



## Princeton's Thomas Sweet seals deal to open 200 ice cream shops in China

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By **Samantha Costa/The Times**

**PRINCETON BOROUGH** — Thomas Sweet ice cream has been a 30-year tradition for many Princeton-area residents, but it's about to become a household name over 12,000 miles away.

Owner Marco Cucchi has signed a deal that will open 200 Thomas Sweet ice cream shops in China over the next few years.

Over the years, several expansion offers have come to Cucchi, from California to Chicago and Boston. But Cucchi, 42, who started out as an ice-cream scooper at a Thomas Sweet shop and ended up owning the whole Princeton-based chain of five, never thought he'd get an offer from China. It all began in early October 2010, with a phone call from David Neufeld, a lawyer in Princeton Junction.

"You're going to think this is crazy," Neufeld said to Cucchi.

And he did at first. Cucchi had just looked to expand in the tri-state area and possibly nationwide, but had never thought about an international franchise. The risk was great for both Neufeld and Cucchi. He called Cucchi three to four times before Cucchi agreed to meet with him.

Neufeld explained to Cucchi that his childhood friend John Leagh, executive director of the China-U.S. Business Leaders' Roundtable Foundation, represented a prominent Chinese businessman, Wentau Zeng,



**Enlarge**

**Michael Mancuso/The Times**

Thomas Sweet owner Marco Cucchi looks over plans in the new store location in Montgomery Shopping Center. He currently has a location across Rt 206 which will relocate into this spot. Michael Mancuso/The Times

**Thomas Sweet** gallery (6 photos)

who spoke of the emerging ice cream market in China. They had considered tackling other ice cream chains, but as a lawyer in Washington, D.C., where there is a Thomas Sweet, Leagh had come to know and love the store's ice cream.

Over time, Cucchi felt a sense of trust in Neufeld.

"I could tell he was serious when we sat down. Right off the bat, I felt like I could trust him," said Cucchi.

By late-October 2010, Cucchi met with Neufeld and Leagh. He expressed his concerns about the product he so carefully helped create over the years.

"I was concerned with quality," said Cucchi.

From December to January, the international franchising plans were moving slowly. By the end of February, a letter of intent was created and the China deal was closed by April. The seven-figure deal will call for quarterly payments for each month a store is open in China, Cucchi said.

"We all sort of clicked. We had a lot of similar business philosophies," Cucchi said of his business partners.

The first store is set to open in August in Wuhan, Hubei, the second largest city in China next to Shanghai, where the next Thomas Sweet will likely open by the end of next year, along with five to 10 other stores. Within three years, a total of 200 are expected to launch in a country that is craving something different.

At 14, an ambitious Cucchi became a scooper and later an ice cream-maker where he worked at the Nassau Street location. His concentrations in marketing and finance in college allowed him to grow in the corporate world, but his passion was always ice cream. It only felt right for him to combine his love for ice cream and business. He turned his partial ownership at Thomas Sweet into full-ownership in 2008. "I loved the store from the second I started working there," said Cucchi. "I always dreamt of Thomas Sweet."

Cucchi and one to two other managers are handling the training of the stores overseas. An 11-person training team from China was brought to the Princeton location over Memorial Day weekend. Prior to that, in early May, the Thomas Sweet staff worked with a translator who took detailed notes, documenting everything so they can run the stores successfully with operations manuals and recipes.

"I'm excited about it. I really am. And I want them to be successful and love the business the way I do," said Cucchi.

As with many international franchises, ingredients tend to stray from the original recipe. Cucchi says that Thomas Sweet will maintain its original ice cream flavors, but you may find a bit of cultural flare atop your favorite raspberry or chocolate chip ice cream if you're in China. Toppings that are popular to the area would

become available, aside from ordinary sprinkles and chocolate chips. Anticipated toppings might be lychee nuts or sweet rice as part of a blend-in flavor, Cucchi said.

The ice cream itself will be made in Ewing at Arctic Ice Cream and shipped to China.

Thomas Sweet will remain the store's name, but Cucchi has signed a licensing agreement that allows the individual stores to sell what they want. For example, Cucchi explained, coffee may be a favorite café beverage here, but the Thomas Sweet stores in China may market tea instead.

Desserts served at the China locations may vary as well. Chances are, those stores will sell "more traditional Chinese desserts," said Cucchi.

"I think it's likely that some of the flavor added will be privy to the palate of people in China," said Cucchi.

Original cofounder Tom Block, who no longer has a stake in the Thomas Sweet chain, is glad Cucchi has taken Thomas Sweet to the franchise level, stating that with Cucchi behind the business, "Thomas Sweet is in good hands."

"Thomas Sweet started in Princeton and that's our home base. I hope to always be in that store," said Cucchi.

He says he'd like to see his 7-year-old twin sons work at Thomas Sweet one day, but encourages them to follow their own dreams.

"I want them to do whatever makes them happy," he said.

Thomas Sweet currently has five locations: in Montgomery, New Brunswick, two in the home location of Princeton Borough, and Washington, D.C.

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