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## Creamery of the crop

By Donna DeMarco

John Hardison, owner of the Cold Stone Creamery in Olney, thinks his ice-cream store has what it takes to lick the competition, but he must keep working at it — every day.

Cold Stone isn't an ordinary scoop shop. Customers choose from a variety of ingredients, called "mix-ins," which are folded on the spot into homemade ice cream.

The customers' concoctions are mixed to order on a granite slab cooled to 16 degrees. The mix-ins range from fruit, nuts and chocolate chips to M&Ms, sprinkles and cookie dough. The store has 16 flavors, including chocolate, cake batter, french vanilla and mint.

"We've got a great product," Mr. Hardison says. "People love it."

The company, which has more than 600 stores nationwide and is expanding rapidly in the Washington area, has more than 30 "originals," specially tested at the franchiser's headquarters in Scottsdale, Ariz. The creations include "Birthday Cake Remix," which is cake-batter ice cream, rainbow sprinkles, brownies and fudge, and "Peanut Butter Cup Perfection," chocolate ice cream with peanut butter, Reese's peanut butter cup and fudge.

"Baskin Robbins has 31 flavors, but they choose them," Mr. Hardison says. "That's the old way. This is the new way."

On this day, Mr. Hardison, 36, arrives at the shop about 10 a.m. He does some office work, which includes making this week's order for graham crackers, almonds, walnuts, hot fudge, cherry halves and spoons — lots of spoons.

Mr. Hardison has his hands in every part of the job —from making ice cream and serving customers to bookkeeping and teaching his employees new things.

His hardy laugh echoes through the small store. It's contagious. It's not the sound one would imagine coming from a man that has been working 16-hour days.

Since opening May 1, Mr. Hardison has been working extra hard to keep the shop running smoothly, making sure that the employees know what they are doing and turning the shop into a success.



John Hardison, the owner of a Cold Stone Creamery in Olney, MD. Michael Connor (THE WASHINGTON TIMES)

He doesn't have to worry much about the latter. There are lines out the door and around the building almost every night.

"The line doesn't go away until I go outside and tell people we are closing," Mr. Hardison says.

During the day, there's a steady stream of hungry customers and curious ones —those who aren't too sure what a Cold Stone Creamery is.

"This is an event and an experience," Mr. Hardison says.

At about 11:30 a.m. —just a half-hour after opening —a group of customers scan the menu and decide what creation they will have. After one of the employees is tipped for her efforts, she and Mr. Hardison break into song incorporating the Cold Stone name and a "thank you" for the tip.

The staff sings after money is dropped in the tip jar.

"I'm a big advocate of making sure this is a fun place to work," Mr. Hardison says. "I don't think the singing is horrible."

The store has 47 employees. The majority are high school students on their first job.

"He's so fun and jolly all the time," said Meghan Ryan, a high school student who makes the store's ice-cream cakes.

The shop goes through about 75 gallons of ice cream a day. During the day, the crew, including Mr. Hardison, is busy making the next day's batch.

By early afternoon, the tables on the patio outside the store are filled with customers savoring their creations.

"It's a lot of fun to go in and see them put it together," says Trish Lankowski, who was enjoying a Peanut Butter Cup Perfection Tuesday afternoon. "It's just a fun place to go and get fat."

Despite being surrounded by ice cream all day, Mr. Hardison hasn't added extra scoops to his diet. He's actually lost 15 pounds since opening the store and says he's so busy he barely has any time to load up on the ice cream.

Mr. Hardison's former life is far from the ice-cream business. He was an information-technology manager at Nextel before giving that up to join a broadband satellite start-up company.

When its funding fell through, Mr. Hardison found himself without a job for a year and a half. He passed the time repairing, restoring and selling the house his grandfather built in Washington. He also toyed with the idea of opening a Harley Davidson dealership and a motorcycle shop in the District. Those ideas never came to fruition.

It wasn't until Mr. Hardison was in Seattle for a wedding that he first tasted Cold Stone. A friend's wife was hooked on the creamery. So was Mr. Hardison.

He signed a franchise agreement in July 2003 and has plans for two more locations in Rockville in 2005 and 2006.