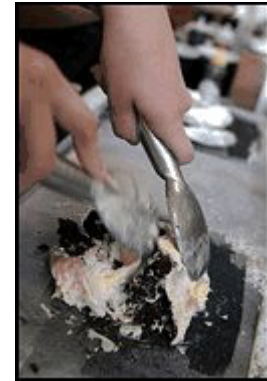


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Lining Up at Cold Stone

Lines out the door of an ice cream place in summer may not seem like any big whoop. Perhaps more telling is the fact that there has always been a line, no matter the season, in the 15 years that I've frequented Cold Stone Creamery.

Founded in Phoenix in the late 1980s, Cold Stone Creamery was created with a simple concept in mind: customized ice cream. And not some wimpy selection of five tired toppings sprinkled daintily atop a small scoop of plain-Jane vanilla. Cold Stone is all about any of a dozen ice creams and about three dozen mix-ins smashed furiously together on a cold stone counter in less time than it takes for the ice cream to melt -- or even soften appreciably.



Here's the drill: First you choose one of a dozen or so ice creams as a base. (The ice cream's not hard-packed but not soft-serve either, as the company explains.) Pure French vanilla. Creamy cheesecake. Rich chocolate. And my favorite, sweet cream.

Move on to the bewildering dilemma of which mix-ins to select, from Snickers pieces to sprinkles, cookie dough to yellow cake, brownies to hot fudge sauce. The selections are then scooped onto the cold slab of granite then deftly and quickly pulverized with a metal palette.

The mesmerizing slap slap slap of ice cream and metal tends to break the concentration of those customers still struggling to decide -- and you need every second afforded by the line to make up your mind. Those who prefer simpler pleasures or who are hopelessly indecisive may wish to stay away.

Cold Stone Creamery now has some 750 franchise locations across the country. With lines, I'll bet, at each one.

Prices (for one mix-in) start at \$3.29 for a Like It, \$3.60 for a Love It, \$4.19 for Gotta Have It. Washington area Cold Stone Creamery locations include Alexandria (Hoffman Town Center, 239 Swamp Fox Rd., 703-329-4066) Cleveland Park (3508 Connecticut Ave. NW, 202-237-2605); Fair Oaks Mall (11952-L Fair Oaks, #M113; 703-218-3445) Leesburg (1013 Edwards Ferry Rd. NE, 703-443-8100) Vienna (205 Maple Avenue East, 703-281-1940). Coming soon to Crystal City, Herndon, Silver Spring and Woodbridge.

For more information, see www.coldstonecreamery.com. -- Renee Schettler