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Peddling Pints

The $8 billion ice cream industry has experienced a sales chill in recent years, but experts say investors with a taste for the right treat can still profit. Trendy brands like Pinkberry and Red Mango, for instance, have helped frozen-yogurt revenues jump nearly 25 percent since 2006. Opening a scoop shop requires at least $175,000, and most successful ventures start turning a profit of about 20 percent within two years, says ice cream business consultant Malcolm Stogo. Outfits that churn their own flavors need more capital for labor and machinery, but pros say it can be a competitive advantage. Jeni's Splendid Ice Creams, in Columbus, Ohio, for one, scooped up $9 million in revenue—and a tidy profit—last year with its homemade flavors. "If we bought some cheap ice cream, we wouldn't have lines out the door," says founder Jeni Britton Bauer.

Still, franchises tend to be more successful than small businesses—though they can also cost nearly twice as much. National chain Cold Stone Creamery helps owners with planning and logistics, and says shops post an average of $340,000 in annual sales. But potential owners may need to put their social lives in the deep freeze: Most ice cream is sold during evenings and on weekends.

—Tania Karas

Alba's New Baby: A Start-Up

The Pitch: While other celebrity investors flock to the latest hot start-up, actress Jessica Alba has gone a step further: She started her own. Alba says she launched The Honest Co., an online retailer of eco-friendly baby and home products, because of her inability to track down certain items for her two kids. "There was a huge market gap, and I felt that we could offer young, modern moms what they craved," the actress tells us. Alba, who now serves as company president, invested her own money in the business (she won't comment on how much) and in March, three major venture capital firms put together a $27
Treasure Hunt

Between the plunging price of solar panels—down about 40 percent last year—and the government’s move to dial back subsidies, it’s been a cloudy year for the $93 billion solar industry. Still, insiders say new panel tech could mean a brighter outlook for solar on a smaller scale.

LIGHT COMPUTING

Samsung says its solar-powered netbook—designed for places without reliable electricity—is the first of its kind. The machine, which has a 250-gigabyte hard drive, isn’t sold in the U.S. but retails for $450 to $650 in Russia, Brazil and parts of Africa.

LUMINOUS LAWNS

Ikea’s new $30 pendant lamp combines solar and wind power, to stay charged in all types of weather. Ikea says the outdoor lamp will remain illuminated for about 12 hours, after juicing up for as little as nine hours. The firm doesn’t release product-specific sales figures but says the lamp has attracted a “huge amount of interest” since it went on sale earlier this year.

READING WITH RAYS

Amazon Kindle users looking for an excuse to spend more time poolside may be interested in SolarFocus’ $80 e-reader cover. The company says a charged cover provides at least three months of unplugged reading time. The original is designed for Kindle and Kindle Touch; the maker says it plans to release additional versions this summer. —Elizabeth O’Brien

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million round of initial funding.

The Business: Alba brought in several cofounders, including serial entrepreneur Brian Lee (founder of online legal-services firm LegalZoom and accessory seller ShoeDazzle) and Sean Kane, former business development executive at price-comparison site PriceGrabber.com. Honest uses a subscription model where buyers pay a monthly fee starting at $36 to receive 12 “bundles” of all-natural diapers, shampoo or detergent a year. This setup helps provide a predictable revenue stream, analysts say.

The Strategy: For a first-time entrepreneur, bringing in seasoned partners is a good move, says John Giannuzzi, managing general partner of venture firm Sherbrooke Capital. In fact, one VC backing Honest says he invested in part because of Lee’s involvement. Targeting a niche within a fast-growing market, such as the $11.8 billion natural-personal-care and household-product industry, can also help attract investors. Of course, having Alba’s name recognition doesn’t hurt either. —T.K.