



Gelato Wave Hits the West Village

By Lynn Bechtold

Just in time for spring, the block of Bleeker Street between Sixth and Seventh Avenues has become a breeding ground for gelaterias, with three shops—Cones: Ice Cream Artisans, L'Arte del Gelato, and GROM—vying for customers as the weather gets warm.

Cones: Ice Cream Artisans, the long-standing gelateria on this block, opened in 1998. They must be "in," as evidenced by a photo of the lovely Heidi Klum and her mom licking away at their ice cream cones, not to mention numerous "best of" awards from the likes of Citysearch and Time Out New York, plus a 27 rating in Zagat's. Founded by two brothers from Buenos Aires, Raul and Oscar D'Aloisio, Cones makes everything fresh daily on the premises and uses all-natural ingredients. Originally a construction manager and an architect, the two brothers decided to try their hand at gelato-making after working on the opening of a new Häagen-Dazs store in Buenos Aires. They decided to introduce artisanal ice cream, in the gelato tradition, to New Yorkers. After training at a friend's gelateria in Buenos Aires, they opened their West Village store, and the rest is history. (By the way, that Häagen-Dazs store didn't do too well in Argentina.)

Cones's list of flavors includes the standard offerings, plus seasonal and creative ones like corn, maté, Champagne and yogurt. They use no pre-mixes: just milk, cream, sugar and the additional ingredients for a particular flavor. This mixture gets put in a pasteurizer, which warms the base to 180 degrees Fahrenheit and quickly cools it to 39 degrees. The batch then goes in the freezer for 12 minutes. For this artisanal process, Cones won a seal of approval from Slow Food (www.slowfood.com), a "non-profit, eco-gastronomic, member-supported organization that was founded in 1989 to



NEW GELATO ON THE BLOCK With the opening of GROM last month, the block of Bleeker Street between Sixth and Seventh Avenues boasts three gelato shops. (Photo by R. Umar Abbas)

counteract fast food and fast life." Oscar contends that "when you produce a product for one shop only, you produce a different product than if you have to supply 15 shops."

Commenting on the proximity of L'Arte del Gelato and GROM, both brothers felt that the competition will be positive. "It's good for people to have the chance to taste and compare, and it promotes gelato-style ice cream," they stated. Raul added, "The more they taste and see, the more they understand the time that goes into making the gelato and why it costs what it does."

Opening in Chelsea Market in 2005, L'Arte del Gelato opened their second store on Seventh Avenue South, just north of Bleeker, last summer. Founded by Francesco Realmuto, a Sicilian-born American, and his business partner Salvatore Potestio, L'Arte del Gelato also makes gelato in the "artigianale" style. Realmuto spent twelve years as a diamond cutter before deciding that he wanted a career change. Having grown up in Italy, where gelato is a huge part of everyday life, he felt that New York needed more gelato places. He went back to Italy to research gelato-making for his new venture. He insists on using only top-quality, fresh ingredients, such as pistachios from Bronte, Sicily and nocciola nuts from Langhe, a town in the northern Piedmont region of Italy. His product is made from organic whole milk and organic eggs, and fruit flavors use seasonal fresh fruit. Every day, batches of the gelato are made from scratch at the Chelsea Market location.

Realmuto went on to explain a little bit about gelato. While American-style ice cream has a butterfat content of at least 12 percent and is pumped with air, gelato only has a 7-9 percent butterfat content, and no additional air. Generally made from whole milk, as opposed to heavy cream, gelato thus has fewer calories than ice cream.

This first location proved so successful that Realmuto began searching for a second storefront last year. He and his partner chose the West Village because they feel that well-traveled Villagers can appreciate their gelato. In addition, the many tourists add to foot traffic. Plans to expand the West Village location will include an upstairs room where customers will be able to enjoy additional treats.

Commenting on the close proximity of his West Village location to Cones and GROM, Realmuto also said that competition is good, and added that he is proud of his gelato: "People will come to us, look at our gelato in the glass case and see our presentation: the innovative flavors, the freshness of the gelato. Our combination of traditional and more innovative flavors makes it fun."

GROM, the newbie on the block (it opened in mid-April), opened their first store outside of Italy last year on the Upper West Side. A New York Times article helped spread the word, and long lines soon formed.

GROM was founded in 2003 in Turin, Italy by two friends: Guido Martinetti, a winemaker, and Federico Grom, a businessman. Following the success of their first store, the two have since given up their other professions to concentrate fully on gelato. Nicolò de Rienzo and his business partner Stefano Ciravegna brought GROM to New York City and run the chain's operations here. GROM currently has 16 stores in Italy and New York.

GROM is different from other artisanal gelaterias in that it makes its gelato at a plant outside of Turin. According to the Times article (May 2, 2007), they started out as a single gelateria, making the gelato on-site. When their gelato maker was hurt in an accident and the owners had to make the gelato themselves, they realized that expansion would not be easy. They decided to produce their gelato in one central location before shipping it to the stores. De Rienzo says this "ensures quality control on the product by eliminating having many different people make the gelato in different cities."

As the chain uses only fresh, top-quality ingredients, they have a monthly flavor list that highlights seasonal products: lemons from Amalfi, and pistachios and hazelnuts from Bronte and Langhe (like L'Arte del Gelato). When the "best" ingredient is not from Italy, GROM looks elsewhere. For example, they get dark chocolate from Venezuela and vanilla beans from Madagascar. GROM, too, has been honored by Slow Food. Since the chain's expansion, they have purchased land in the Piedmont region and have begun to farm their own fruits. "I sleep easily at night because I know we make something healthy and of high quality for our customers. It is not about money, and we are not trying to be the Starbucks of gelato," says de Rienzo.

Once GROM's gelato is made into liquid batches, it is "flash-frozen" and then shipped to the stores. Then, the batches are thawed and whipped in a machine before being re-chilled to the proper temperature. For certain flavors, ingredients are added after the final mixing, such as chestnuts in "Marrons glacés," a March Flavor of the Month. According to de Rienzo, if he and his partner in New York have an idea for a flavor, they talk with the founders, who may agree to let them try it. Some flavors are more popular in the U.S. than in Italy.


Why did GROM choose the gelato-saturated Bleeker Street area for their second New York store? After living downtown, de Rienzo always knew that he wanted to open a store in the West Village. He particularly likes Bleeker and the area near Father Demo Square. He feels that the West Village is a real community—even while hosting many tourists—and hopes that this community will embrace his new establishment.

With the arrival of spring, it's always a good time to have a gelato, especially since we have three artisanal options to choose from. There are a few more vacant storefronts on the block, so who knows? Perhaps Ciao Bella and Il Laboratorio del Gelato of New York, or Capogiro of Philadelphia are on the way. ■

L'Arte del Gelato
75 Seventh Avenue South
(between Bleeker and
W. 4th Streets)
212.924.0803
www.lartedelgelato.com

Cones: Ice Cream Artisans
272 Bleeker Street
(between Sixth and Seventh Avenues)
212.414.1795

GROM
233 Bleeker Street (corner of
Carmine)
www.grom.it/eng



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