

The Sweet Science

*Desserts—
they're not just for dessert anymore.*



I know people who don't like desserts. I know them, but I'm not sure I trust them. From my perspective, refusing sweets is like abstaining from water. I just don't believe it's natural.

Needless to say, I suffer from a sweet tooth. It's the way I was raised. My dad assured me it was perfectly fine to have chocolate cake for breakfast and a sundae for dinner. Split a dessert with me and I'll make sure that you don't get your fair share. For a sweet freak like me, nothing could be better than all the new shops around town that sell gelato, sorbets and pastries.

Technically speaking, Gelato Pazzo on Oak Street isn't new. Vincent Pigna and his family opened the gelateria and sandwich shop inside the Riverwalk mall in 2004. After the storm, they moved the whole operation, including the sleek, brightly colored fixtures that were custom built in Italy, to Oak Street. Before the clientele was nearly all tourists, but now it's primarily locals.

The soft texture of the gelato here will be immediately familiar to anyone who has spent time in Europe. It's not scooped into cups but rather spread with a paddle. The flavors are also old world classics, like cherry, pineapple and chocolate. My favorite was the dolce latte, a caramel with a toasted edge.

According to Pigna, gelato has about 5 percent butterfat, while ice cream can be up to 15 percent. Less air is whipped into gelato, and it's stored at a warmer temperature than ice cream. That means that the flavor of gelato is cleaner and stronger than ice cream.

At La Divina Gelateria, owners Katrina and Carmelo Turillo cook up flavors that appeal to sophisticated palates, including blueberry basil, dark chocolate spiked with cayenne pepper or peach made with fresh fruit from the Crescent City Farmers Market. They use organic sugar, hormone-free milk and whenever possible local produce. "For us, this really would not have been possible 10 years

ago," says Carmelo. "We couldn't find good milk 10 years ago. It would be hard to get the fresh fruits."

Ten years ago, though, Carmelo wasn't thinking about selling gelato. He was working on a Ph.D. in business at Tulane. After a few years teaching M.B.A.s in Madrid, he decided to return to New Orleans. Carmelo made gelato as a hobby, so he enrolled in a gelato-making course in Spain. Now, the couple is back in their old neighborhood with a charming gelateria that's already a fixture in the area.

A few doors down, the mood is hipper at Sucre, where all the colors are carefully coordinated and the music tends towards techno. Local restaurateur and caterer Joel Dondis invested a million dollars in the project, which includes an A/C system that keeps the shop at a constant 40 percent relative humidity (something to remember when temperatures climb in August). More importantly, he convinced the nationally known pastry chef Tariq Hanna to leave Detroit.

Hanna always wanted to live in New Orleans. He was married here, and unbeknownst to him, Dondis' sister took the photos. The day before he happen to meet Dondis at a food expo last summer, Hanna got a fortune cookie with some take-out Chinese that said, "Take the next offer that comes along."

The real draw at Sucre is the artisanal chocolates and delicate pastries. Both rival anything else in town. Where else can you get a chocolate flavored with thyme? Others include white chocolate with brown butter and almonds, milk chocolate with malt and dark chocolate with lime.

The brightly colored pastries are each carefully sculpted. The Xoxolat Sucre is a little oval of the richest chocolate imaginable. The classic Napoleon has a bit of apricot jam that cuts through the layers

of cream and flaky pastry. And the Detroit Bumpy Cake, a Motor City favorite, is a fudgy chocolate cake with a rippled layer of vanilla cream on top. "I know New Orleans is heavily steeped in the historic aspect of its cuisine," says Hanna. "It's all good and well, as long as I get to bring a piece of Detroit here."

OTHER NEWS

Chef Jason LaMotte, a veteran of Restaurant August, has opened Ardoise, an "upscale American contemporary" restaurant in the former location of Sal & Sam's....Sunday brunch is back at Emeril's Delmonico....Camellia Grill is now open until midnight on the weekends....Celebrate Bastille Day on July 14 with a poodle parade at the downtown Crescent City Farmers Market....The House of Blues now serves a carry out menu at lunch....The hip Baru Bistro & Tapas offers Colombian flavors on Magazine Street....The ingenious automated dispensers at W.I.N.O., the Wine Institute of New Orleans, let cork dorks sample dozens of wines by the ounce or by the glass....Fire in the Lower Garden District and Nardo's Trattoria Uptown have both closed.

Ardoise: 4300 Veterans Blvd., 885-8585

Baru Bistro & Tapas: 3700 Magazine St., 895-2225

Camellia Grill: 626 S. Carrollton Ave., 309-2676

Crescent City Farmers Market: 700 Magazine St.

Emeril's Delmonico: 1300 St. Charles Ave., 525-4937

Gelato Pazzo Caffè: 8115 Oak St., 304-6908

House of Blues: 225 Decatur St., 310-4999

La Divina Gelateria: 3005 Magazine St., 342-2634

Sucre: 3025 Magazine St., 520-8311

W.I.N.O.: 610 Tchoupitoulas St., 324-8000

For more Eats including an interview with Jeff "Beachbum" Berry, king of the tiki drinks, go to OffBeat.com.