

Gelato Nation

Bringing a little Italy to Oregon.

BY SARA BRICKNER

Getting Lucky

Located right across the street from the 5th Street Market in downtown Eugene, **Café Lucky Noodle** is well-known locally for its classy atmosphere and delicious cuisine. But the first thing you notice when you walk in the door is a small ice cream case filled with gelato, a traditional Italian frozen dessert made with milk instead of cream.

But watch out, strict vegetarians: traditional Italian gelato gets its name from gelatina, or animal gelatin. And at Lucky Noodle, they're purists, making their homemade gelato Italian-style.

After all, it's the gelatin that gives gelato its name, as well as the velvety consistency. Its irresistible taste and texture have made it increasingly popular in America as a more delicious, less fattening alternative to ice cream. Joshua Keim, the owner of Café Lucky Noodle, said, "Gelato in Italy is a way of life."

The restaurant and bar are slightly separated from the gelato nook, where customers can sit at two small tables next to the window with their gelato and a cup of coffee. Café Lucky Noodle is open until midnight on weeknights, and 1 am Fridays and Saturdays. It's also all-ages, a bonus for the under-21 crowd. With cool gelato, it may become the hot late-night spot when the temperatures rise this summer.

What Lucky Noodle lacks in variety (there are only five flavors after all), it makes up in quality. When I visited, the featured flavors were chocolate, vanilla, coconut, chocolate chip banana and peach fruttosa. Fruttosa is the same as sorbetto, a dairy-free, but not gelatin-free, version of gelato. Unlike sorbet, which melts quickly and tastes more like fruit-flavored ice, fruttosa stays together better and retains the smooth texture sorbet lacks.

Both the fruttosa and the chocolate chip banana have fruit chunks in them, which adds to the flavor. However, the banana seemed to overpower the chocolate chips. I probably wouldn't order it, but banana lovers should take note. And though I'm not usually a big vanilla fan, the vanilla gelato tasted like a vanilla bean in ice cream form.

The best flavor was a tie between coconut and chocolate. The coconut flavor has bits of real coconut in it, and tastes like the real fruit minus the weird artificial aftertaste you sometimes get from store-bought ice cream brands. The chocolate flavor was a rich, cocoa-y goo that tasted as rich as double chocolate cake, but didn't leave me with the sick feeling that often accompanies consumption of overly rich foods.

Living the Sweet Life

My next stop was **Sweet Life**, on Monroe between 7th and 8th streets. Already renowned for their pastries and other baked goodies, the coffee shop, café and bakery-in-one also

features gelato imported by a Michigan company. In line with Sweet Life's philosophy of cooking in small batches, the gelato is made with all natural ingredients.

Part of Sweet Life's allure is the combination of baked goodies and their gelato. For five bucks, customers can order a brownie sundae with their choice of different brownies, gelato, whipped cream, fudge and a cherry on top. Or, gelato can be added to any pie or cake slice for only a dollar or two more. It's a popular feature, and Sweet Life employee Jodi Benham said they have a fair share of gelato lovin' regulars. "There's this guy who comes in every day at two o'clock and gets a scoop and a half," she said.

Like Café Lucky Noodle, Sweet Life rotates different flavors, and carries at least two sorbetto and two flavors of

ry, which was still a bit too sugary for my taste. I found that Sweet Life's sorbetto had a slightly more even texture than Lucky Noodle's, but I'd gladly visit either to get a gelato fix.

Up North

For Corvallis residents, **Francesco's**, located on 2nd Street in downtown Corvallis, offers a wide variety of gelato. A small café with wrought iron outdoor tables, old-world décor and a classy yet casual atmosphere, Francesco's looks like a bona fide Italian coffee shop. Francesco's imports all of their 26 gelato flavors from Italy and makes the gelato at the café with American milk.

The gelato is piled high, artfully spread into a swirling, creamy mound in the metal bins. The fruit flavors have garnishes and big chunks of fruit, while the chocolate flavors have chocolate drizzled over the top. They also offer several flavors of sorbetto, including peach with huge slices of peach mixed in.

It's presented so artfully, the gelato looks like colorful, fluffy clouds sitting on top of the containers. Standing there, I found myself fantasizing about cannonballing into it with my mouth open, kind of like Scrooge diving into a vault of edible cash.

When I finally tasted the stuff, it was smooth, creamy and light but tasted more like ice cream than the gelato at Café Lucky Noodle or Sweet Life. The fruit chunks were enticing, but my wariness of frozen fruit-and-cream combinations returned.

I had nothing to fear. Like the gelato at Sweet Life, Francesco's has mastered the art of making a good, creamy fruit gelato. The lemon gelato was sweet, yet tart, like the perfect glass of lemonade in frozen form. The orange was almost as good, though a tad sweeter. The other fruit flavors were also excellent, but my favorite was strawberry, another ice cream flavor I usually avoid.

The one flavor you can usually count is chocolate, which the chefs at Lucky Noodle do right with a rich, chocolately flavor that blows any chocolate ice cream I've had out of the water—AND it doesn't give me an "ugh, too much rich food" stomachache. Though visiting the Lucky Noodle first might have spoiled me, I found that Francesco's chocolate tasted too much like cream and not enough like chocolate. The Roman Holiday flavor, vanilla gelato with chocolate and caramel swirled in, was much better. Cinnamon and cappuccino were delightful if you've got a sweet tooth.

Chocolate fans and night owls, Café Lucky Noodle is your best bet. For Eugenians with a lot of time on their hands, Francesco's is worth the trip for their variety and the unbelievable lemon gelato. And Sweet Life is an all-around great bet for good gelato and an even better brownie sundae. **EW**



Coconut Bliss (see story, page 5) in addition to gelato. Their offerings are usually a combination of tried-and-true flavors and unlikely taste combinations. Some of the combinations sounded odd, like malt with malt specks and bourbon caramel gingersnap. The flavors I was excited to try, Italian pistachio and mixed berry, weren't as impressive as their more creatively named cousins.

Besides their vanilla, which I liked better than Café Lucky Noodle's, I found myself drawn to the weird-sounding combinations. I was especially impressed with the Nocciola, or smooth hazelnut, which perfectly captured the nutty hazelnut taste without losing any ice cream sweetness. And even though I normally hate malt balls, the malt with malt specks was one of my favorite flavors.

The sorbetto were also delicious. Because ice cream is so sweet, I tend to dislike fruit flavors because they don't resemble fruit. But the raspberry and passionfruit sorbetto contained chunks of fruit. The passionfruit was tangier than the raspber-

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