

Gelato

The ancient Romans combined fruit purées and honey with ice, but it was a Florentine who first gave us gelato. Although the question of who makes the best gelato in Italy remains a heated debate, there's no question that the frozen wonder is here to stay.

You say ice cream, I say *gelato*... Either way, there was no such thing in Europe until the sixteenth century. The Chinese had already developed the art of making iced desserts before the Christian Era, and they taught this art to the Arabs, who learned to make syrups chilled with snow and called them *sharbats* (hence *sorbet*, *sherbet*, and *sorbetto*). The Arabs passed this knowledge on to the Italians, especially in Sicily, where gelato is arguably still the best in all of Italy. Although the ancient Romans had been combining fruit purées with honey and snow to make cooling sweets, it was only in the sixteenth century that Italians learned how to cool without ice: the trick was combining water with salt-peter, and running it over containers filled with the food to be cooled. And so it was that sherbets became all the rage

in Italy. Sherbets made their way to France with Caterina de' Medici, who brought her team of cooks to France when she married Henry II, but it took a while for it to take hold in France. Bernardo Buontalenti, a Florentine architect, added milk and cream to sherbet bases in the latter half of the sixteenth century, and called his creation *dolci gelati*, meaning 'cold sweets.' It was a man named Francesco Procopio, originally from Palermo, who opened the first *gelateria* in Paris in 1670; less than a century later, the city already boasted 250 ice cream shops, although they were open for business only in the summertime, when cooling foods were especially sought out. Procopio's successor, Buisson, saw that ice cream could be a genuine gold mine, and started selling his ices throughout the year in 1749.

2000 GELATO BYTES

1929: Otello Cattabriga designs the first electric ice cream machine.

1900s: Stabilizers like gelatin, egg white, agar-agar, and carob are added to ice cream.

1900

Late 1800s: The first manual ice-cream makers are produced.

1800

1798: An Italian named Tortoni creates the first iced sponge cake.

1700s: A Venetian businessman, Sartelli, opens the first gelateria in London.

1700

1670: Francesco Procopio, born in Palermo, opens the first gelateria in Paris.

1600

1533: A different ice cream is prepared for each day of Caterina de' Medici's wedding celebration.

1500

GELATO VS. ICE CREAM

The Italian term gelato does not simply denote ice cream: it is actually a different dessert. According to Maria Batton, owner of Seattle's first authentic gelateria, Gelatiamo, the most important difference is the lower fat content of gelato. Gelato contains anywhere from 6% to 10% total fat content, whereas ice cream is required by North American law to have a minimum of 10% butterfat content; the total fat content is 17% to 28% for average ice cream, and 38% for super-premium ice cream. "The lower fat content of gelato is likely the result of its evolution from sherbet," explains Maria. The second difference between gelato and ice cream is what is called "overrun," or the amount of air inflated into the product during freezing. In ice cream, the overrun is 100%, meaning that from one gallon of mix you obtain two gallons of ice cream; in gelato, the overrun is 20% to 25%, which gives gelato a much creamier, more compact texture. "It's almost like eating a frozen custard," says Maria. Another important difference is the amount of sugar added: gelato contains less sugar than ice cream. "Sugar is a potent anti-freeze agent: ice cream, which contains more sugar, is conserved at an icy -15° F, while gelato is kept at 7° F," says Maria, who learned the art of gelato from the best Venetian gelatieri. Her shop in Seattle has been widely lauded as one of the best on the West Coast since it opened (Gelatiamo, 1400 Third Ave., Seattle, WA; [206] 467-9563).