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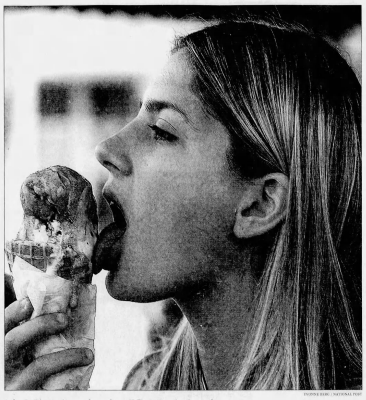

Andrea Patrizio, 21, enjoys a raspberry gelato on Sicilian Ice Cream's patio yesterday.

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LITTLE ITALY, BIG TASTE

IT'S FAMILY STYLE

Gelato isn't just a delicacy, it's part of a culture

By Natalie Atkinson

It is impossible to imagine a summer in Toronto without gelato.

In the same way the word "panini" has made its way into everyday vocabulary, gelato has become the noblest summer pursuit, and is on everyone's tongue — a dessert niche moving from one culture to many.

It is a treat for the city's Italian heritage — Torontonians of Italian descent number more than 600,000 — that such a multicultural palate has evolved to appreciate the after-dinner sorbetto and passeggiata (stroll).

"At one time we used to be predominantly Italian — but now, maybe 10% Italian customers, but a lot of different nationalities come in," says Maria Ventola, whose father, Nicola, founded La Sem, a 39-year-old gelato institution in Mississauga.

For most, the experience of Italy is limited to a morning espresso, memories of a backpacking trip across Europe, a Tuscan honeymoon or a daydream of eating gelato with the likes of Gregory Peck in the classic film *Roman Holiday*.

Gelato is as Italian as soccer and grapes — their version of a chocolate bar. It is the Italian word for ice cream (literally, "that which is frozen"), but that is where any similarity ends. Above all, gelato is often a family affair — on both sides of the counter.

On sultry summer evenings, you can spot a genuine gelateria by the crowd gathered outside: extended families — from the slick downtown club crowd to the more traditional *famiglia*. At the heart of Little Italy on College Street, beneath illuminated street signs in the shape of the famous boot, the young and stylish gather at Sicilian Ice for *nocie* (hazelnut chocolate) and *fiorone* gelati, lingering and watching the lively street scene from the patio.

On the last corner of the Corso Italia neighbourhood — which stretches from St. Clair Avenue West between Dufferin and Lansdowne — and next to the Barlesourt indoor soccer and bocce courts, is La Paloma Gelateria, considered by aficionados to have the best in the city.

From an ever-changing repertoire of 60 made-from-scratch flavours like Roche Catarina (with Ferrero Rocher chocolate) and Caramelina are named after the owners' wives, and mainstays like *nocciole* (hazelnut) and *fragola* (strawberry) are written in Italian.

"It's family style, so it isn't pretentious — I love authenticity," says one long-time connoisseur. As for the gelato, it's just superhigh quality — they also have very unusual flavours, so whoever is making it definitely has style! And the best

'IT'S THE ONE THING WHERE PEOPLE DON'T MIND IF IT ISN'T CONVENIENT'

zabaglione [egg-flavoured custard] in town."

La Paloma is so authentic that actor Chas Palminteri stopped in last year and, from behind the gelato counter, re-enacted his line from the infamous bar fight scene in *A Bronx Tale* for patrons.

At La Paloma, every few days about 150 bags of four-litres-no milk, 40 kilos of sugar and several skids of ingredients are delivered. Gelato, sorbetto and soya ices are made fresh every morning.

The orthodox, artisanal method of gelato production involves using milk instead of cream, and heaps of natural ingredients to produce an intense, creamy product.

Traditional gelato is characterized by a single bold flavour (like *tart limone*) and smooth, silky texture.

"Part of the Italian tradition is that it should taste like what it is," says Gelato Fresco founder Hart Melvin. "You want to really taste the fruit — especially since locally we have some of the best berries, like raspberry, going."

And with genuine gelato, there is no food colouring, so essences like banana will be pale and creamy — not acid yellow.

The pistachio is the palest green instead of the synthetic, technicolour lime of many ice creams.

"It cannot be done mechanically, it cannot be McDonald's-done," says Vincenzo Ciarlanti, who owns La Paloma with partner Salvatore Giamone (Vincenzo's brother Silvio works with Salvatore's son Carmen in the manufacturing division). "There has to be some kind of family orientation, otherwise you won't get the passion, the love, the subtle changes in flavour."

"It's like making cement. It's not Baskin-Robbins. Gelato is a delicacy."

At La Sem, the recipe for their signature chocolate (which they have shipped as far as Newfoundland) comes from Bari, a town in Puglia where Ventola's father worked in a gelateria from the age of 8.

Fans include hockey players like Felix Potvin and Dave Andreychuk who live in the area. Actors like Lorette Switt and Cloris Leachman make the drive from nearby Stagg West for a sampling of their specialty — *torrone* — a confection of honey and nuts made with nougat.

For some, the delicacy is less about authenticity than nostalgia. "Gelato is such an integral part of Italian life," says Adam Mazzara, a second-generation Italian-Canadian.

"It's so natural to enjoy a gelato while you go for a passeggiate with friends. It sounds crazy, but one taste of an authentic gelato from a place like La Paloma or Gelato Gelato and I'm back in Tuscany on a clear starlit summer evening, strolling on the Ponte Vecchio, wondering if heaven can possibly be any better than this. It's the closest thing to being there."

"It's about the whole package," agrees Melvin. "Not like just going for a coffee. You get your particular indulgence, then walk around, see the city, the street life. "It's the one thing where people don't mind if it isn't convenient, if you have to walk — the going is as much as part of it as the ice cream itself."

In the tony Eglinton Avenue area uptown, the impossibly tiny Carnevale de Venezia on Yonge Street is the main outpost for Gelato Fresco products.

Nestled in a space the size of a shoe closet, cones are dispensed with a paddle from the typical Italian presentation of chilled stainless steel bins. Again, here customers are almost exclusively local residents, many with children in tow, out for a summer stroll.

In the Annex, the lone gelato stand is at Tre Fontane restaurant, where Calabria-born owners known simply by their first names, Nick and Maria, serve only the handful of traditional Italian flavours.

This spring, Faema Café at Dupont Avenue and Christie (known for its espresso machines), the four second-generation DI Donato brothers felt the demand for gelato so acutely that they sent brother Rocco to Bologna for several weeks to learn to become a gelataio and produce a small range of exotic flavours like Cassata Siciliana — (think fruitcake ice cream) and chocolate-orange.

Hollywood Gelato (at the corner of Bayview Avenue and Manor Road) was opened last year by Italian-Canadian cousins Dino Carella — whose parents are still in Italy operating gelaterias in Bari and Aquaviva — and Peter Salvaggio, who do brisk business with the well-heeled, decidedly un-Italian residents.

Four workers behind the counter work for several hours for a lineup outside the door that easily sees a thousand people on an average summer night. Patrons even stop by in the morning for a small cone with their espresso.

Andrea Pittis moved from Northern Italy seven years ago and opened Tutto Gelato in the concourse of Scotia Plaza in 1998 to tap in to the *tiramisu*-craving traffic of the business crowd. She sells about 500 cones a day.

Gelato's widespread popularity in Toronto hints at its people's not-so-secret taste for *la dolce vita* — the desire to capture the passion and languid lifestyle of Italy in the heart of this bustling city.

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Gelato - La Sem, La Paloma, Faema

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