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On Central Ave., a sweet taste of success

A fast-growing national ice cream chain plans to open its first Westchester store next month on the Scarsdale portion of Central Avenue.

Cold Stone Creamery is set to open in the Midway Shopping Center on Nov. 7. The chain offers fresh-made "superpremium" ice cream and lets customers choose from flavors and toppings offered on a 16-degree granite stone.

The Central Avenue store is one of 300 that the ice cream chain plans to open this year, and one of 50 in New York state. The closest Cold Stone Creamery to Westchester opened last month in the South Norwalk, or "SoNo," section of Norwalk, Conn.

"We see 75 stores in and around the New York metropolitan area and 75 in the rest of the state by the end of 2005," said Kevin Donnellan, a spokesman for Cold Stone Creamery. "We've carved out our own niche for an ice cream experience that's unbeatable from the first bite."

"Experience" means the crew will break out into song every time a customer leaves a tip. And instead of small, medium or large, Cold Stone Creamery calls its sizes "I like It," "I Love It!" and "Gotta Have It!"

"Cold Stone Creamery is a leader in premium ice cream, which is on something of a comeback now," said Nancy Weingartner, managing editor of Franchise Times, an industry publication based in Roseville, Minn. She said the chain is among several national retailers that are trying to satisfy a perceived growing consumer appetite for an ice cream equivalent of the pricey premium product experience popularized by Starbucks.

Not all ice cream chains are taking that route, however. Baskin-Robbins, for example, has begun expanding its Westchester presence beyond eight traditional stores through new franchise stores shared with Dunkin Donuts and developed by corporate parent Allied Domecq Quick Service Restaurants. One such store opened last month in Mount Kisco.

Baskin-Robbins and other established national chains like Carvel, which has 31 Westchester stores, are more at risk of losing customers to Cold Stone Creamery than independent ice cream sellers, said Lynda Utterback, executive director of the 500-member National Ice Cream Retailers Association in Rolling Meadows, Ill. The association once counted Cold Stone Creamery among its members when it was primarily a West Coast chain.

"The independent retailers have more flexibility to change and adapt to new trends quicker than the chains would," said Utterback, who also tracks the industry in part as publisher of The National Dipper.

ARIZONA INSPIRATION

Wayne Thompson, the store's franchisee owner-operator, said his 900-square-foot space will have outdoor seats and tables for customers during warm-weather months. He said he signed up for a franchise after visiting one of the chain's Arizona stores.

"The waffle cone smelled wonderful. It was the best ice cream I ever had, and I'm not an ice cream lover. I hung onto the franchise pamphlet and I decided I wanted to open a store," Thompson said.

Thompson's franchise agreement covers a 3-mile radius of the Central Avenue store. He said he is also interested in bringing Cold Stone Creamery to other Westchester communities, among them White Plains and Bronxville.

Franchisees like Thompson who open in the metropolitan area pay a \$40,000 franchise fee and can expect to invest about \$245,000 and up for construction and equipment costs.

Cold Stone Creamery is the latest in a series of new national and regional tenants for Midway whose owners - brothers Lyle and Mark Steinberg - have been renovating the retail center over the past year. During that time, Midway has moved CVS to a larger space and welcomed the regional grocer Gourmet Garage, as well as Linens-N-Things.

Headquartered in Scottsdale, Ariz., privately held Cold Stone Creamery operates more than 450 stores in 40 states and the Caribbean. The chain generated \$100 million between January and August, and is projecting full-year 2003 revenues of \$180 million - more than double last year's \$88 million.

Much of that growth reflects an aggressive national expansion campaign intended to grow Cold Stone Creamery to 1,000 stores by Dec. 31, 2004. Next year alone, the ice cream chain will open 450 stores, Donnellan said.

Cold Stone Creamery does not release same-store sales comparisons, but said its average store generates annual sales of \$358,000.