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In Greenwich, there's always room for more high-end scoops

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At Cold Stone Creamery in Manhattan's Times Square, a steady line snakes through the shop and spills out onto the busy Manhattan sidewalk.

It happens at the Cold Stone Creamery on High Ridge Road in Stamford, too. In the dead of winter the line can still be out the door.

The popularity of Cold Stone Creamery, an ice cream franchise that started on the West Coast 16 years ago and has recently made its way east, is a growing, ubiquitous phenomenon.

And that makes Eddie Bennett and Glenn Karow happy men. The business partners -- a corporate lawyer and restaurateur respectively -- came across Cold Stone Creamery a few years ago when they were seeking to go into a restaurant franchise together.

Bennett, who lives in Stamford, was searching the Internet and googled up Cold Stone Creamery, then a virtual unknown on the East Coast, he said.

Intrigued, Bennett drove to Clinton, the home of Connecticut's only Cold Stone Creamery at the time. After one visit and several scoops of ice cream, Bennett was hooked. He and Karow opened their first franchise in South Norwalk a year ago, and, several months later, their second franchise in Stamford.

Today, they own the franchise rights for most of lower Fairfield County and are poised to open their third store in Greenwich, at 49 E. Putnam Ave., next month.

Their plans don't stop in Greenwich. Within the next two years they will open another Cold Stone in Stamford as well stores in Westport, Wilton, Darien, Fairfield and New Canaan. And last week, the business partners bought the franchise rights in Middletown, N.Y.

"We have experienced explosive growth over the past two years," said Kevin Donnellan, spokesman for Cold Stone Creamery in Scottsdale, Ariz. "The demand is not only for our ice cream, but for a superior small business opportunity."

Last year, Cold Stone was 35th on Entrepreneur Magazine's list of Fastest Growing Franchises in America. The company has 800 Stone Cold Creameries in 46 states and has sold an additional 1,000 franchise agreements.

So what makes Cold Stone Creamery such a hit? Bennett says its a mixture of quality, homemade ice cream and fun.

"I think people like the concept, they like the atmosphere," he said.

All of Stone Cold's ice cream and frozen yogurt is made daily at each store. Customers tailor their scoops with one or more mix-ins, such as cookie dough, freshly baked brownies and candies.

The store got its name from the granite stones atop which employees customize each scoop of ice cream. Employees blend the ice cream and mix-ins on the stones, which are chilled to 16 degrees so the ice cream doesn't melt 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 the most popular combo: chocolate ice cream with peanut butter, Reese's Peanut Butter cups and fudge.

But it is not just ice cream that draws people to the store. Employees scoop ice cream and entertain, frequently breaking into song or dance to delight customers. Bennett believes the combination will resonate with Greenwich customers.

He had hoped to open the shop in July, but has been held up by building permit approvals. Despite missing out on summer sales, Bennett is optimistic that business will be strong no matter what the season.

"We opened the Stamford store in January, which is not the greatest time to open an ice cream store. We were selling ice cream during snow storms," he said.

The biggest challenge in Greenwich is getting people into the store initially, especially because East Putnam Avenue doesn't have the foot traffic found on Greenwich Avenue, he said.

Bennett said he plans to drive people to the new shop with samples.

"I have absolutely no qualms about giving out free ice cream," he said, adding that employees will hand out samples and coupons to people walking out of the movie theaters and on Greenwich Avenue.

But unlike Stamford and Norwalk, Cold Stone does face more competition in Greenwich, where there are three Baskin-Robbins stores, a Haagen-Dazs and two independent ice cream stores -- Gofer Ice Cream and Darlene's Heavenly Desires.

Mary Ann Morrison, president and chief executive officer of the Greenwich Chamber of Commerce, said Greenwich is big enough for multiple scoop shops.

"We are town of 60,000 -- that's one for every 10,000 people. We have another 20,000 people come to Greenwich on a daily basis. I don't think it's out of line," he said.

And, she said, more people are eating ice cream.

In 2001, U.S. sales of ice cream and frozen desserts was \$20.7 billion. Of that total, \$13 billion was spent on "away from home" frozen desserts, according to the International Dairy Foods Association.

"I think there is room for everybody," Bennett said. "It's not our intention to push someone out."