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Word of mouth – Tilly's Gelato and More

An Italian dessert finds new home in Cedar Mill

By Cindy Hudson, Special to The Oregonian

CEDAR MILL — A year ago, Barbara and Paul Anctil didn't even know what gelato was. But on vacation last March in Australia, they noticed gelato stores packed with customers in Melbourne's Italian district. Once they tasted the creamy, frozen Italian dessert, they knew why it's so popular.

Back home, Paul Anctil researched gelato stores and found a distinct void in the Cedar Mill area where they lived. Thus the idea for Tilly's Gelato and More began to take shape.

"Neither of us was thinking of doing something else," says Barbara Anctil, who is 56. Both are retired, she from St. Pius X Catholic Church, and Paul, 71, from Anctil Heating and Cooling.

The couple was "looking forward to being together and having a cabin on Mount Hood," she said, "but we found we're both happier doing something, and doing it in our community."

The two agreed on the name, deciding Tilly's is a friendly-sounding play on their surname. But they needed to find a location and learn the gelato business.

They picked a vacant restaurant close to home in a small mall on Cornell Road.

While the Anctils were dreaming of ways to remodel the space that used to house The Hobbit, they also were finding out more about gelato.

Online research led them to PreGel, an Italian company with U.S. offices that trains people to make gelato. Barbara spent two days at a company workshop in San Francisco learning to mix bases with flavors in the right amounts to balance sugars and fats.

There, she met Leonardo Mazzero, PreGel's West Coast representative. A native of Venice, Mazzero has been around gelato makers since he was born; his grandfather and father also made gelato.

"To make gelato is not so easy as to make a sandwich," said Mazzero. "I spend time with my customers teaching them how to play with ingredients to reach the flavor they want. The most difficult part is the recipe. If you don't have a good recipe, you don't have good gelato."

Many people are surprised to find that gelato is lower in fat and calories than ice cream. That's because it is made with less cream and more milk. The creamy texture comes from a lack of an ingredient found in abundance in premium ice cream: air.

Business has been brisk at Tilly's since it opened in mid-December. A recent day found the shop full of customers buying gelato, despite the cold weather. Marge Muilenburg, a longtime Cedar Mill resident, stopped in for lunch with a friend and stayed for dessert.

"This is a real treat," said Muilenburg, as she enjoyed a scoop of coffee-flavored gelato. "I'm very glad to have this in the neighborhood."

Barbara makes classic Italian gelato flavors in the shop, including stracciatella (chocolate chip), gianduia (hazelnut chocolate), panna cotta (cream), tiramisu and pistacchio (pistachio). Some selections are seasonal: pumpkin, eggnog and peppermint. She also makes doppio zero, or double zero, which is both fat- and sugar-free.

Other items on the menu reflect the owners' commitment to local products whenever possible: Kobos Coffee and Stash Teas, soups by Harry's Fresh Foods, and an assortment of panini and breakfast pastries.

Barbara said she is looking forward to shopping for fresh fruit from farmers markets this summer to replace the frozen berries she uses now to make a local favorite: a blend of marionberries, raspberries and blueberries.

"I even planted 10 blueberry plants at home," she said, "in the hope that someday I can use my own berries in my gelato."