

How about a dip?

Sellers of ice cream, frozen custard defy recession with sweet creations

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BY **BILL CHRONISTER**

THE COLUMBUS DISPATCH

Ice cream -- and frozen custard -- is busting out all over this spring.

Whit's Frozen Custard this week opened its fifth store, at 564 E. Broad St. in Pataskala, on the heels of its fourth opening, at 121 S. Stygler Rd. in Gahanna. A sixth is expected in Athens this year.

"There's been a lot of interest in the stores, people looking to franchise," said Chuck Whitman, who started the chain in Granville six years ago.

At all Whit's, frozen custard is the star, starting with a kids scoop at \$1.75 and ranging up to a packaged quart at \$6.50.

The stores always have vanilla and chocolate, plus a third flavor that changes weekly. Right now, it's black cherry chocolate chip. Whitman says he's come up with 164 different flavors and is always experimenting. Quarts are available in about 15 flavors.

If ice cream's your thing, and Dublin's your neighborhood, look for two familiar ice-cream names to move in nearby.

Jeni's Splendid Ice Creams will open a fifth store, at 1 W. Bridge St., on April 1 -- barely two weeks after the birth on Friday of Jeni and Charly Bauer's second child, a boy.

Jeni's also has begun working with 12 area dairies and a processor in Utica to produce enough 100 percent organic, grass-fed milk for all Jeni's products.

"It's very difficult to find milk that hasn't been stripped of its vitamins



CHRIS RUSSELL | DISPATCH PHOTOS

Chip Gordon, owner of the Whit's Frozen Custard stand in Gahanna, delivers a cup of custard to a customer. Another shop has just opened in Pataskala, and a sixth shop is expected to open in Athens this year.



Whit's recently opened a new shop at 121 S. Stygler Rd. in

and nutrients by high-heat pasteurization," Jeni Bauer said. "This puts us at the top of the quality pyramid."

Another big name in ice cream -- Baskin-Robbins -- is expected to open a store in the Dublin area within a couple of months, spokeswoman Danielle Sullivan said, declining to say yet exactly where or when.

Most ice-cream outlets in central Ohio report year-over-year sales increases in the first months of 2009 and expect solid summer receipts.

"People have said, 'I'm sick and tired of this economy and I'm going to buy an ice-cream cone and enjoy myself,' " said Clay Cookerly, co-owner of Graeter's Columbus and Dayton stores. "They might not be ready to buy a car, but they're willing to spend money on an ice-cream cone."

Graeter's is working up new flavors and expanding its charitable giving.

A 6-year-old named Elena Desserich was behind both.

She has become known since her death for a book her parents wrote, *Notes Left Behind*, about her battle with brain cancer.

Sales of Elena's blueberry pie ice cream, created by a family friend who won a Graeter's contest, start in June and will benefit the charity named the Cure Starts Now.

Graeter's also has created a banana cream pie flavor, available now, as well as peanut butter caramel nut for April and Butterfinger crunch in May.

John Gainor, Dairy Queen International president and chief executive, is working with franchisees as the 69-year-old chain focuses on three store platforms it calls Grill & Chill, "food-centric" and "treat-centric."

"In January, we also introduced our Dairy Queen/Orange Julius model and made it available to operators who want to develop soft-serve only," Gainor said.

All stores are offering a Sweet Deals value menu, including nine regular menu items priced at two for \$3, three for \$4 and four for \$5.

For Blizzard fans, here's the lineup: March -- turtle Oreo; April -- midnight truffle; May -- raspberry truffle; June -- brownie batter; July -- Girl Scout Tag-Along Peanut Butter Patties; and August -- Girl

Gahanna. You can always get chocolate, vanilla and a weekly special flavor.

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Scout Thin Mints.

Over in Utica, sisters Andre, Luconda and Joanne Dager want everyone to visit Velvet Ice Cream's factory and new viewing gallery.

"We also have the 35th Utica Old-Fashioned Ice Cream Festival coming May 23-25," Andre Dager said. "We'll make a 6-foot ice cream sundae on that Saturday for everyone to share."

Velvet is featuring several new flavors: a Chocolate Lover's Trio to go with its Vanilla Lover's Trio, bananas and cream, lemon cream pie and strawberry shortcake.

Cold Stone Creamery continues its co-branding, with products going into two Tim Hortons -- at 1815 Hilliard-Rome Rd. on the West Side and 5470 N. High St. near Worthington.

Cold Stone also has new flavors featuring Jell-O Pudding, Country Time Pink Lemonade and Ghirardelli Chocolate, franchisee Jeff Curran said.

"Our ice-cream cupcakes have been a huge hit," Curran added.

Johnson's Real Ice Cream, on E. Main St. in Bexley, and Denise's Homemade Ice Cream, at 2899 N. High St. in Clintonville, have been focusing on flavors.

At Johnson's, fruit is the theme, said President Jim Wilcoxon. Lemon and orange-pineapple are coming in April, a mango sorbet in May and pomegranate-blueberry in late May or June.

Denise's Stan Zafran has stayed with his more exotic style, including vanilla malt, black licorice, cantaloupe and cucumber.

"Cucumber is a fruit," Zafran said, "and once you skin it and puree it and put it in sugar and let it bloom, it's really good."

Handel's Homemade Ice Cream, on the Far West Side and in Powell, is working on a value menu, said brand owner and CEO Leonard Fisher, including "smaller sizes of shakes and sundaes, as well as an ice-cream sandwich."

He's also creating a line of dairy-free ice pops branded with cartoon favorites Dora the Explorer, SpongeBob SquarePants and Spider-Man.

From the heartland

Papa John's is marketing a pizza nationwide that got its start on Bethel Road.

"We wanted to make the ultimate pepperoni pizza," said Charles Burris, operating partner of Johncol Inc., Papa John's franchisee with 22 stores in central Ohio. "So some area supervisors and I went down to the store and starting making up versions."

They came up with a large, thin-crust pie holding twice the usual load of pepperoni, plus mozzarella,

parmesan and Romano. They priced it at \$11.99 and, with corporate permission, put it in their stores.

When Papa John executives saw the sales figures, Burris said, "They said, 'Wow! Let's take it national.' "

It's available at all 3,300 stores.

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