

Katherine Hamilton
Spring 2013

It was my first day of work at my dream internship at Gelateria Il Procopio, a small but renowned family-run gelateria on Via Pietrapiana. From behind one of the machines in the back laboratory emerged a grandfatherly man with an apron, bandana, and kitchen clogs. He introduced himself as Piero, and we shook hands. Piero was the gelato maker, and he would be my teacher. On the first day we made gelato di more — a pure fruit gelato made with fresh blackberries. The pulp, made of the tiniest blackberries I had ever seen, was a vibrant reddish purple that stained the white plastic bowl and Piero's apron. With quiet concentration, Piero measured out the sugar syrup and citric acid to the exact gram, mixed it with a monstrous immersion blender, and then poured it nonchalantly into the gelato maker. Within a few minutes, a bright lavender gelato poured out in a thick rope, which Piero quickly spread into the tray and formed into peaks with the spatula. When the gelato was done, Piero tossed it into a roaring, ultra-cold freezer. He rummaged through the kitchen drawers and pulled out two long-handled spoons. "Mangia," he commanded, handing me one of the spoons and pointing to the machine where bits of purple gelato remained stuck on the machine's propeller.

My lessons in gelato making were full of tastes and smells. Every ingredient, without exception, was introduced with its place of origin. Piero opened a gallon-sized tin with a golden, caramel-colored paste inside. "Senti il profumo?" he asked me, wafting the scent of hazelnuts toward my nose. I had never been a fan of hazelnuts before, but these were heavenly — a little sweet, toasty, and rich, but not overwhelming. "L'alta qualita," he said, pointing at the label that said "Papa dei Boschi" (Pope of the Woods) and laughed. Then his face became serious. "Queste sono di Piemonte," he said with the utmost respect. "Assagia," he said as he opened a can of puro pesto di pistacchio — a bright green paste consisting of only the top-quality Bronte pistachios from Sicily. "Vedi," Piero said, pointing to a bag of lemons from the Amalfi Coast.

Hoping to share a bit about my local food culture, I told Piero about the best flavor combinations from my favorite ice cream store at home, Bi-Rite Creamery in San Francisco: salted caramel ice cream, roasted banana ice cream, strawberry-balsamic soft serve. But the most famous is the Sam's Sundae, a chocolate ice cream with olive oil and sea salt. As we were tasting a batch of chocolate gelato, I pointed to a bottle of olive oil on the shelf. "Proviamo?" I grinned. "Oh, no!" Piero replied with a furrowed brow. "Olio con gelato, no!" But maybe there's something to be said for traditionalism, because without a doubt, Piero's gelato is the best I've ever tasted.

One day, as Piero was writing the orders for the next day's dairy delivery, I realized that I had no clue where the most essential ingredient came from — the milk. "Di dove viene il latte?" I asked. Piero grinned. "Sai dov'è Maremma?" he asked. I shook my head. And suddenly Piero became unstoppable. He told me all about Maremma, a southwestern region of Tuscany famous for a certain type of shaggy sheep dog. "Sai che cos'è 'cow-boy'?" he asked, and went on to explain how cowboys in Maremma were just like those in the old West as he whistled the theme from "The Good, the Bad, and the Ugly." And he told me about the friendly lucertole, or tiny lizards, that live there. Usually, lizards run away from people, he explained — but in Maremma, he found tiny lizards nibbling at the sand stuck to his bare feet. "Tu devi andare, devi andare," he repeated fondly.

Piero was always wise — telling me about different stories, foods, and places, and making everything look easy. One day he entrusted me with the task of making chocolate-hazelnut ice cream bars. He mixed the cream and chocolate together in a bowl, then gave me a spatula and instructed me to place the cream in the Popsicle molds with a spatula. Piero demonstrated first, completing a tray of six perfectly even bars in just a few strokes. He watched over my shoulder as I labored over a single

Coluccio Salutati Essay

bar. After about ten minutes, my bars were finished. I handed them to him with a nervous grin, hoping they would pass muster. He took one look and started over, then decorated the bars with an artistic, Jackson Pollock-like drizzle of dark chocolate. I wondered what was wrong with my bars; surely after they were drizzled with chocolate, no customer would be able to tell the difference. But a winning gelato not only has to pass muster, it has to be perfect without covering up any mistakes or taking any shortcuts. And that's what makes Piero a true artisan — because it's not really about customer satisfaction with the final product, but satisfaction with one's own work at every step along the way.