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Cold Stone Creamery ready to lick Japanese ice cream market

Major U.S. ice cream chain Cold Stone Creamery (CSC) will soon begin operating in Japan at a time when the ice cream market here is on the upswing after years of decline.

CSC is the first foreign ice cream chain to try and make inroads into Japan since Haagen-Dazs set up its Japan office in 1984.

CSC plans to open its first Japanese store in the Roppongi Hills complex in Tokyo. Workers will put on a show for customers by mixing ice cream with ingredients such as nuts and chocolate chips on a frozen stone plate.

"I hope that people here will think of ice cream when they want to have a dessert," said CSC Japan President Kazuhiro Ishihara.

CSC Japan aims at opening 150 stores in the Tokyo metropolitan area by the end of 2009. Officials from the Japan Ice Cream Association said that sales of ice cream dropped from 387.9 billion yen in 1995 to 332.2 billion yen in 2003, apparently because consumers' tastes for desserts have diversified.

"We reduced prices in a bid to avoid excess stock, and the amount of sales declined," an ice cream industry source said. "It is a vicious cycle."

But in 2004, sales in the ice cream market in Japan expanded to 354.1 billion yen, when several quality ice cream products such as Haagen-Dazs's Parfait hit the market.

"Consumers like high quality products and the market is picking up," a Haagen-Dazs Japan official said. "We hope that (CSC's) entry will boost the interest in ice cream." (Mainichi)

