

'Yogurteur' bets on tart trend

Plans five Berry Chill locations by yearend

Tart frozen yogurt is hot in California, and Michael Farah hopes it will be in Chicago, too.

On Jan. 25, Mr. Farah is opening the first [Berry Chill](#) "all-natural yogurt bar" at 635 N. State St., with plans for additional stores in Lincoln Park and downtown this spring. The trendy product looks like soft-serve ice cream but has a tart taste and contains live yogurt cultures. It's usually topped with fresh fruit or granola.

Mr. Farah, a 29-year-old crude-oil futures trader, declines to say how much of his own money he is putting into the venture but says he has raised \$1 million from outside investors. He plans to have five [Berry Chill](#) stores in Chicago by yearend, before expanding into four more cities in 2009.

"If I don't do it now, I'd lose out on my opportunity to bring it to Chicago," he says.

[Berry Chill](#)'s Michael Farah tested formulas and flavors for his frozen yogurt with a soft-serve machine in his condo. "I just want that smooth, creamy texture," he says.

PHOTO:
ERIK UNGER



Mr. Farah wants to generate local excitement similar to the buzz in Los Angeles surrounding the Pinkberry shops. Pinkberry, which has locations in California and New York, is considering opening stores in all major U.S. cities including Chicago, but "nothing is set in stone," a spokeswoman says.

Meanwhile, Red Mango Inc. — a South Korean company that claims it "first introduced the tart frozen yogurt that's sweeping the nation" — is coming to Illinois. Locations in Evanston and Naperville will open in February and March, and a spokesman says the Chicago area will have five to 10 Red Mango stores by the end of 2008.

'ROOM FOR IT'

Mr. Farah developed his yogurts with guidance from a gelato maker in Italy, and he tested flavors and formulas himself with a soft-serve machine in his River North condo. "I just want that smooth, creamy texture, but not too icy," he says.

Mr. Farah's titles at [Berry Chill](#) LLC are president and CEO, but he prefers to be known as "yogurteur." He hopes to generate word of mouth with prominent locations, a Web site and a Facebook profile.

"As far as Chicago goes, there's definitely room for it," says Darren Tristano, executive vice-president of Chicago food-industry consultancy Technomic Inc. He predicts that the tart frozen yogurt trend will catch on well enough that it will soon be on grocery store shelves and McDonald's menus.

Mr. Farah touts [Berry Chill](#) as a healthy product, claiming it will be one of the few authentic chilled yogurts on the market. He says that many of the other desserts labeled as frozen yogurt do not actually include "probiotics," or live bacteria.

Like [Berry Chill](#), Red Mango has won voluntary certification from the National Yogurt Assn. Meanwhile, Pinkberry, which hasn't yet applied for certification, has faced two consumer lawsuits questioning its authenticity. But the *Los Angeles Times* tested the product and found it does contain live bacteria. A company spokeswoman says, "Pinkberry is considered frozen yogurt."

Preliminary tests show that 1 ounce of [Berry Chill](#) yogurt contains 125 calories, 1 gram of protein, less than 6 grams of sugar and no fat, Mr. Farah says. An 8-ounce [Berry Chill](#) with three toppings will run about \$5.

Correction: [Berry Chill](#) yogurt has less than 25 calories per ounce. The caloric content was misreported in a Jan. 14 news story. [printed in Jan. 21 issue]

[Berry Chill](#) claims that its products increase metabolism, boost immune response, lower bad cholesterol, raise good cholesterol and eliminate bad breath. David Schardt, senior nutritionist at the Center for Science in the Public Interest in Washington, D.C., is skeptical of some of those claims. Yogurt can aid digestion and the absorption of lactose, he says. But while studies on animals have shown that some probiotics might help with immune response and cholesterol, the benefits haven't been proven in humans, he says.