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Cold Stone is hot

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Every now and then, Steven Martin feels like creating his very own ice cream fantasy. When that happens, he heads to the ice cream shop in the Tallahassee Mall.

There he can have ice cream his way - scooped up with just about anything, including apple pie filling, graham cracker crusts, peanut butter, almonds, Nilla Wafers and pieces of a Kit Kat candy bar.

But then, that's how it works at Cold Stone Creamery, a privately owned ice cream chain based in Scottsdale, Ariz., whose products have been drawing long lines of Tallahassee ice cream lovers.

Now owners are hoping those same lines will form when they take their smooth, cool, creamy treats into the heart of the college community. On Oct. 1, they'll open a new location on West Tennessee Street, between Moe's Southwestern Grill and Firehouse Subs.

"I'm so excited," Jaua Johnson said of the new location, which is just minutes from her home. "Now, I don't have to come out here to the mall."

Johnson drives to Cold Stone when she feels like treating herself to one of the creations that range in price from \$3.89 to \$4.59, depending on the size. One of her favorites is Caramel Turtle Temptation, which includes Cold Stone's signature sweet cream ice cream, pecans, fudge and caramel.

It's a different type of ice cream," she said. "It's good."

Since opening in the mall two years ago, Cold Stone Creamery - which mixes up freshly made ice cream concoctions on a cold granite slab in front of customers - has increasingly become a favorite of shoppers. Often, lines stretch beyond the box office of the nearby AMC theater.

"It's a great business for the mall," said David Renninger, Tallahassee Mall general manager. "It's a great complement to AMC theater business." The store has an arrangement with AMC that allows customers to take their ice cream inside the theater.

The 1,300-square-foot new store will be larger than its mall location, with room inside to seat seven. It will also have two granite stones for mixing and an ice cream cake display, features not available at the mall location. At least 35 employees will be on staff.

"Our primary market is college students," said Cecil Rolle, general manager of Cold Stone Creamery and an owner of the two Tallahassee locations. "So, this was absolutely a perfect location."

In fact, it's the chain's ability to draw customers that prompted the Tallahassee native, who is moving back here from Ocala, to consider owning a franchise.

"My wife and I were coming from the movies (in Miami) when we were deciding on where to go get ice cream," Rolle said. "I suggested Ben & Jerry's (ice cream shop) and she suggested Cold Stone. She said everybody in the nail salon was talking about this ice cream."

Rolle said when he and his wife pulled up to Cold Stone, they saw a line stretching outside the door. "My wife said, 'Let's go,' but I told her I wanted to know what people were waiting in line for," he said.

It was soon after tasting the product that Rolle decided to invest in a franchise. Last winter, he and two other investors purchased the Tallahassee Mall location and franchise agreements to build on West Tennessee Street and in Ocala.

A profitable experience

Cold Stone customers say there are many reasons the business is so popular. Some point to the fact that the ice cream is freshly made every day and that its texture is soft. The company uses a premium ice cream mix and fresh ingredients.

Others say its the mix-in ingredients and a menu that touts flavors such as Banana Split Decision, Cookie Mintster or Pecans and Cream Passion that make the treat so tasty.

Chris and Josh Boyd had never tasted a Cold Stone creation before they went to the ice cream parlor last week to order one of its cakes.

"Someone told me it was a good cake," said Chris Boyd, who ordered one for her husband's birthday. She and her son designed one with sweet cream ice cream, devil's food cake, Oreos and chocolate chips.

"It's his 60th birthday, so it better be good," she said.

Companywide, revenues went from \$88million in 2002 to \$156million in 2003.

Nationwide, annual sales per store average slightly under \$400,000, Rolle said. Tallahassee's location has been keeping pace with that, "growing by double digits each year for the last four years," he said.

Initial franchise fees are \$42,000, with the total investment ranging between \$267,000 and \$399,000. "It's seems to be the kind of franchise that can endure," said Sharon Rush, an investor in the business, based in Gainesville, "and I think that's because of the concept of the stone. People can make what they want and have it made in front of them."

Cold Stone has more than 800 stores, which should rise to about 1,000 by the end of the year.

"The demand for franchises has been overwhelming," said Kevin Donnellan, company spokesman. "We're trying to do everything we can to keep up."

Donnellan said a primary focus of the company was to open more stores in the Southeast. The company entered the Florida market about five years ago.

Rolle said a second location on West Tennessee was just the beginning of additional stores he wants to open here. Within the next year-and-a-half, he hopes to have locations in Killbuck and on Capital Circle Northeast.

But right now, it's all about the store opening on West Tennessee Street. Said Rolle: "I look forward to opening day."