

A taste of old Italy | Chester County Press

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Julianne and Vincenzo Tettamanti opened their European-style dessert cafe in 2014.

By John Chambless

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Take a bite of summer.

On the tip of a sample spoon, the pear gelato at Gemelli - Artisanal Gelato & Dessert Cafe in West Chester is the essence of a perfectly ripe pear, magically transformed into a texture somewhere between custard and ice cream. Next, the Tiramisu sample is the sweet, coffee-flavored essence of cake, only rendered creamy smooth.

Behind the gleaming display case, Vincenzo Tettamanti smiled. He's accustomed to converting people, one little scoop of cool gelato at a time.

For Vincenzo, the chance to bring real Italian gelato to a country that regards candy-colored fluff as the real thing is both a pleasure and a challenge. Since 2014, the gleaming Gemelli store has been making magic with flavors that use only the best ingredients, prepared in the traditional way.

But the story of the business begins with love.

Vincenzo grew up in Ferrara, Italy, and met his future wife, Julianne, when she was a student at Philadelphia University, studying abroad in Milan. He followed her back to the United States in 2009 and the couple lived in Philadelphia and then Media. They discovered West Chester's nightlife and restaurant scene through friends, and decided to relocate to the borough.

“West Chester has the same downtown feel. It reminds me of an Italian piazza,” Vincenzo said, adding that the Gemelli store was modeled after

a European cafe. “I’ve always cooked, since I was 13 or so. Being from an Italian family, we did make a lot of things at home,” he said. “Both my mom and my grandmother made lasagna, tortellini, those kinds of things, from scratch. I grew up with gelato. It’s part of the culture.”

Once moving to America, “I realized that, if I wanted to eat what I was used to, I had to make a lot of it myself,” he said, smiling. “So I went back to cooking, and creating a lot of things from scratch. That’s what pushed me. I wanted to do something with the skills that I was gaining on my own. I decided to focus on desserts. And you can make gelato with anything, really, as long as you know how the ingredients work together.”

Vincenzo’s meticulous training as a “gelato maestro” led him to a win at the prestigious Gelato World Tour competition in New York City’s James Beard Foundation last April. He came away with the People’s Choice winner, Goat Cheese and Fig Balsamic Reduction, which is a creamy goat cheese gelato folded with a handcrafted Italian balsamic from Modena and fig reduction. It’s certainly not the type of flavor Americans expect in a dessert.

Also out of the ordinary is the mushroom-flavored gelato that Vincenzo makes for the Kennett Square Mushroom Festival – a flavor that is sometimes a leap for people, but one that has become a favorite at the festival.

In Italy, Vincenzo said, “there was always gelato. But to do it correctly, you need to learn. It’s like going to pastry school or restaurant school. I still go back to Italy for training to keep up with whatever new products or techniques they’re using. There’s always research to be done.”

In the gleaming kitchen, patrons can watch through a large window as Vincenzo and his team whip up dazzling creations with an exacting eye for detail. “It’s like a restaurant, what we do here,” he said.

Gemelli will be offering gelato infused with Chaddsford Winery spiced wine. For the Milk & Cookies flavor, the kitchen first bakes chocolate chip cookies using locally sourced and organic ingredients, then crumbles them into the gelato. There’s an avocado flavor that has every bit of the airy appeal of the essential ingredient. There’s pistachio and hazlenut, and a vegan variety that uses almond milk as a base. Even the ubiquitous pumpkin spice flavor for their lattes comes from local pumpkins, pureed in the Gemelli kitchen and cooked down to a syrup – no powdered flavoring allowed.

The stuff that’s sometimes seen in the cooler at pizza restaurants that’s whipped up and neon-colored? It’s not real gelato, Vincenzo said. Gemelli makes their gelato in small batches, and nothing lasts longer than a couple of days. There are no preservatives or additives to maintain shelf life or to artificially pump up a flavor.



A refurbished food truck will spread the word about the shop.

Vincenzo leads classes at the shop for people who want to explore the

boundless world of gelato, and he tells students, “A brownie can be made from a box mix, or you can make it from scratch. It's the same with gelato. A lot of people open a gelato shop here in America because it sounds cool, you can charge more for it, but they don't know what they're doing. They use powders or artificial flavors.

“That's the easy way to do it, but I want to do it the hard way,” he said. “I'd be ashamed to give you something that's not as authentic as possible. We make everything from scratch. The base is made here. All our dairy, jams and most seasonal fruit we use are organic, and from Lancaster. We are as GMO-free as possible, we don't use corn syrup, and everything is definitely seasonal. We make the caramel, we grind our own nut butter. It's not just the ingredients, it's the process of how you put them together.”

That kind of small-batch, artisanal attention to the product makes all the difference. And it makes gelato ideal for those with allergies, since customers know exactly what ingredients are in every variety.

Vincenzo is aware that Rita's Water Ice dispenses something called gelato. But anyone who tries the Gemelli variety will immediately recognize the difference. “Even water ice here has nothing to do with real Italian water ice,” he said.

So, given all he knows, can Vincenzo enjoy American ice cream? “Well, I can eat *good* ice cream,” he said, laughing. “The problem is that it's so hard to find.”



The gelato is meticulously made with all natural ingredients.

After extensive renovations and a coat of paint that matches the cool green of the store's marquee and décor, the truck is an adorable billboard for the company's product. It looks like it has come straight from some stylish 1960s Italian film, and you cannot avoid looking at it. From inside the truck, the Gemelli magic can travel to fairs and food festivals, further spreading the word about good gelato, not whipped fluff. The truck is available for parties, events or corporate functions. The business is marking its third year in West Chester in October. To help spread the word about their product, the Tettamantis have purchased and refurbished a 1948 International Harvester step van. "It's a perfect marketing piece," Julianne said. "When we found it in Idaho, someone was living in it. There was a hole in the ceiling and there was a stove inside. We had it renovated in Arizona, put it on a car carrier, and shipped it here."

"In this area, nobody works like I do," Vincenzo said, offering another sample of creamy gelato goodness. "It's a natural, light taste, using only the ingredients that are necessary. We have a lot of Italian customers who always stop here. They're not going to find this anywhere else. I want to make sure as many people as possible can share this."

For more information, visit www.gemelligelato.com

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