



ONO GELATO COMPANY— WHERE ONO MEETS PONO

BY ROB PARSONS
PHOTOS ROB PARSONS

Maui, like each of the Hawaiian Islands, is full of surprises. In the midst of Paia town's unique, funky mixture of shops and businesses, visitors and longtime residents alike may be surprised to find a company serving authentic Italian gelato, with a local flair.

Nearly a century ago, Stefano Mosi's grandfather, a patisserie chef in Torino, Italy, made gelato by hand, a few flavors at a time. In the family tradition (though utilizing modern equipment) and with a nod to Maui's abundance of exotic fruits, Ono Gelato Company has created their frozen treats daily in small batches since their doors opened in late 2007.

The three owners—Mosi; his wife, Melissa; and friend Valerie—previously owned and operated a bakery business on another island, Vancouver Island in British Columbia. Their popular European-style bakery in downtown Victoria had five outlets and 100 employees. The demands of the business, including baker's hours that begin at 1 in the morning, prompted the three to take a vacation. Thus, in 2006, the idea of a Hawaiian gelato business was inspired by a visit to Ono Organic Farms in Hana, where they marveled at the variety of locally available tropical fruits.

They renovated a long-vacant storefront at Paia's main intersection, where Baldwin Avenue meets the Hana Highway. In fact, the crosswalk leads people right to their front door.

Despite an overall downturn in Hawai'i tourism, their specialty Italian ice cream business has met with great success. In fact, a second Ono Gelato is slated to open in Lahaina this summer.

"One of the best surprises," says Stefano, "has been how business has spread by word of mouth. The same response took years in Canada."

Customers quickly came to appreciate the quality ingredients and "limited edition" flavors. Ono Gelato offers up to 24 different kinds of gelato and sorbetto, the nondairy confection that showcases many of the exotic fruits.

"People come in and offer fruit from their backyards," Valerie says. Consequently, Ono Gelato features seasonal specials including cherimoya, starfruit, lychee, pink grapefruit, blood oranges, strawberry guava and more.

"People say it *really* tastes like the fruit," Stefano says.

They subscribe to the Farm to Fork ethics of producing and serving food that is grown locally, using organic ingredients whenever possible, to help support local agriculture and the economy. They feature 100 percent Hawaiian-grown coffees, prepared by Maui Oma Roasters, including premium Maui beans from Kaanapali, and aromatic varieties from Kaua'i and the Big Island.

Colorful jars of Jeff's Tropical Jams and Jellies, the creations of a chef trained at the Maui Culinary Academy, are also found here.

"We know that what makes us unique in Hawai'i should be a local selling point," Melissa notes. Thus, they continue to invent new ideas and flavors.

Chubby Monkey is one of two new vegan flavors, an option for those who are lactose intolerant. It combines cherimoya, apple, banana and chocolate, but is made with filtered water, not dairy or soy.

"It's so creamy, people can't believe it's not ice cream," says Melissa.

Sandy Beach combines peanut butter (freshly made), sea salt, graham crackers and coconut candy in an unlikely combination that is a huge hit.

Their gelato is made with milk from Organic Valley of California, as Hawaii doesn't have a certified source. "With the dairy now closed on Maui," says Stefano, "sometimes it seems as though it's going backwards here."

But the trio of owners is dedicated to doing the right thing, or what's *pono*, as the Hawaiians say. When they found that curbside recycling wasn't provided, as they were accustomed in British Columbia, they provided recycling containers in their shop for customers.

They use biodegradable packaging, with corn-based gelato cups made from potato starch. It costs them double the price of plastic, but they understand it's one of many steps in reducing their overall environmental impacts, towards obtaining a "green restaurant" certification.

Being community-minded has always been a focus. "If the community's not doing well," Valerie says, "we're not doing well." Recently, they supported a "Memoirs of a Geisha" themed Women Helping Women benefit by donating their services and a special green tea gelato.

Their business found an unexpected publicity boost a year ago when a Maui Electric transformer blew, causing a power outage throughout Paia Town. While battery-operated emergency lights allowed them to stay open, the freezer cases slowly began to warm up.

"We put big handmade signs out front, saying 75 percent off," said Melissa. "Soon we had a line out the door. No place else in town was open. We sold out everything within two to three hours!"

Stefano makes his gelato and sorbetto each morning, using an Italian-made Carpagiani batch freezer that pasteurizes the mixture before chilling. His gelato uses only 3–4 percent butterfat, unlike American ice creams that can use 10–18 percent. And, the gelato machinery whips almost no air into the final product, producing a dense and wonderfully flavorful product.

To keep the product fresh, he makes small batches of three gallons or less, though the Lahaina storefront will use a new machine with twice that capacity. The new Lahaina store, located a few steps from the Front Street seawall, will also feature an espresso bar and deli, with light breakfast, baked goods and sandwiches.

Ono Gelato's owners describe themselves as "Entrepreneurs whose goals for profits are tempered with equal enthusiasm for stewardship of artisanal gelato and green ethics." They understand that living in the Hawaiian Islands provides unique opportunities, and a responsibility, or *kuleana*, for sustainability.

It's no surprise that an upstart business with good recipes and community-minded initiatives will find popular support. Indeed, says Stefano, "Our gelato cake sales are picking up!"

But aren't some customers worried about the caloric content of his frozen treats? "Calories aren't everything," Stefano explains, "if you're eating good food and living a healthy lifestyle. My grandma lived to be 99."

With a little luck, Ono Gelato might also enjoy such longevity.

www.onogelatocompany.com



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- Peter Merriman, Merriman's Kapalua, 2009 Friend of Agriculture winner and *locavore** since 1988.

Look for Grown on Maui at farmers markets, grocery stores, and restaurants island wide. Go to www.maui-county-farm-bureau.org for information and a list of farmers markets.

**Locavore* – someone who eats food grown or produced locally.

