

SWEET TREATS

A TASTE OF ITALY: PALAZZOLO'S ARTISAN GELATO

BY JENNIFER CHANDLER

When one thinks of gelato, Italy comes straight to mind. But did you know that one of the country's best artisan gelato makers is based right here in Michigan?

When I first met Pete Palazzolo, I knew I had found a soul mate in my love for ice cream (I have a huge sweet tooth). Describing his artisan gelato and sorbetto business, Pete's eyes light up like a kid in a candy shop. His enthusiasm about his craft is contagious, and his passion for using the finest ingredients and old-world techniques is evident in each creamy bite.

Pete's family ran an Italian restaurant down in Saugatuck in the mid-eighties. Since their resort-town business was seasonal, Pete and his mother decided to make gelato to keep money coming in year-round, and Palazzolo's Artisan Gelato & Sorbetto was born. In 1986, Pete had the idea to sell their gelato wholesale to chefs. "At that time, the only option for restaurants was cheap ice cream or a couple of flavors of Häagen Dazs. Chefs were looking for great ice cream made from real ingredients," Pete explains. Responding to the need in the market, he began working directly with his customers to make the flavors they wanted—from scratch, using only the best ingredients. "Our gelatos and sorbettos are unique, because each pan is made to order using only the highest-quality natural products," he continues. He then tells a story about a customer in Chicago who didn't understand why his pistachio gelato was not green. Pete had to explain that the color in any of his gelatos comes from the real ingredients he puts into them. "We never use powders, flavor bases or anything artificial," he says. "Every flavor you taste is the real deal."

Pete searches the globe for the finest pure flavoring for his gelato, importing such delicacies as vanilla from Tahiti and Madagascar and chocolate from the Netherlands, Venezuela and Switzerland, but he looks closer to home for his fresh ingredients. "I source them from right here whenever possible," he says, "because they are so much fresher and taste better." In addition to getting hormone-free milk and cream from a dairy just ten miles away from his plant, Pete uses raw Michigan honey as a sweetener. But locally grown fruits are where Michigan's flavors really shine in his specialty frozen treats.

"The fruit here in Michigan could rank on top in the whole world," Pete boasts. "The blueberries, raspberries, peaches, cherries and other stone fruits have an incredible flavor profile. And the local apricots are unreal—500 times more intense than what you get at the grocery store." One taste of the fruit-based gelatos and sorbettos in Palazzolo's repertoire confirms this statement. "We have found that if you want the best flavor, you must start with the simplest ingredients," says Pete, "and with fruit flavors, that means only real

fruit. We puree all of the whole fruits in-house. Even our lemon and lime juices are pure and fresh-squeezed."

In addition to the more than 600 flavors he offers regularly, Pete also works with chefs to customize flavors. With clients all over the country, Pete has earned a reputation for being able to make a gelato for almost any taste. "I have a chef in Tennessee who orders a Southern-style buttermilk brown sugar gelato," he says, "and I make a sangria sorbetto for a tapas restaurant in Grand Rapids."

Pete admits that he also likes to "clown around" with local wines to make specialty sorbettos. "We have so many great little pocket wineries throughout western Michigan, and I work with many of them. I recently made a blueberry merlot sorbetto and a black cherry zinfandel sorbetto, and they both turned out very well," he says with a smile.

Pete now sells his ice creams to resorts, sweet shops and caterers around the country. A few specialty stores in western Michigan also carry pints of his specialty concoctions. In Traverse City, a selection of Palazzolo's gelatos and sorbettos can be found at Sweet Asylum: A Sanctuary of Treats, located in the Mercato at Grand Traverse Commons. "One of the things we like most about Palazzolo's ice creams is that they are made from all-natural, all-fresh ingredients—never from a mix," says manager Tricia Frey. "Palazzolo's makes its gelatos in the authentic Italian tradition, and you can tell. I have had customers who have been to Italy tell me that this is just like what they experienced there."

So for a sweet taste of Italy, you don't need to wait until the next time you travel abroad. You can get artisan gelato and sorbetto right here in your own back yard! *eGT*

Sweet Asylum: A Sanctuary of Treats

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Palazzolo's Artisan Gelato & Sorbetto

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Facing page: At Sweet Asylum, Tricia Frey hands over the gelato.

GELATO VS. ICE CREAM

Simply put, gelato is European-style ice cream. Unlike most American super-premium ice creams, it is made from lower butterfat cream.

The “original” ice cream, gelato was first produced the old-fashioned way in a simple tub with ice and salt, stirred by hand. As this mixture froze with a slow-stirring motion, very little air was whipped into the product.

During the American Industrial Revolution, continuous-freezer machines were developed to speed up the production process. These machines could be set to whip up to 60 percent air into the frozen finished product. This is how America’s commercial ice cream is produced today.

Most American brands of ice cream contain between 60 to 120 percent overrun. (Overrun is the trade term for the amount of air whipped into the product—100 percent overrun is 50 percent air.) In contrast, most European-made machines for ice cream production still use the old-world churn style with a slow mixing speed.

In addition, the American philosophy behind super-premium ice creams is that the higher the butterfat, the better the quality of ice cream. But that same desirable creamy texture can come from taking steps to not incorporate too much air into the ice cream. Dense gelato provides a taste as creamy to the mouth at eight percent butterfat as its high-air and high-butterfat cousin.

