

# 10 years for San Gelato Café



Log photo by KERI HOLT

**MMMM:** San Gelato Café General Manager Toni Stokes, owner Simona Faroni and manager Heather Williams stand at the counter of the outlet at Silver Sands Factory Stores outlet mall.

## Hard work pays off for Simona and Guido

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Guido Tremolini comes up with a lot of ideas. Big, life-altering ideas. ‘Luckily a lot of them die out overnight,’ says his wife, Simona Faroni. Yet one didn’t. One idea grew into a business of a lifetime that’s now celebrating 10 years success, nationwide. Last year alone the business experienced 300 percent growth.

Guido came home with this idea more than 11 years ago when he and Simona were still living in their native Italy: “Let’s make Gelato in America,” he said. Simona’s first reaction was no. Guido didn’t give up. He had recently visited friends along the Emerald

Coast, which he described to Simona as a beautiful paradise filled with people who had never heard of Gelato, an Italian ice-cream-like treat that's more than 2,000 years old.

Guido, who was operating a restaurant in Italy with a relative at the time, was enticed by the great opportunity he saw available in America. In October 1995 he brought Simona to the Emerald Coast to see for herself. Hurricane Opal had just ripped through the area, leaving heavy destruction in its wake.

"What he described as a paradise was anything but," Simona said. "But we were young and crazy and decided to do it." Simona was 26; Guido was 29. They chose Fort Walton Beach as the base for their venture and went to work opening their first G.S. Gelato outlet.

Yet, there was one problem – neither one spoke English. And neither was prepared to face the rules, laws, regulations, and cultures attached to America.

"We didn't think it would be such a barrier and we really weren't concerned about it". Simona said.

Then another problem surfaced. To make authentic Italian Gelato, the couple imported the necessary machinery from Italy.

During the final inspection, the U.S. Department of Agriculture declined approval because it didn't meet code and recommended they dispose of the machines. It took the couple 14 months to speed-learn English and get the machinery up to code and approved by the Department of Agriculture and the Food and Drug Administration.

"It was one of the worst experiences of our lives" Simona said "but in life, a curse can be your best blessing."

They were the first company in FDA history to obtain an approval for Italian equipment designed exclusively for Gelato production, Simona said and when they finally open in Fort Walton Beach, the couple received their chance of introducing gelato to Americans.

"People didn't know what it was" Simona said, "They would take one look at it and think it was yogurt, pudding, mashed potatoes. But once they tasted it they loved it."

It's a healthy alternative to what Americans call ice cream Simona said. Gelato is naturally 93 percent fat free and is made of all natural ingredients.

Sorbet, which the couple also sells, is 100 percent Fat free and dairy free. It's good and good for you. Most people can't believe that food can taste delicious even when it contains no or very little fat," Simona said.

One of the couple's first customers in Fort Walton Beach was developer Keith Howard, creator of the Silver Sands Factory Stores outlet mall in South Walton.

"I was driving through Fort Walton Beach with my family and we saw this store with European style cases filled with Gelato," Howard said. "It looked like a store straight out of Italy that was dropped into Fort Walton. When we walked in, we actually felt like we were in Italy."

The presentation and quality of the product was far superior to anything he had seen in the region, Howard said. Therefore, he invited the couple to join his latest development. Silver Sands Factory Stores, which in 1996 was in Phase 2 of development.

"In all my years of travel – regionally and nationally – it was the best Gelato I had tasted and I knew they would be extremely successful at Silver Sands," Howard said. "If you ask for strawberry Gelato, you're getting fresh strawberries. If you ask for pistachio, you're getting fresh pistachios."

Guido and Simona jumped at the invitation and San Gelato Café at Silver Sands was born. “Mr. Howard took a very big leap of faith in us, and we’re forever grateful,” Simona said. “He’s a visionary too.”

Howard said, “We placed them in a high profile part of our center and have watched them grow since. Now centers across the country are soliciting them to open more stores.” Business has indeed escalated, Simona said. The couple has landed national contracts with the likes of Olive Garden and Universal Studios. Their product is also served in numerous casinos in Las Vegas and is known to be served occasionally in Washington D.C., in the House of Representatives and the Senate.

San Gelato Café at Silver Sands is celebrating its 10<sup>th</sup> anniversary this year and, in nor of that, recently underwent a complete overhaul. Everything from the bathroom marble to the dining area’s furniture came directly from Italy. The sop’s first franchise in Mary Esther and is another cafe. San Gelato at the Beach, at the Boardwalk on Okaloosa Island is also open. Simona and Guido plan to open another soon in Panama City Beach.

Today, G.S. Gelato offers 92 flavors and makes about four tons of Gelato and sorbet each day at its office/manufacturing facility in Fort Walton Beach. And Simona and Guido make two trips every year to Italy to purchase ingredients.

“Every day is a challenge but we love what we do and we love the people we work with.” Simona said.