

Nation's Restaurant News
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Chef Profile

Raymond Karam: Ice-cream lover turns temptation into career

By Milford Prewitt

Who has it better than Raymond "Ray" Karam? On a steady and daily diet of ice cream, Karam says, he has lost 30 pounds in the past year or so.

Karam is a food scientist and the taste master for [Cold Stone Creamery](#), the 170-unit, Scottsdale, Ariz.-based premium ice-cream chain with a galaxy of flavors and whimsical creations in its freezer cases. A big bear of a man, Karam is not advocating that people eat ice cream every day but rather that people take nutritious routes to good health. He, however, is paid to eat ice cream daily in his search for new and exciting creations and flavor profiles.

Karam has been following his largely ice-cream diet for 26 years. He first developed a fondness for creating beguiling ice creams for Carnation and later Nestlé. And for the past two and a half years he has led Cold Stone Creamery's research and development efforts.

Title: Taste master and manager of research and development, Cold Stone Creamery Inc., Scottsdale, Ariz.

Birth date: Aug. 26, 1956

Hometown: Brooklyn, N.Y.

Education: Bachelor's degree in chemistry and microbiology, State University of New York in Oneonta; completed graduate school course work in food science – minus thesis – at the Morrison School of AgriBusiness at Arizona State University

Career highlights: Inventing the Frutazza, a smoothie machine that won the 1999 top award from the American Tasting Institute; working 15 years with Carnation; working nine years with Nestlé

What's the difference between a food scientist and a chef?

Well, years ago there was more of a distinction. Chefs cooked, while food scientists discovered ingredients and additives and studied the chemistry behind food, heat, cold, all of that. But I think today a chef has to be a food scientist, and a food scientist has to be a chef.

Where does the science enter in making ice cream?

It's very mathematical: You use formulas, and they change recipe to recipe. The formulas are used to do different things, freeze at certain temperatures. Then there is the biology to figure nutrition content and calorie count. Then there's the chemistry to establish the right mix of emulsifiers so that fats stay suspended in what we call a colloidal state. A lot of people don't realize this, but ice cream is one of the few foods that have all three states of matter at the same time — solid, liquid and gas. Fat hangs onto the air cells in ice cream to give it that fluffiness and texture we like. Mess up, let it get any colder and it would be like sucking on an ice cube. Flavorless.



How did you become an ice-cream expert?

After getting out of school, I worked for Carnation and somehow gravitated to the ice-cream and the dessert side of their business, and it took off from there. The whole pasteurization process and the use of applied mathematics in making new flavor combinations turned me on, and I helped the company save a lot of money. But there was a food scientist I met at Dryer's ice cream named John Harrison who was really inspirational to me — his passion and clarity.

Are there any flavors left to make ice cream out of? Have we reached the end of the line with new creations?

Man, there are so many I want to try. I have a whole list that I'm actively pursuing right now, and I'm slowly chipping away at it. Inspiration comes from all over the world, and our customers won't believe what is coming next.

What's coming next?

It's top secret! But it's a sensation that has never been done. Our customers will be pretty pleased.

Where did the idea for the cake batter ice cream come from?

Actually, it came from a franchisee in Atlanta who remembered how much he liked to lick his mother's spoons clean after she made a cake when he was a kid. So I assisted in the formula, made sure it could fit in well with every store. I could see right away that it was a great idea and had a lot of merit.

The ice creams in the stores are mixed on a stone that is kept at 16 degrees. Beyond being trademarked and part of your company's name, what does keeping the stone that cold do for the ice cream?

It allows the ice cream to warm up just enough so that the servers can fold it and mix in the guests' add-on ingredients. But it's cold enough that the ice cream is not going to melt either.

How much of your menu is trademarked?

Most of it. When we really know we have a big hit, we try to protect it, the names especially. Those names convey a feeling or emotion behind the ice cream.

We're in an era when everything that tastes good is bad for us — French fries, double-patty cheeseburgers, all pasta dishes — and you are making the most despised, wicked delight. I can't help asking if the nutritional, health, obesity thing has entered into your job?

I'm mindful of all of that, but we still are committed to serving a product whose butterfat is about 14 percent, 2 to 3 percent above the industry average. Anything more than that and you might as well eat cold grease, because that is what it is going to taste like. I'm focused on flavor and the wow factor. We're about total indulgence. I'm not a food cop. Cold Stone Creamery is in the pleasure business.

I have an idea: popcorn-flavored ice cream. What do you think?

I'm ahead of you. I'm already working on it. It's on my list. It may not play well by itself, but in combination with something else, it could be a big hit.

I've had sorbet made from garlic, asparagus and spinach. Could there ever be vegetable-flavored ice cream?

Well, we've done an avocado-flavored ice cream. But you have to bring other things to it. Ice cream is supposed to be sweet, after all.

How long does it take for a new creation to go from an idea to a spot in the freezer case?

About four months. The executive team tries it. We run customer focus groups. We have a few test stores play with it to see how it fits operationally.

What is the most enjoyable aspect of your job?

When a guest takes that first bite and goes, "Oh, my God!"