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Cold Stone Creamery makes wishes come true

By: Nicole Clark

Eleven-year-old Alexander Herrera dug into his Styrofoam dish with a fervor usually reserved for presents on Christmas morning.

The verdict?

"It's good," the Maternity BVM student declared between mouthfuls. "Tastes like chocolate."

But what kid couldn't appreciate a concoction of thick vanilla ice cream, Oreo chunks, M&Ms and chocolate fudge?

The Cold Stone Creamery in Franklin Mills mall last week gave away free Cake Batter ice cream, its new flavor invented by a sweet-tooth expert—a 7-year-old boy.

For the donation of their choice, customers got to sample the ice cream, the creation of Alexei, a child from Atlanta, Ga., who was granted his dream by the Make-A-Wish Foundation.

Cold Stone Creamery stores nationwide debuted Cake Batter in July—National Ice Cream Month—and will donate a percentage of all ice cream sales during the month to the Make-A-Wish Foundation. Customers were asked to create their own signature ice cream recipe to be posted with their name on a paper star hung in the store for \$1, also for Make-A-Wish.

During the three-hour Cake Batter giveaway last Thursday evening business was brisk. "It's a good flavor," said Chris Hause, administrative human relations manager of FoodBrand, parent company of Cold Stone Creamery and six other restaurants in Franklin Mills. "It tastes just like cake batter if you ever licked the beaters."

But some customers passed on the Oreo/M&M mishmash in lieu of time-honored favorites.

"That looks a little sweet for me," said Castor Gardens resident Jane McIntyre, forgoing the Cake Batter for the safety of a good old black-and-white shake.

Still, the ice cream tastes of grownups run the gamut, said Leslie Large, of Mayfair, who's working at the store on her summer break from Millersville University.

"You'd be surprised," she said. "Adults, old people. They ask for gummy bears, marshmallows, everything."

North Philadelphian Cheronn Newkirk was on her second day of employment at Cold Stone. "All this ice cream stuff is weird," she said. "All the different stuff people want mixed in. It's something new." Cookie dough and pineapples are not out of the question.

"Anything with cookie dough and fruit—that's weird," said co-worker Shantel Fletcher, of North Philadelphia. "One lady who comes here always asks for gummy bears, sprinkles, M&Ms and chocolate chips. That's a lot of stuff to fit in one ice cream. It's funny."

But squeezing candy, nuts and fudge into a few scoops is an art form they've perfected. It takes at least three toppings to become a bona fide Creation, Cold Stone's name for its ice cream hodgepodes, Hause said. Employees make the ice cream from scratch daily, along with brownies and waffle cones. The store is named for the frozen granite stone where workers hand-mix the Creations, in customer view at the front counter.

Trish Wyder, 18, of Levittown, estimated they work with about 40 toppings, everything from cookie dough and Butterfingers to sliced almonds and York Peppermint Patties.

"A Creation is anything you want," she said, mixing with metal spatulas an Our Strawberry Blonde-graham cracker pie crust, strawberries, caramel and whipped topping in strawberry ice cream.

Workers assist indecisive patrons confused by the array. "We'll say, 'What's your favorite ice cream?'" Wyder said. "'What kind of toppings do you think you like?' And every time I say, 'You're coming back, right?' And they're like, 'Mmm, oh yeah.'"

Frankford resident Ruth Velazquez, 21, has a different strategy. "They'll ask me what I like and then I just throw in what I like," she said.

The case always holds 13 ice cream flavors. Store manager Aaron Fierstein said the store finally got in butter pecan, after months of customer requests.

He's still trying to commit to memory the slew of recipes. "I know how to serve, but banana splits...that's too much for me to handle," he said.

Learning the ice cream trade isn't all sweetness and light. The girls at Cold Stone in Franklin Mills said they watch videos to learn flavors and keep lists behind the counter in case they need a quick brush-up on what's in a Chocolate Cherry Cheesecake Chill or Breathless Boston Cream Pie or Monkey Bites.

Eighteen-year-old Fletcher, who's been at the store for four months, admitted she made lemon sorbet, sans the lemons, when she first started.

"I did lots of things wrong," she said. "Waffle cones, I burnt them. We had to throw them in the trash."

Tossing in too much or not enough of one topping and doling out mammoth portions were other problems she's since corrected.

"Somebody put syrup in the fudge machine-that wasn't me though," she said.

One might expect ice cream workers get to dip into the cold stuff all they want. Not so. But they have a good time anyway.

"We make it fun," Large said. "We sing for tips."

At the end of the night-after a few renditions of "A Scoopin' We Will Go" and "I've Been Working on the Cold Stone"-the store netted about \$150 in donations for Make-A-Wish. The money will go toward the foundation's mission, granting the wishes of children with life-threatening illnesses. The Philadelphia chapter grants about 175 wishes a year, said volunteer Alan Oppenheimer. Kids can ask for anything-vacations, shopping sprees, meeting a celebrity, getting their bedroom redecorated.

"People have met Michael Jordan. They've sat on the bench with the Phillies. Someone got to be on the TV show 'Friends,'" he said. "Virtually anything. It helps the whole family when they have to put up with so much stuff all the time. They just get to do something wonderful, and it seems to help medically.

"It's even great for the people who donate. They're getting so much more than the donation-ice cream and feeling good about it."