched ginger wasabi, which came out of a conversation about sushi. When a focus group sampled it, they all made faces. But we knew we had to try it. Good or bad, you get a reaction. People started buying it and we ran out of it in some markets. I seasoned it with raspberry, pineapple and coconut."

For the Japanese market, Strawberry Shortcake Serenade is the best seller. Karam has developed new flavors to match Japanese consumers' needs. "From what I have seen here, Japanese like delicate

flavors, not too sweet, fresh and fruity. They like flavors that blend well together. So once you have the basics, it's not difficult to come up with ideas. We do a lot of seasonal promotions, too, because it's important to give consumers something new to try."

Karam says the biggest difference in ice creams today is the flavors and mixes. "It used to be just plain vanilla, chocolate and strawberry. Flavors have become more developed and mixers can hone in on specialty flavors and make them exactly the way you want. For example, you can get an overripe strawberry, a tart one, a green one, and so on." The use of the cold stone is another innovation. Set at 16 degrees, it keeps the ice cream cold while it is being mixed, otherwise it would slide around and the ingredients could not be added in.

It usually takes about four months from the time Karam has an idea until it makes it to the stores. "There are very few times when you hit it right on the mark first time. When it comes to flavors, it is something you have to do over a long period of time every single day. And you learn. For example, peppermint is very intense by itself but when you freeze it, the intensity goes up. So you are better to reduce it a little on the warm side."

Fortunately, the Cold Stone Creamery execs don't rule with an iron hand. "Sometimes, the market research might not support a particular flavor, but that's OK. I never stop developing flavors and they are always on the shelf, should marketing decide otherwise," says Karam.

So what are his all-time personal favorite ice creams? "If I could pick three, I would go with vanilla, then Paradise Found which is white chocolate ice cream with pineapple, coconut and bananas. The third would be Deep Dark Chocolate Devotion, which is chocolate ice cream fudge brownie and chocolate chips."

With that, Karam jumps up and wanders over to some Japanese customers enjoying their Cookie Overload and Berry Berry Berry Good treats. "That looks great," he tells the bemused girls. "I'm happy all the time. I love ice cream. I want to make people happy, make them laugh." Which he does. The language of ice cream needs no words.