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Local Cold Stone Creamery franchises start popping up

By Julie Fishman-Lapin
Staff Writer

Cold Stone Creamery may not mean a whole lot to most people in the Northeast.

At least not yet.

But give it a little time, and the ice cream shop that's all the rage on the West Coast is likely to be as commonly known here as Starbucks and Krispy Kreme.

With three of the scoop shops opening in lower Fairfield County, area residents can decide for themselves whether this super-premium ice cream has the draw and staying power its founders and franchisees have envisioned.

The first area Cold Stone Creamery opened in September in South Norwalk. A second store is slated to open Jan. 20 in Stamford at 1109 High Ridge Road. And by early spring there will be a third Cold Stone at a yet-to-be-disclosed location in Greenwich.

And area ice cream lovers can thank Stamford attorney Eddie Bennett and restaurateur Glenn Karow for importing the franchise to this region.

"The first time we tasted it we knew it was destined for greatness," Bennett said.

But Bennett knows he's got many scoops to go before Cold Stone becomes as well-known as other ice cream chains such as Baskin-Robbins, Dairy Queen and Carvel.

"It's just really getting started in the Northeast," he said. "There are still a lot of people out there who have never heard of it."

But based on the company's success out West, Bennett said he is eager to bring the ice cream here, especially to his hometown.

"I always thought Stamford needed more ice cream," said Bennett, a 14-year city resident.

Cold Stone, he said, is sure to satisfy the pickiest ice cream connoisseur. All of Stone Cold's ice cream and frozen yogurt is made daily at each creamery. Customers tailor their scoops with one or more of mix-ins, including cookie dough, freshly baked brownies and candies.

The store got its name from the granite stones employees use to customize each scoop of ice cream. Employees blend the ice cream and mix-ins on the stones, which stay at 16 degrees so the ice cream stays consistent when it is mixed with goodies.

As the company says, the granite is the palette and the customer is the artist. Creations can range from banana ice cream with brownie, banana, fudge and roasted almonds to coffee ice cream with caramel and Heath bar.

But it is not just ice cream that draws people to the store. Employees often break into song or dance to entertain customers, and they get especially musical when they receive a tip, Bennett said.

Mix-in ice cream was first introduced by Steve's Ice Cream in the 1970s. The Steve's Ice Cream shop in Greenwich closed a decade ago but other companies jumped on the mix-in trend, including Columbia, Md.-based MaggiMoo's Ice Cream & Treatery, Houston-based Marble Slab Creamery, and Dairy Queen, said Lynda Utterback, executive director of the National Ice Cream Retailers Association.

Cold Stone has become the fastest growing ice cream chain, said Kevin Donnellan, spokesperson for Cold Stone Creamery.

"We are looking to do to ice cream, what Starbucks did to coffee," he said. "We are looking to redefine the category."

Judging from its quick growth, Cold Stone might be on the way to do that.

The privately-owned company first opened in 1988 and began franchising in 1995.

Based in Scottsdale, Ariz., Cold Stone has opened one store a day this month, and doesn't plan to slow down next year. The company has 550 stores now and wants to have 1,000 stores by the end of next year, Donnellan said.

The company is also developing an agreement for international expansion, he said.

The Northeast is a prime growth area for the company, which has in the Pacific Northwest and California and is concentrating on the Midwest and East Coast, Donnellan said.

The company recently opened its flagship Manhattan store on 42nd Street in Times Square.

"People don't necessarily think ice cream is a good business for New England because of the harsh winters. But ice cream is the ultimate comfort food. People eat it year round," Donnellan said.

Ice cream is big business. Frozen desserts consumption is a \$20.7 billion annual business, with about \$7.7 billion of that being at-home consumption and \$13 billion coming from scoop shops and restaurant sales, according to the International Dairy Foods Association in Washington, D.C.

That number is good enough reason for Bennett and Karow to expand their plans. The pair are in lease negotiations for a Greenwich location. If the negotiations go as planned, a Greenwich store should open in March or April, said Bennett, who is also looking at Darien, New Canaan, Westport as venues for Cold Stone Creamery. Bennett said he has plans for a second Stamford Cold Stone Creamery downtown.