



# ice

Now that summer is in full swing, it's no wonder that the sweet treat of choice is refreshingly cool ice cream. What is it about gelato that has South Africans screaming for more? **Katherine Graham** finds out



Katherine Graham

# The scoop on cream

Who would have thought that someone as despotic as the Emperor Nero, who allegedly played his fiddle while Rome burned and fed Christians to lions during gladiator matches, could have contributed to the popularity of something as heavenly as ice cream? It's said that the caesar liked nothing better than to eat a concoction of snow mixed with nectar, fruit pulp and honey.

Whether it was Nero or Marco Polo, fresh from his travels to China, who helped make ice cream famous, one thing is for sure – the Italians definitely do it best. Eating gelato, as it's known in that country, is something of a national pastime, with gelaterias on every street corner. 'I don't know why they do it better than us,' says Danny Diliberto, operating partner of Doppio Zero in Cape Town's Mandela Rhodes Place. 'The texture and flavour of their gelato is superior and we could definitely do better when it comes to presentation. Perhaps Italians are just more passionate about their ice cream!'

But is South Africa that far behind the Western world when it comes to the standard of our ice cream? Britta Sinn, owner of Sinnfull Ice Cream, doesn't think so. 'When I first started in 2002, there was very little in the way of good quality ice cream on offer in SA,' she concedes. But since then she believes a shift in the market has occurred. 'I think people are becoming more discerning,' says Sinn. 'They've been overseas and tried ice cream like Ben & Jerry's and Häagen-Dazs and so their tastebuds have been awakened. They know what they want and they want what's better for them. Their palates have become more sensitive.'

Charlotte Ngwenya, co-owner of Bombolino, concurs. 'I think people are beginning to understand the benefits of eating fine foods,' she says. 'There's an appreciation of quality and people are prepared to pay a premium for it.'

Bombolino (which means 'bellybutton' in Italian) started in 2005 after Roberto Vanoni and his wife Gloria came to SA on holiday and were disappointed with what was passed off as ice cream. They decided to start making real gelato, with Ngwenya joining the company two years later.

'You can tell the difference in our ice cream by its superior taste,' Ngwenya says. 'That's because of the type of ingredients we use. All our flavours are imported from Italy, while the milk and sugar are sourced locally. Most ice cream manufacturers make a huge quantity of ice cream and use this as a base. We use the classic or artisan method of making gelato – each flavour is made separately and no extra cream, sugar or air needs to be added to make the product stable.'

It's a credo which another Italian duo, Fabio Ficononi and Paola Gabrielli of Lecca il Gelato, subscribe to. They were also inspired to start a gelato business when they realised there was a gap in the higher end of the ice cream market in SA. The couple both studied traditional gelato artigianale (artisanal ice-cream making) in Bologna, so it's no wonder that their standards are so exacting. (Lecca il Gelato, incidentally, means 'lick the ice cream', which is quite appropriate seeing that 'lecca' is pronounced the same way as the Afrikaans word 'lekker'.)

## NO COLOURANTS, ADDITIVES OR PRESERVATIVES

'What makes our ice cream different is the fact that we only use fresh ingredients,' comments Ficononi. 'There are no colourants, additives or preservatives in our ice cream. We source the best products from around the world. For example, our pistachios are from Sicily, our hazelnuts are from Piemonte, the cocoa is from Brazil and the vanilla beans are from Tahiti.'



Lecca il Gelato



Britta Sinn, owner of Sinnfull Ice Cream.



Charlotte Ngwenya, co-owner of Bombolino.

What started off as one Lecca il Gelato store in the sleepy university town of Stellenbosch has grown to 23 branches in the Western Cape, with ambitious plans to expand in Johannesburg and Durban. And there are no shortage of flavours (76 in all) for ice cream aficionados to choose from – Zuppa Inglese (inspired by English trifle), tiramisu, cassata, panna cotta, capri with biscuits and bignolosa with beignets. Chocolate is often paired with alcohol, such as grappa, whiskey and limoncello.

Which flavours are the most popular? 'Hazelnut, pistachio, and extra dark chocolate, which is made from 75% cocoa butter and contains no milk,' says Ficononi. 'Customers also love our sorbets. The fruit is chosen according to its seasonal availability. When there are mangos, we make mango sorbet. When there are peaches, we make peach sorbet. Because we use fresh fruit, the products are full of vitamins and healthy.'

#### HEALTHY OPTIONS

Healthy eating is a trend which Ngwenya acknowledges too. 'Our sorbets are great for the weight conscious or lactose intolerant,' she says. And Bombolino's most popular flavours? 'Kids love chocolate, choc-mint and peanut butter, while adults prefer amarena cherry, pistachio and hazelnut.' Ngwenya's personal favourite is lemon sorbet.

Sinn does not hesitate when asked what their most popular line of ice cream is. 'It's called Addictions and contains English toffee, white chocolate and almonds,' she says. 'The crunchy toffee pieces in the ice cream are what keep people coming back for more. As the name says, it's addictive!'


Sinn, who studied to be a pastry chef and who makes all the raw ingredients such as toffee, cookies, honeycomb and Turkish delight herself, describes her ice cream as premium rather than gelato. 'The butter fat content of our ice cream is around 16.25%, higher than gelato, which is 12-14%,' she says.

It seems there's no getting away from the fact that this delightful indulgence is fattening. Comments Ficononi: 'If you consider that there are between 160 and 200 calories in a 100g tub of ice cream, roughly equivalent to a plate of pasta, you need to choose between ice cream and pasta for lunch. You can't have both, otherwise you'll get fat!'

#### NOT JUST A SUMMER FOOD

He's adamant that ice cream should not only be enjoyed in summer. But South Africans will need convincing: Ngwenya says that ice cream sales in winter are notoriously poor. 'Consumers need to be educated that ice cream is not a seasonal product,' she says. 'It can be enjoyed all year round.'

With so many new players in the industry, it's becoming harder for companies to defend their turf. 'It's a difficult trading environment because everyone is trying to get the edge,' comments Sinn. 'The competition makes it hard for me, but I'm not going to change my strategy. I'm not going to start a 'zero fat' line of ice cream because that's not what I'm trying to achieve. My ice cream is loaded with calories but that's okay. Everything in moderation – my philosophy is you shouldn't feel bad about eating it.'

And which sweet-toothed ice cream fan would disagree? 

#### THE 10 MOST POPULAR ICE CREAM FLAVOURS IN THE WORLD

1. Vanilla
2. Chocolate
3. Butter pecan
4. Strawberry
5. Neapolitan
6. Chocolate chip
7. French vanilla
8. Cookies and cream
9. Vanilla fudge ripple
10. Praline pecan

Source The International Ice Cream Association