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Yogen Früz is out to chill area's ice cream habit

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In New York and L.A. it has caused a rivalry between two giants, 30-minute lines and a load of parking tickets.

And now this unassuming force — frozen yogurt — has quietly hung a shingle in upstate New York, at Eastview Mall.

The health fad has been resurrected from the era of stretch pants and George Michael, and its peddlers are pushing it in sleek, minimalist shops with a hipper-than-thou feel. Pinkberry and Red Mango are the big names on both coasts, but it's a third company, Yogen Früz, that has ventured upstate.

The company is the elder of the chains making it big in this new frozen yogurt wave. It opened in Toronto in 1986 — Pinkberry started in Los Angeles in 2005 and Red Mango in Korea in 2002 — and has stores in more than 20 countries.

The new frozen yogurt model is a simple one: Tart, soft-serve yogurt is topped with fresh fruit or something a little more indulgent like chocolate chips or even Cap'n Crunch cereal. The frozen dessert is pumped up as a healthier, more refreshing option than ice cream. It's lower in fat and calories than ice cream, and Yogen Früz touts the inclusion of probiotics, live bacteria with several health benefits including the ability to aid digestion.

The chain also sells smoothies and its signature blended yogurt, which mixes frozen yogurt with flash-frozen fruit ranging from apples to mangos.

Harry Balzer, vice president of the NPD Group, a market research firm that has monitored American food trends for 28 years, said frozen yogurt had a good run in the 1980s and early '90s and he isn't surprised that it's making a comeback.

"We love ice cream as a country and it'd be nice if we could indulge in a healthy ice cream," he said. "Yogurt as a category is growing more popular and it has sort of a health halo."

George Traikos, 53, owner of the Eastview Yogen Früz, has found that people are eager to take another taste of a past trend. He opened his store two days before Thanksgiving and by Dec. 21, he said he had exceeded his first month's sales projections by 40 percent.

He estimated that 90 percent of the people who try a sample make a purchase at Yogen Früz within the hour. Traikos said customers love the taste and the healthy image.

"The flavor is what's getting people to buy the first time and their conscience is why they come back," he said.

Traikos, who splits his time between a downtown apartment and his home in Davie, Fla., near Miami, got hooked on Yogen Früz this spring after visiting the Canadian headquarters to sample the product and meet with the company about franchising possibilities. He believes so strongly in the product's

quality and appeal to consumers that he purchased the franchise rights for 53 upstate counties.

His connection to the region dates to 2005, when a Rochester broker contacted him about buying the Academy Building in downtown Rochester. Originally a real estate developer, Traikos purchased the building on Fitzhugh Street and is working to redevelop it. While that process plays out slowly, Traikos is filling his time with Yogen Früz.

The company plans to open 15 more upstate stores over the next two years and hopes for 100 locations in five years.

Banking your future on a trend can be risky business, especially when the market is heading toward saturation with large chains and mom-and-pops opening stores across the country, but Traikos is confident his commitment was a wise one.

"Our product is better," he said.

He prides himself on the "unparalleled" customer service that his staff of nine part-timers and one full-timer provides and says Yogen Früz is good value. The blended and plain soft-serve varieties start at \$2 to \$3 a serving.

Last week as holiday shoppers rushed around the mall, several stopped for a sample. Sydney Shufelt and Rachel Redhead, both 13 and from Victor, noticed the shop on a recent shopping trip and decided to try it out last week.

Sydney said she was drawn in by the modern look of the place. Shiny metal light fixtures hang above the register and light blue tile is the backdrop for the store's simple menus. The bright colors of fruit toppings pop off the uncluttered white counter top and a pink glow radiates from beneath the front of the counter. The entire store is only 389 square feet.

"It looks a lot cleaner and more put together than an ice cream place," Sydney said.

She had a strawberry blended yogurt with raspberries on top, and her friend tried a smoothie. The girls said they liked the refreshing, less sweet taste of the yogurt enough to forgo a run to the food court or Maggie Moo's, a popular ice cream chain, the next time they are in the mall.

Balzer, the health trend expert, said the success of frozen yogurt depends in part on its ability to change consumer habits. Fro yo, as frozen yogurt fans sometimes call it, needs to be convenient and affordable to make a real go of it against a tough competitor like soft-serve ice cream.

Nancy Gingold, owner of Gitano's Frozen Yogurt and Custard on Waring Road in Rochester, is skeptical that a business selling just frozen yogurt can make it long term. One of her business' most popular products in the early 1990s, frozen yogurt has fallen out of favor, she said.

"The clientele that come in, very few ask for the yogurt. They want the regular ice cream," she said.

Traikos sees the strength of frozen yogurt in its difference from ice cream. It's healthier, he said, and more pure than some ice cream with mysterious ingredients. But he knows that the two frozen desserts are competing for the same dollars.

Michelle Brienzi of Fairport, tried a Yogen Früz smoothie last week while shopping with a friend.

"I wanted to try this new healthy thing for the new year, and this is better for you than ice cream," she said.

She took a long sip. She could taste the strawberries and bananas. She could tell they were fresh and she liked it. But in the end, if she's craving ice cream, Brienzi said, frozen yogurt won't cut it. She'll buy an ice cream instead.

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