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## FOOD



Leo Bulgarini offers up gelato in strawberry, banana and Sicilian pistachio flavors. He uses his Ford Model A for Pasadena deliveries.

# It's crazy good

By Amy Scattergood

**L**EO BULGARINI is a little obsessed with gelato. The Rome-born ex-sommelier and his wife, Elizabeth Foldi, spent two years scouring villages throughout Italy seeking those who still made gelato the old way, using not pastes and premade bases, but fresh ingredients.

Seeking the right pistachios for the gelato they make in their new Altadena gelateria, they traveled from Rome to Sicily, finding them at last in the little town of Bronte. California pistachios, he says, don't have the right depth of flavor. Toasted in the oven, then crushed in an old-fashioned peanut butter grinder, the Sicilian pistachios go into a gelato that's dense and creamy, with a rich, earthy flavor and a raspy texture that reminds you just how distinctive the nuts are. It is just as wonderful as his cantaloupe sorbetto spiked with Tanqueray gin, that, he says, gives the sorbetto "extra oomph and a certain depth."

Bulgarini and a few others in and around Los Angeles are taking gelato and ice cream to a whole new level. At Milk in West Hollywood, a Patina Group chef is giving old-fashioned ice cream the kind of devoted attention he used to give to a smoked sturgeon and potato terrine. Gelato Bar in Studio City is updating classic Italian gelato with fresh California ingredients. The results couldn't be more delicious. It's not the first time gelato has been in the spotlight in Los Angeles -- in the late '80s there was a gelateria craze. But this generation of artisans, joined by an ice cream maker or two, is taking the craft to something that seems more like an art. They're perfecting techniques to get the purest flavor and creamiest texture, seeking out the ripest peak-season fruit, the best chocolate, the most flavorful, freshest nuts.

Gelato -- Italian ice cream -- is denser and less rich than most American ice cream, often with more intensity of flavor. Less air is incorporated into it, and it has a lower butterfat content than ice cream, largely because of a preference for milk over cream.

Bulgarini, who until 2006 worked as a consulting sommelier at Tre Venezie in Pasadena, first made gelato when he was a child in Rome, with his uncle. He and Foldi were determined,

when they came up with the idea of opening a gelateria, to learn to make gelato the old-fashioned way. "The artisan is dying out," Bulgarini says. "Both here and in Italy."

In search of excellence

It wasn't easy finding worthy teachers. "In Rome right now there are about eight gelaterias that make it from scratch," Bulgarini says. "Maybe 99% of gelato in Italy is industrial," adds Foldi, a Pasadena native who gave up her career as a litigator to make gelato. "It was killing her soul," says her husband. At last they found the gelato genius they were looking for in 82-year-old Guido Luca Cavieziel, a third-generation gelato maker, in retirement in the Sicilian town of Catania. In the two months he spent with Bulgarini and Foldi, he taught them the formulas he used to make superlative gelato.

The distinctive creaminess of gelato comes from ingredients combined in specific proportion to each other. "If you do the math, you don't have to add a bunch of junk," Bulgarini says. Just the freshest fruit, the best nuts, the purest milk (Bulgarini's comes from Broguiere's Dairy in Montebello).

They opened their shop, Bulgarini Gelato, in a pretty courtyard under the looming San Gabriel mountains, just 11 days ago. (Before he opened in Altadena, Bulgarini wandered with his gelato cart from venue to venue for a year, peddling from the Pacific Asia Museum to Caltech to Pasadena's Laemmle Playhouse 7 movie theater.) The gelateria has the charm of an airy farmhouse kitchen, with rustic painted furniture and shelves filled with jars of brightly colored amaretti and Italian chocolates. A beautiful copper Elektra espresso machine and a vintage 1960s granita maker the couple had shipped from Rome are more like architectural still lifes than machinery.

Bulgarini changes flavors daily, depending on what he and Foldi bring back from trips to local farms -- or what they pack in their suitcase during frequent trips to Italy. Raspberries from Santa Barbara go into an intensely flavored raspberry sorbetto. Marsala from Sicily sets the zabaglione gelato apart; Ojai cherimoyas from Santa Barbara Farmers Market make spectacular tropical gelato.

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