

Florence and the ice cream

Frederika Whitehead grabs a spoon and embarks on a gelato tour of Florence

There are only two places in Italy that make good ice cream: Sicily and Florence. Always up for a challenge, I've come to test this theory, embarking on a tour of the stunning Tuscan countryside in an attempt to discover precisely what makes this the gelato capital of the world.

I began my investigations in Florence, where upon introducing himself Simone Gori handed me a bucket full of plump yellow lemons for squeezing. "I want you to know we only use the best quality ingredients in our ice cream."

Simone Gori joined Vivoli, the oldest ice cream makers in Florence, when he was just 14 years old. Now, more than 40 years later, he is head chef and also happens to be married to the current owner, Silvana Vivoli. The Vivolis like to keep things in the family, and generations of Vivolis have made ice cream in their restaurant in Florence's medieval city centre since it first opened in 1932.

While I slaved over the lemon squeezer, Simone gave me a few words of advice for choosing a good ice cream shop: "When you see a shop selling lemon or banana ice cream that is yellow in colour, you should walk on by. That ice cream has been coloured and flavoured. It's not the real thing."

Lemon ice cream made with fresh lemons will be just off-white, as will banana ice cream, and a true pistachio ice cream should be brown not green. "90 per cent of other ice cream makers use flavouring, powders or concentrates," he says, "we only use fruit, milk and sugar."

Quality has its drawbacks, he admits: Vivoli ice cream only keeps for two days,

while the artificially flavoured ice cream lasts for five or six days. This is less of an issue when you consider that from the one tiny restaurant behind the Palazzo

Vecchio, Vivoli sells 500kg of freshly made ice cream every day during the summer months.

Simone's assistant, Valentina, tells me that a seasonal ice cream made from Novelline oranges grown in Puglia, which are only available in winter, is her favourite. "We use the whole orange, cut into cubes, simmer it in a little water, a little sugar... It's delicious." Saying this, she screwed her face into the internationally recognised expression that means "yum". Vivoli use the seasonal Novelline marmalade to make not only Valentina's favourite marmalade ice cream, but also a chocolate orange ice cream that is said to be a big hit at Christmas.

The first flavour that Simone created – 40 years ago – was made from the Sicilian Fathers' Day dish sweet, fried rice balls known as arancini. Simone had the mix for the arancini in the fridge, but instead of making them in the traditional spherical fashion, he decided to make them into ice cream. Did it go down well?

"Yes, but as in all family businesses there are arguments. And now there is some dispute over who had the original idea for that ice cream," he laughs. Unfortunately untranslated, a discussion began regarding what I can only imagine to be the true inventor.

While Simone and his colleagues reminisced, we turned out batch after batch of ice cream I chopped bananas and



smashed up bars of chocolate while Valentina checked the temperature of the machine, then told me when to pour in the milk and the sugar, the bananas or the chocolate. Some time later she checked it again and, after taking a note, instructed me to empty the vat.

Lunchtime comes around all too soon, and we're bundled out the door so that Simone and his family can get on with the important business of selling the confection we have just made. As I left the kitchen with a cone of Vivoli lemon ice cream in my hand, I saw the rectangular steel tray containing my banana ice cream sitting in the display and felt a faint glow of pride.

The following day we travelled to Toni Cafarelli's Il Re Gelato to make ice creams with a more contemporary twist. Toni was just seven years old when his father opened a pizzeria in his native Sicily, and now Toni has been focusing on ice cream alone for 25 years.

Like the purist Vivolis, only the best will do. However, the base of Toni's ice-cream is totally different to what we made at Vivoli. Il Re uses cream as well as milk, eggs, and a variety of sugars. Unlike the traditional Vivoli parlour, his flavours are much more avant garde.

Everything was laid out for us. We began work on the olive oil ice cream, which is served with a smear of chilli pepper jam and shavings of ricotta cheese, baked in the oven with honey, salt and butter - a typical Sicilian method of preparation. Toni ordered me to pour the prepared cream and olive oil into the machine at the appropriate times. I didn't really feel like I was doing much cooking as the machine handles the labour.

Most of the "lesson" involves listening to Toni talk through the creation of his exotic ice cream flavours. Having put ice cream on the menu at hundreds of corporate events, he has certainly displayed his creativity: dishing up green apple and prosecco granita; onion ice cream with cheese and caramelised apple; pecorino ice cream with caramelised leeks; even using pear and cheese ice-cream as a sauce for ravioli.

How does he come up with new flavours? He claims the secret is equal parts science and romance. Every flavour is analysed to find a working combination. Toni continues, "passion makes the

difference. When you have passion you do everything with love. It makes everything seem wonderful. And everything is wonderful."

A visit to the farm of his olive oil supplier gave him the idea for his most challenging flavour yet. "The farmer also had a field of irises, and I stepped into the field and the smell and the colour just hit me. It was so beautiful. I wanted to make an ice cream of it."

Toni notes he had just one small problem. Irises are hugely toxic. "Don't ask me to make this ice cream unless you have deep pockets," he laughs.

He had to hire a toxicologist to help him prepare a liquor from the roots that was safe for human consumption. It took seven years, and each tiny bottle of the Iris liquor cost in excess of €500. The result was an ivory coloured dessert that achieved the "remarkable fragrance" that captivated Toni.

Was it worth it? "Of course it was. Experimentation is how humans evolve," Toni says, quite seriously. Even if the experiments are with ice cream? Especially if the experiments are with ice cream.

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GELATO FACT

The world's top ice cream tasters take out tongue insurance. John Harrison of Dreyer's insured his for \$1 million.



**Simone Gori
demonstrates his
ice cream making
technique at his
gelateria, Vivoli**





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