



## Anything but Vanilla

**I**t may not be located where you would expect to find a gourmet ice-cream parlor but in New York's lower East Side, on Orchard Street, across the street from the Lower East Side tenement museum exists a factory like no other, and not to be missed if ever in New York. Laboratorio del Gelato—or The Gelato Factory—scoops out some of the finest, freshest and most delicious classical and custom flavored gelato and sorbet around.

Don't expect to see test tubes or Bunsen burners in this laboratory. Instead expect to find fresh peaches, plums, nectarines, grapes, or herbs. You might even be lucky enough to get a glimpse of owner and gelato maker extraordinaire, Jon F. Snyder. This quiet, seemingly laid back, handsome gelato connoisseur starts preparing his frozen creations at four in the morning. His fruits are hand-picked at local New York outdoor markets, organic ingredients are sourced when possible and only the freshest ingredients are used. He enjoys and has fun with what he does and prides himself on a hands-on approach with careful attention to detail. What makes his gelato the best in New York? Why was it voted one of the City's best shops by *New York Magazine*? He proudly responds, "I don't think bigger is better anymore. It's about quality, not quantity. I use fresh fruit, herbs and ingredients. I make small batches to ensure the highest quality. I want to provide a superb product for my customers." That's why Mr. Snyder himself personally produces more than half of the gelato created in the shop. He adds, "It's not about creating a giant corporation that's selling thousands of gallons of gelato at the expense of quality. It's about creating smaller batches where you can really tell the difference in taste."

This all made sense to me as I looked around, seeing an employee donning a white lab coat, carefully slicing vanilla bean for the next batch of gelato or the freshly picked lavender plants that Jon explained to me were the leftovers that his mom had hand-picked and prepared. The fresh lavender would be ground down and made into a paste for another custom-flavored batch.

Ice cream making is not new to Mr. Snyder, the original creator and owner of Ciao Bella, which he successfully ran for five years in

the 1980's. Feeling burnt out, Mr. Snyder sold the now corporate giant gelato company for a fraction of what it is worth today, but that doesn't bother him at all. After selling Ciao Bella, Mr. Snyder decided, (to his mother's delight) it was time for college. He earned his undergraduate degree and MBA at Columbia University and started selling stocks on Wall Street.

After seven years of working on Wall Street, Jon realized he was making money but he wasn't happy. Something was missing. His life changed on Sept. 11, 2001 when his brother, who worked in The World Trade Center, got delayed before making it to work. Miraculously, he survived the disaster. This had a profound effect on Jon as he re-evaluated how he wanted to live his life. "I wanted to figure out what to do next, and it all just made sense. I wanted to bring something back to New York and I thought it would be fun to start another gelato company."

Disappointed but understanding of Ciao Bella's move to New Jersey in 1999, Jon thought New York needed its own ice cream company once again. Born and raised in New York, Jon was proud that he would be re-investing in Manhattan by opening up Laboratorio del Gelato in the Lower East Side of Manhattan. He also decided that if he did open another gelato store, he would go back to the basics that he originally established Ciao Bella with—a wholesale business where he personally works with chefs, caterers and restaurateurs, customizing favors for their menus. Today, Jon is called upon by chefs, restaurants and caterers world wide to create custom gelato flavors. Upon opening Laboratorio in 2002, his notoriety preceded him. "The interest in Laboratorio del Gelato, far exceeded my expectations," he admits.

Since opening his establishment, Jon's been interviewed by *Time*, *Newsweek*, and *Bon Appetit*, to mention a few. He's also been called upon by shows like "The Early Show" and "The Food Network" to work with. He likes to remain involved with the New York community. "I love New York and appreciate what it's given to me, so I strive to give back by donating my product and time to worthy charities such as the Elizabeth Glaser Pediatric AIDS Foundation, The Henry Street Settlement for the Homeless and the Central Park Boathouse, he says.

Jon's savory favors are now available at close to 200 restaurants and caterers worldwide. When asked about franchising his business, Jon says, "To me that's not what it's all about. I love watching the reaction of people as they try the favors, and I have fun working with chefs, creating new, innovative and refreshing favors." He admits he has been approached to open up small outlets in such popular places as the Museum of Modern Art and the Central Park Zoo, which might be profitable venues, but franchising the company and mass producing are just not for him.

It might even be fun to open a classy retail shop in New York, he admits. He and his brother toyed around with the idea of possibly opening up a shop in his brother's home town of Las Vegas, but right

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Snyder at work in Laboratorio del Gelato

now the original Laboratorio del Gelato in New York's Lower East Side suits him just fine. Regardless of where he may open, one thing is clear, Jon would never give up the hands-on, attention-to-detail approach that puts his product above the rest.

Luckily for us, Laboratorio del Gelato will soon change its 12 flavor rotation in its small Orchard Street shop to 20. Each flavor seems more irresistible than the next, but with close to 200 flavors, one could easily taste these sweet treats at least three times a week and still not sample all the flavors. The rotation of favors is generated by orders, which are placed by the specific restaurants the day before. Visit often and you may even be lucky enough to try some of the more exclusive favors like cherry blossom, which uses imported cherry blossoms from Japan, and mascarpone or Greek yogurt gelato, which is custom made exclusively for a local Greek restaurant. Although some of these may sound unusual, Jon assures me they're delicious.

The classic flavor lover has probably never tried the likes of vanilla, chocolate, or the intense flavor of dark chocolate which is made with Belgian chocolate and melts in your mouth as if it were a candy bar. Or, if you're more of a fruit lover, taste the mango gelato whose dense flavor is so strong that you'd swear it was pure mango off the tree. Hazelnut packs a punch with its intensely rich, nutty-filled flavor. More adventurous palates may want to experience the unique, yet delicious qualities of black sesame or rum raisin. If you are in the mood for a dairy free concoction, try the delicious sorbet, which is also available in yummy/piquant savory selections such as tangerine, green apple or strawberry, each fruit flavor fuller than the next. I personally enjoyed all the favors but the creamy texture and fantastic flavor of the rum raisin (packed with raisins that had been soaked in liquor) topped my list in gelato. Although I think I might be more of a sorbet kind of guy because the vivid colors and incredibly intense flavor of the green apple and strawberry sorbet was simply outrageous and I promised myself I'd be back for more soon.

Laboratorio del Gelato is located at 95 Orchard Street, between Broome and Delancey Streets in New York City.

Unable to visit the store? Not to fear. For \$60 (plus \$25 overnight shipping within the U.S.), Laboratorio del Gelato offers four pint gift packs with a T-shirt thrown in delivered directly to your door. Whether ordering online, requesting it from your favorite restaurant, or dropping in to the Lower East Side store, don't miss these one-of-a-kind sweet and savory delights. (EM)