

Speciality ice cream, called 'artisanal', accounts for a small part of the industry's value share in the Middle East. Now, more and more international brands are trying their luck in the region thanks to the current trend of 'fun and enjoyment'.

Von Ryan has the story



Ice cream, originally known as a pure 'enjoyment food' is experiencing mega trends of 'fun and enjoyment', 'health and wellness' and 'convenience', which are transforming how markets worldwide view the product.

This, along with an industry growth of about five per cent a year in the GCC, offers huge potential for companies in the 'artisanal' ice cream business, which is defined as selling premium brands in speciality stores.

For Galadari Ice Cream Company, exclusive licence partners of Baskin Robbins for the GCC, it is not the weather that dictates one's craving for ice cream (although it may be a factor, too).

"It's wrong notion to think that when the weather is hot, hordes of people run to us to get ice cream. On the contrary, if you think about it, when the weather is too hot, people stay indoors – usually in their homes," says Manoj Loya, General Manager.

To illustrate his point, he says that when a person sees Baskin Robbins in a mall the weather doesn't matter that much. Experience triggers the brain, which, in turn, triggers the craving. And what is a Baskin Robbins' experience? According to Loya, it's fun and good taste.

He adds that the company's approach is more experience-orientated: "We do not just sell ice cream; we sell the fun of having it."

Baskin Robbins is arguably the region's leader in the artisanal category, performing strongly since its first shop opened at Al Diyafah, Dubai, in 1979. It is also most popularly known for its ice cream parlours, enjoying an 80 to 85 per cent share of the market worldwide, says Loya.

With close to 400 stores all over the Gulf, Galadari is Baskin Robbins' largest franchisee worldwide. Saudi Arabia remains its main turf with 210 stores, followed by the UAE with 95 stores.

"Let's face it. We'll always have the advantage of being the first premium ice cream brand in the GCC," he says. The brand was around when nobody else thought of bringing the artisanal concept in this part of the world. He believes Baskin

Robbins has become a Middle East brand – no longer a brand from the West. As he says: "The Arabs have owned it."

Cold Stone Creamery, a super premium ice cream brand originally from Arizona, US, is also an advocate of the 'fun and enjoyment' trend. The company refers to its ice cream as 'creation' since the product is made from a handcrafted recipe, tailor-made to customers' tastes through a variety of toppings (e.g. candies, chocolates, nuts, fruit and syrup).

According to Country Manager Kewal Mehta, what sets Cold Stone apart from other artisanal brands is its way of serving ice cream. A crew of singers and jugglers entertains customers while their choice of ice cream concoction is mixed on a frozen granite stone.

Part of the fun is reading through Cold Stone's menu, with a long list of catchy names for ice creams and sundaes such as Banana Split Decisions. Mehta believes that keeping a customer happy attracts steady and profitable sales. He calls the strategy a win-win situation.

Emphasising the fun of a personalised ice cream experience, Mehta names quality, a feel-good atmosphere and wide range of choices as the main reasons why Cold Stone clicks with ice cream fanatics.

The Apparel Group is Cold Stone's franchise holder for the entire Middle East region, launching the brand in 2007 through the opening of its first shop in Dubai Festival City.

In line with other artisanal brands, a large percentage of its customers belong to the young adult category (18 to 34 years old), which accounts for 40 per cent of the market. Pre-teens and teenagers come in second with a 35 per cent share, while the remaining 25 per cent belong to the 35 years and older bracket.

"If you take a look at the figures, we practically cater to everyone. Who doesn't love ice cream?" says Mehta. In Japan, Cold Stone is a big success, with queues of people regularly lining up in the shops to 'experience' ice cream.

According to Mehta, one of the company's immediate goals is to set up its own production plant in the UAE, which will supply to the whole region. Currently, supply of fresh and raw material comes from the Arizona headquarters. It is, then, transported to a rented cold store facility in Dubai before being delivered to Cold Stone's shops in the emirate.

Processing machines, located in the shops, turn the imported base mix into ice cream as we know it. "This