



GELATO

ICE CREAMS & SORBETS

LINDA TUBBY

— PHOTOGRAPHY BY JEAN CAZALS —

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PAVILION



Dedicated to my sons Dan and Ben and my friend Ruth Prentice, with love

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THE SNOW AND ICE AGE

There is a lack of credibility in many of the stories surrounding the origins of Italian ices. Most are based on myths and legends but a number are plausibly linked to real historic events and provide a fascinating trail through a variety of countries. Like many inventions, it is often difficult to pinpoint one source or inventor, or even specific dates for that matter. Looking into the concept of the “discovery” of gelato, I found myself following the most tenuous of links and unearthed some fascinating stories.

One tale talks of the Venetian traveller and writer, Marco Polo, bringing the concept of frozen ices back to Italy from China. It is said, but hotly disputed, that he observed the Chinese using ice and fermented milk in a way that would later be developed in Italy during the 16th century. The Chinese knew about the usefulness of harvesting and storing snow and ice and had been freezing things for thousands of years. The widespread use of this natural cooler, teamed with exotically flavoured syrups, was also being enjoyed before the time of Marco Polo in India and Persia. Arab traders travelled with this knowledge, and settled the habit firmly with the Sicilians, who later perfected the art. The indication is that the first sorbetto was simply a loosely frozen, highly aromatic and sweet drink.

Long before Marco Polo, the Romans knew all about how to make full use of the seasonal harvest of snow and ice. Iced drinks – *bevande ghiacciate* – were part of everyday life in Rome. Slave runners carried huge blocks of icy snow down from the mountains not far from the city. Storing snow for use throughout the hot summers was a necessity. It was used to add a chill to the warm, heavy wine, making it more palatable. Snow also supplied a treat of pure icy slush, which could then be flavoured with fruit and honey syrups. Emperor Nero Claudius had an unquenchable liking for ice-cold wine. The drinking vessel used at the time was revolutionary – it had two chambers, the outer packed with snow and the inner chamber containing the drink itself.

Towards the end of the 16th century a number of people in Naples were

playing with the idea of freezing. One scientist in particular, Giambattista Della Porta, was forging ahead with his own experiments using cooling techniques that worked well enough to freeze diluted wine. The temperature of water drops when salt is added and dissolved into it – initially saltpetre was used. It was later found that normal salt crystals did the job perfectly well. This process of freezing was made all the more powerful by rotating a vessel filled with liquid buried in a snow and salt mixture called *salamoia*.



Classic Italy: a fountain in the Piazza Navona, Rome; an old-fashioned gelato maker; the historic Piazza della Cisterna, San Gimignano; a shrine in Rome, stuffed with prayers.

Many began to make use of this growing knowledge, including Bernardo Buontalenti – a multi-talented Florentine artist, designer of buildings, firework festivals, feasts for the Medici family and possibly the instigator of the post-Italian Renaissance gelato boom. He and his recipes were the talk of the Italian glitterati and he was requested to take charge of organizing luxurious banquets to impress the guests of the Medici who frequently visited from other countries. To this day, Italians pay homage to him by making a gelato named after him. A *Buontalenti* is an egg enriched custard gelato, sweetened with honey and flavoured with wine. It is said he was the first to add eggs to milk to produce a custard base.

Just outside Florence, Buontalenti built Pratolini – a summer residence for the Grand Duke – and installed snow pits in the grounds of the villa. These were covered with an insulating pyramid of thatch designed to store icy snow carried down from the mountains for a full year without melting away. (Snow when compacted into blocks lasts a very long time.) He also had pits built in the Boboli gardens and around the walls of Florence to store snow and ice for sale to the general public who by now, just like the nobility, wanted an on-hand supply during the scorching summer months.

Concessions giving permission to collect and store snow and ice were being sold to the highest bidder. It seemed in everyone's interests therefore to promote the new idea that was exciting the fashionable rich of the day. Iced follies became the big thing at grand banquets. Vast visual displays were increasingly over-the-top, with crushed ice and snow the basis for these magnificent arrangements. Showy pyramids and obelisks of seasonal fruits encased in ice, strewn with tangles of heavily scented orange blossoms, sweet jasmine and scented roses, bedecked the tables on these glamorous occasions.

Due to the huge popularity of ice and snow it made more economic sense to take ice from the local lakes and rivers, or to dig reservoirs close to the villas of the nobility and, when they filled with water and froze over in the coldest months, carve out the blocks of ice and put those into storage.