

# The Washington Post



## Gelato, Reshaped

Noah Dan's signature creation starts with a wholesome country connection.

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KINZERS, Pa. — The first thing Noah Dan does when he arrives at Spring Wood Farm is pour himself a glass of milk. He ladles it, unpasteurized, straight from a holding tank, then drinks it in almost one gulp.

The 54-year-old founder of Pitango Gelato is something of a milk connoisseur. In 2006, the Potomac resident spent nearly three weeks on a tour that took him from southern Virginia to New Jersey in search of the freshest, liveliest-tasting milk, which he says is the essential foundation of good gelato. He found it in Lancaster County at the farm of Mennonites Roman and Lucy Stoltzfoos.

Dan takes the same earnest approach to every ingredient that goes into his dozens of flavors. The organic milk and cream come from grass-fed cows. The fruits for sorbets are local and organic when possible. And Dan shuns stabilizers or preservatives, which are common even in some premium ice creams.

"It's a dirty little secret that if something is cold enough and sweet enough, people will eat it," Dan said. "The idea was to make a gelato that was good enough for me."

Dan opened his first shop in Baltimore's Fells Point in 2007, a year after his East Coast milk tour. Last month, he opened locations in Logan Circle and Reston Town Center. In Baltimore, it took several

months to cultivate loyal patrons. But at the new branches, crowds have waited in lines out the door almost from the start for the 20 flavors available daily: cantaloupe, mojito and local-strawberry sorbets and Sicilian almond, pistachio and crema, a vanilla custard with a touch of lemon that is Dan's favorite. Each flavor is kept in a separate canister at 14 degrees, a temperature Italians call *freddo dolce* — "sweet cold" — so that the gelato is not too cold to scoop or taste.

So what? Authentic gelato remains tricky to find. Most producers use chemical additives. Sometimes it's too rich; gelato has less than 8 percent butterfat, compared with as much as 25 percent in premium ice cream. Even in Italy, many of the bright-colored mounds of raspberry and pistachio gelati are made from commercial mixes. (Think about it: Have you ever seen pistachios that green?)

"I'm just in love with [Pitango's] gelato," said restaurateur Paolo Sacco, who after one taste decided to offer it at Posto, his trattoria in Logan Circle. "Even in Italy, the gelato is not as good as it used to be. Pitango is going back to the basics with fresh ingredients."

Raised on a kibbutz by an Israeli father and an Italian mother, Dan spent summers in Trieste, in Italy's northeast corner. His athletic build and accent reflect his Israeli heritage, but when it comes to food, Dan says, he's "100 percent Italian."

Like Sacco, he had disappointing experiences with gelato when he returned to Italy to visit. After selling his software company in 2002, Dan started to experiment with making his own. "For me, the eye-opener was when we made crema from scratch. It tasted 10 times better than the stuff with additives."

Reproducing recipes commercially was a challenge, however. First, he went on the milk tour. After visiting dozens of farms, he found the Stoltzfooses through chef-restaurateur Nora Pouillon, who uses their milk and eggs at Nora, her organic restaurant. Dan wanted more than milk from their grass-fed dairy. He wanted to build a small production center on the 140-acre farm. By making the gelato bases on-site, he can add raw milk and cream and pasteurize them only once. That gives them a fresher, less-cooked flavor.

Next, Dan had to source ingredients to flavor the gelato. He wanted to use California nuts. But whether they were boiled or roasted, skin on or skinless, he could not replicate the flavors he remembered from his childhood. He ultimately chose to import hazelnut paste from Italy's Piedmont and pistachios from Sicily. Strawberries came from an Amish farmer and friend of the Stoltzfooses. Dan made grapefruit sorbet when a Mennonite farmer arrived with a truck of citrus from Florida. Dan calls the Mennonite community his "secret ingredient."

Summer is high season because of the fruit harvest and the demand for cold desserts. Since Pitango opened its two new shops, company production manager Hilda Stoltzfoos, 27, is making gelato 10 to 12 hours a day. On a recent day, Hilda and two of her siblings juiced hundreds of limes for a 110-gallon batch of mojito sorbet. They then crushed mint leaves — local spearmint, though Dan prefers sweeter Israeli mint when he can get it — into the juice with a hand mixer and added unrefined cane sugar and organic dextrose, a corn sugar that lends texture. The final step was flash-freezing the base and shipping it to Pitango stores to be poured into an Italian gelato machine.

"Hats off to Noah," Roman Stoltzfoos said. "Around here there's no skimping on ingredients. He's just as fussy as fussy."

Mojito is one of the few Pitango varieties with more than one flavor ingredient, an exception Dan permits because of his nostalgia for the nine years he lived on the Caribbean island of Curacao. Otherwise, he prefers pure flavors: tangerine, raspberry, green apple, hazelnut and *fior di latte*, with a delicate milk flavor.

It's a different strategy from the one used by local gelato pioneer Dolcezza, which opened in Washington in 2004. There, husband-and-wife founders Robb Duncan and Violeta Edelman offer the classics but enjoy discovering new combinations based on what's local and in season. Their gelato is made daily, and most of the 370 flavors Dolcezza has produced are available only briefly. On hand now at Dolcezza's two shops, in Georgetown and Bethesda, and at five farmers markets are strawberry tarragon, lime cilantro, lemon with opal basil.

"There's plenty of room in this market. I think it is good they're here, because it will raise awareness that most of the stuff that we get is just crap," Duncan said. "Showing the way things can be made artisanally and with good ingredients highlights the difference between what we do and industrial products."

The one complaint that both Pitango and Dolcezza have faced is about their prices. Pitango's gelati sell for between \$4.65 and \$6.50. Dolcezza's are priced from \$4.50 to \$6.60. (Other gelati, such as at Boccato Gelato in Clarendon, are less expensive but may contain stabilizers and emulsifiers.) "People complain about the prices, but that's what makes this possible," Dan said. "At this level, I don't have to worry that I can't afford that ideal ingredient."

Pitango makes about 60 varieties; 20 are available each day. The most popular are the chocolate noir, a rich but clean bittersweet sorbet; vanilla; stracciatella, a vanilla chocolate chip; and chocolate — not a surprise, Dan said. But he continues to experiment with new varieties. He has tried passion fruit and pawpaw and is on the hunt for a local peach for a summer sorbet. Someday, he'd like to offer pitango, a kind of wild cherry that is ubiquitous in Israel but difficult to get in the United States. On a recent trip to Spring Wood Farm, Dan brought some Galia melons, which were fragrant and sweet but, he concluded, not right for sorbet. "The sweet you can add," Dan said. "What you need is an intensity of flavor."

"You cannot cheat when you have just one or two ingredients," he said. "All the chemicals in the world cannot do what's already done perfectly by God."



Pitango owner Noah Dan on a visit to Spring Wood Farm.