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Cold Stone crew dishes up dessert - and fun

By DENISE WATSON BATT'S

NORFOLK — The four in line at Ghent's Cold Stone Creamery swirled the choices around in their heads: Orange Dreamcicle? Mud Pie Mojo with peanut butter, Oreos, almonds, fudge and whipped topping? Or the Founder's Favorite with brownie, caramel, fudge and pecans?

Then, it began.
Courtney Smith started the melody of "My Girl."

*Doom, dum, dum, dum, dum, dum,
doom ...*

Ashley Link, working the waffle iron behind her, spun around quicker than a Temptation.

*I got Cold Stone,
On a cloudy day ...*

*The customers glanced at the girls, squinched at the vat of mocha, then back at the girls.
When it's hot outside
I got raspberry sorbet ...*

One in line smiled, another smirked, the girls spun and kept sashaying. The smallest customer, eyes peering over the counter's edge, pushed himself higher on his tippy toes as the girls finished with a flourish, scoops and gloved hands shooting to the ceiling.

*Cold Stone! Ice Cream! Mix-ins!
Talkin' 'bout Cold Stone!*

The boy squealed.



Cold Stone Creamery crew members, from left, Courtney Smith, 17, Billy Colonna, 18, and Ashley Link, 17, sing at the shop on 21st Street in Norfolk. STEPHEN M. KATZ / THE VIRGINIAN-PILOT

That's what Cold Stone is trying to deliver, more than smoothies and floats – the Ultimate Ice Cream Experience.

Sounds as syrupy as the Strawberry Shortcake Serenade , but one of many Cold Stone truths is this: Profit comes by making people happy.

The first store opened in Arizona in 1988 and traded the hard-packed and soft-serve standards for a creamier ice cream that customers can mix with dozens of ingredients. Crew members then combine them on a cold granite stone as customers watch. Freshly made waffle cones are extra; tips will buy the singing and dancing.

The formula is working. More than 1,000 creameries are sprinkled throughout the United States , the Caribbean and Guam , with 1,000 more in development, including one in Japan . Hampton Roads has nine with plans for more. Mystery shoppers in July and August sampled stores for their cleanliness, customer service and the X-factor – the entertainment. The 21st Street summer crew will split \$10,000 in scholarship money after being named among the top three in the nation.

Earlier on this Saturday evening, 17-year-old Courtney rushed in – not a happy, singing starlet. But that was before she crossed the employee-only threshold, clocked in and tied on her apron. She says once that happens, the Cold Stone persona slips into place. It's her job, but she likes her crew and the customers. The smiling comes easily.

She was “working the stone” with Mike Sheetenhelm , an Old Dominion University freshman , and Ashley, a Maury High senior . Courtney is in drama at Norfolk Academy but doesn't want Broadway. She's aiming for the much tougher crowd in the United Nations one day and the song-and-dance of international relations. Mike was known for wrestling in high school , and while he doesn't like singing, he's never anxious when the tunes start and people stare. Years of rolling around on a mat, in Spandex, in front of hundreds, killed the nerves. Ashley isn't fond of singing solo, but when she's with the crew, she's fine.

The line in front of the ice cream case – the ghea in Cold Stone vocabulary – lengthened. Mike scooped from the ghea, while Ashley ladled waffle batter behind him. The honor student had spent most of the day in an SAT prep class, and she was beat; the customers wouldn't know that, though. She smiled as her three waffle irons hummed, filling the store with vanilla-scented steam.

Courtney was nearby, mixing scoops of chocolate and mint.

A customer watched as she worked her spades, right over left, right over left. “I'll take M&M's,” he said.

Courtney reached for a spoonful among the jars of cookies, Gummy Bears and brownies. A woman asked, “Are the Oreos fresh?”

Courtney: “Everything is fresh.”

The spade slipped out of Courtney's hand and clanged on the floor.
"Spade down!" she shouted.

Ashley and Mike called back, "Spade down!"

Courtney grabbed another, kept mixing.

She smiled at the customer, "We have an Oreo waffle cone, if you'd like?"

"No," he said, looking at the cookie flecks in his ice cream. "That's OK. We have enough already."

Courtney scooped the mound onto a cone.

"As you know, this is absolutely guaranteed," she said, walking to the register. "If you don't absolutely like it, we'll throw it out and make another one."

Just then Billy Colonna , a crew leader , came in.

"Billy!" the crew yelled.

Three customers strolled in behind him.

The line swelled with families coming from afternoon football games, young couples on dates, grandmothers treating grandkids to a scoop.

A few coins tumbled into the tip jar.

Instantly, to the tune of "The Lion Sleeps Tonight " a crew member began:

A we will mix, a we will mix

On the cold stone, the frozen cold stone

we're mix-ing your ice cream!

Billy asked for the next in line while they sang, Mike punched the register, Courtney moved next to Billy, smiling at another customer.

To work here, applicants don't interview, they audition. Managers don't look for polished singing (it helps, though), but they insist on patience, enthusiasm and energy. Mega energy. Manager Kristie Webster poked her head from behind the back. The line was creeping toward the door. She moved to the register while Billy, Mike and Courtney worked the stone.

Billy folded pineapple chunks into Sweet Cream , while Mike plopped strawberries into chocolate, grabbed the fudge bottle, flipped it in the air, then squeezed a line onto the berries. The 18-year-old worked in construction and clothing before earning a job here by subbing the first line of "Build Me Up Buttercup ," with "Why don't you fill my cup, with Cold Stone, baby?"

It's the first time, he said, he looks forward to coming to work.

Cassandra Sumner, an assistant manager, hustled behind the crew with a frozen pan the size of a turkey roaster, heading toward the ghea.

She shouted: "Fresh blueberry ice cream!"

The crew repeated, "Fresh blueberry ice cream!"

Waffle bits hit the floor around Sumner as Ashley scrap ed batter off the irons. Webster chatted up a pint-sized cheerleader at the counter.

"How old are you?" Webster asked.

"Twelve," the girl said, dipping into her cream with M&M's.

"You're catching up with me," Webster said, smiling, "I'm 13."

The cheerleader laughed.

Sumner came through again.

"Fresh banana ice cream!"

The others came back: "Fresh banana ice cream!"

Mike's voice called to a customer: "Here's your cookies and ice cream!"

Billy: "Please follow me down to the stone."

Courtney: "This is your first time here? Don't let the boards distract you. We have 17 flavors made fresh every day ... "

She handed sample spoons of Chocolate Devotion over the counter to outstretched hands in the line.

A few coins fell into the tip jar.

A scooping we will go.

A mixin' we will go,

Hi-bo, the dairy-o,

We thank you for your dough!