



*Queens Chronicle*  
August 12, 2004

## **Cold Stone Creamery Opens On Forest Hills' Austin Street**

by Kim Brown, Central and Mid Queens Editor

Breathless Boston Cream Pie, Sinless Sweet Cream, Strawberry Blonde...If these don't sound like typical ice cream flavors it's because they are creations of Cold Stone Creamery. And Cold Stone Creamery is anything but typical ice cream.

Austin Street in Forest Hills is home to Queens' third Cold Stone store, part of a franchise that is licking ice cream competitors across the nation. At Cold Stone, sizes are like it, love it, gotta have it, rather than small, medium and large. Waffle cones and brownies are made fresh every day. Instead of flavors, the store offers "creations" or customers can invent their own.

"It's an indulgence," said Mike Belvedere, owner of the Austin Street store. "We take ice cream to its finest level."

The difference between Cold Stone and other ice cream stores is evident right away from the high tech machinery and elaborate display cases imported from Italy to the distinctive red walls with dark wood trim. Then there is the constant singing. Yes, singing.

Employees—also known as crew members—sing when they get a tip, they sing if someone looks like they need cheering and sometimes they sing for no reason at all.

"It brings out the best in people," said 17-year-old employee, Shakir Saud. "I love having fun. It's just so much better than any other job I've had."

One song Saud serenades customers with is sung to the tune of the Temptations' "Ain't Too Proud to Beg." It goes like this, "I know you want my cheesecake and I refuse to let you go. You don't have to beg and plead for some strawberries. I don't mind, 'cause it means that much to me."

Though perhaps not Broadway caliber, the songs do make customers smile and sometimes even dance and clap. And the customers do stay to order.

Cold Stone ice cream lovers can make their own concoctions by choosing their favorite flavor and mix-ins—sponge cake, graham cracker, pie crust, cookie dough, ButterFinger, M & M's and the list goes on and on. The ingredients are mixed together on a granite slab cooled to 16 degrees, hence the store's name, Cold Stone.



**Wayne Algenio mixes ingredients into ice cream at Cold Stone Creamery. (photo by Michael O'Kane)**

The company's own creations include "Cookie Don't You Want Some More," which contains cookie dough, chocolate chips, fudge and caramel. "Apple Pie a la Cold Stone" is made with real apple pie, cinnamon, graham cracker crust and caramel.

Then there are the ordinary flavors, which are anything but ordinary. Coffee ice cream is made with real coffee, nine bananas are used to make two pans of banana ice cream. All of the ice cream is made fresh daily.

A self-described "ice cream fanatic," Belvedere grew up in Glendale. He is in the process of opening four other Cold Stone stores in Queens. The Astoria location will open on Broadway in two to three months. The Atlas Park, Glendale store will open in 2005 and two Bayside locations are still being scouted.

Belvedere's business philosophy is as much about giving as about earning. "Personally, I think it's better to give back to the community than to just come and take," he said. And he acts on those words. Half of his opening-day proceeds went to the Make-A-Wish Foundation for sick children. By selling paper stars in July he made close to \$3,000 for the same charity. On August 24th, 15 percent of sales will go to Turn The Corner, an organization that fights Lyme disease.

To some, the success of the Cold Stone brand is perplexing at a time when being rail thin is in and the Atkins diet is more than a passing craze. Although the ice cream is not cheap—prices start at \$3.29 and go up from there—the slow economy helps premium ice cream sales, according to Scott Hume, managing editor of the trade publication Restaurants and Institutions. "You can still take your family out for tasty ice cream, even if you can't go to a restaurant," he said.

Belvedere explains the ice cream's popularity like this, "Cold Stone is a place to let loose and have fun, rather than restrict yourself."

Whatever the explanation, the phenomenon has certainly caught on. Since 1995 when the first Cold Stone Creamery opened in Arizona, more than 700 others have appeared. With 800 stores in development, Cold Stone is growing five times as fast as Baskin Robbins, the industry leader. Moreover, it was ranked 25th on Entrepreneur magazine's list of the nation's "101 Fastest Growing Franchises."

Belvedere has previous retail experience as a manager for The Wiz and an Expo Design Center. At one time he owned his own kitchen-design business. But Belvedere couldn't be happier about his new-found line of work. "I wouldn't trade this for anything," he said. "It makes me feel like a kid again."

Cold Stone Creamery is located at 71-66 Austin Street. Summer hours are 11 a.m. to 11 p.m. Sunday to Thursday and 11 a.m. to midnight Friday and Saturday.