



A gelato for all reasons

Italian gelato guru Palmiro Bruschi is bringing his iced magic to Melbourne. By Tony Chiodo.

BEFORE I begin, let me make it clear that gelato is my one and only weakness. I'll admit that when I was asked to talk to Palmiro Bruschi, Italy's gelato supremo, I was as excited as a child at a candy store.

Bene, pronto, pronto and boy, quite a few prontos until we connected. Jetsetting around the globe on his world tour, stirring up vats of gelato for anyone who'll eat it, is il signor Bruschi, Italy's numero uno maker of *gelato artigianale* (artisan) — the real home-made variety.

With my Italian a bit rusty, our communication was "aided" by the obligatory hand gesturing (not very useful over the phone), peppered with the Italo-Australian dialect. But as we all know, gelato of the Italian variety is a universal language that extends much further than the vats that serenade in the streets at summertime. Speaking to Bruschi in Spain as he makes his way Down Under to present his magic at Bella Italia 2003, a celebration of Italy at Crown Casino, I found out how the gelato tradition has transformed over the years.

Palmiro's beginnings were humble in that he was born in a one gelato bar town, a bar that only opened in the summer and that offered only four flavours of excitement. He now owns the most famous gelateria in Sansepolcro, in that very same town in Tuscany, which is open all year round, seating up to 180 and offering up to 30 flavours a day. Gelateria Ghignoni is the laboratory, the place where some of the most innovative gelati creations are born. Yes, a *gelatoio* (ice-cream maker) is taken seriously

here. On the menu are the classic flavours: exotic *coppe* (coupes), *spume* (mousses), semi freddi (semi freddo ice-cream), torte (ice-cream cakes) and gelato cocktails, and something a little more offbeat are the frozen vegetable creations. It's these that tickled my curiosity.

"La gelateria e pieno di gastronomia," says Bruschi. Translated, that means ice-cream can be eaten three times a day (so he says) and offers much nutritional contentment. I ask him about low-fat, low-calorie gelato. The phone goes quiet and I think he's dropped off the line, then he laughs raucously and says, in his best Tuscan voice (and, I'm certain, gesturing with both hands as well): "Our culture is steeped in the tradition of eating and la gioia di ben essere (the joy of well-being). We eat for sheer pleasure and the ritual is molto naturale (extremely natural), 100 per cent organic. The taking of gelato is as joyous as taking mother's milk. Gelato is to be enjoyed full of cream, whole milk, *frutta fresca* (fresh fruit) and sweet with sugar."

Now this is where our conversation gets interesting. Gelato making is regional and seasonal, he says. Who would've guessed it? Does he mean you eat it in the summer at the beach? No! Gelato made in the north and south vary, he clarifies. Of course it would.

Bruschi explains that in Udine in Umbria, for example, where it snows, that gelato is a lot richer in flavour and oozing with a higher fat content. This would serve as supplementary insulation and warmth. Flavours are classical, such as *cioccolato* (chocolate), *nociola* (hazelnut), *torrone* (nougat) and *zabaglione*. Those down south, let's say Calabria, for instance, need a little of the chilled variety; something less fattening, more sweetening and with lots of fresh citrus fruits, says Bruschi. Like *la cucina*

regionale (regional cooking), *gelato regionale* follows the seasons and also features much of the local fruits, wines and spirits.

Still, I'm wondering about that vegetable gelato. Bruschi says he was inspired by old recipe books chronicling the Renaissance period, when flavoured ices were splashed throughout the banquets that lasted for hours. He now recreates these feasts, offering gelato either as a palate cleanser or, more radically, as an accompaniment. He reels off a few examples: *gelato di vino rosso con vitello in salsa* (red wine gelato with veal in a sauce); *cioccolato e tabacco gelato con arrosti di manzo* (chocolate and tobacco with roast beef); olive oil and basil gelato with crustaceans; and strawberry and black pepper gelato next to steamed fish. Just a few chic combinations.

I suppose we'll just have to wait for his arrival to try such marvellous, innovative dishes. Meantime, I make tracks to my local gelateria to sample some Acland street flavours, reminiscing about the time I once trekked to Bologna, the home of gelato, to pursue my childhood dream of becoming a signor Whippy.

To all those who love things Italian — even if it's only gelato — you can check out Palmiro Bruschi and other renowned Italian chefs preparing their signature dishes at Crown Casino restaurants from February 25 until March 9 as part of Bella Italia.

So I sign off from our chat and head to bed, counting the sleeps until I meet my maker — ice-cream maker, that is — dreaming in flavours and colours.

PALMIRO BRUSCHI WILL BE ONE OF FOUR VISITING ITALIAN CHEFS PREPARING A GALA DINNER AT CROWN PALLADIUM THIS FRIDAY AT 7PM. \$150 A HEAD. PHONE 9292 6942. HE WILL ALSO BE APPEARING AT OTHER EVENTS THROUGHOUT THE FESTIVAL, UNTIL MARCH 9.



Italy's numero uno gelato maker, Palmiro Bruschi.