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By DAVIDE BERRETTA

Paris

Judging from the menu descriptions, someone who has just wandered into a Grom store in Milan or Amorino in Shanghai might mistake it for a fancy wine bar or gourmet food shop. But ingredients like Pedro Ximenez wine, Tonda Gentile hazelnut from the Langhe, and Sfusato lemon from Amalfi are finding their way into ice-cream cones in these sleek, upscale and often understated shops. Around the world, these small companies are now marketing Italian gelato as a delicacy for connoisseurs willing to pay a premium for natural ingredients and in-store pampering.



An Amorino vetrina -- the counter where gelato is displayed

Their treats don't come cheap. Prices range from €3 to €8 for a cone topped by scoops of gianduja chocolate or wild-berry mascarpone cheese. After establishing footprints in their home countries of Italy and France, Gromart Srl and Amorino are expanding in Europe, the U.S. and Asia. Another company, Amore Gourmet Gelato, founded by two Indian entrepreneurs and an Italian gelato chef, is making a strong push into India, with eight stores in Mumbai and Hyderabad.

These companies are "thinking about the product and how to present it, thinking about

the way they arrange their shops, including who serves the gelato and how it is served," says Gino Cocchi, chief executive of Carpigiani, an international supplier of ice-cream machines. The strategy is similar to that used by high-end and cult fashion brands. Manufacturers of exclusive handbag, shoe or watch labels publicize the quality of their materials and spend millions decorating their boutiques and training sales staff in order to pamper high-spending consumers.

The Grom brand was founded in Turin in 2003 and will have revenue of some €6 million this year, according to founder Guido Martinetti. The company has 19 boutiques in northern Italy.

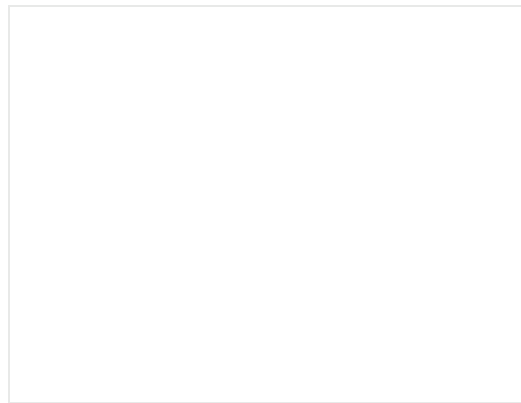
Grom, whose cones sell for between €2.50 and €3.50 in Milan (a bit higher than the average price for ice cream in the city), brands itself as, "Gelato how they used to make it." The chain emphasizes its use of all-natural ingredients. "Our gelato is among the cleanest in the world," says Mr. Martinetti.

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has bought its own organic fruit farm in Italy's northern Piedmont region in order to have full control over the ingredients of its sorbets. The brand's popular Crema di Grom, an egg cream with chocolate and cookie bits, uses organically raised eggs, chocolate from Ecuador and biscuits from Piedmont made with five varieties of corn.

For its first location outside Italy, in May 2007, Grom picked Manhattan's Upper West Side -- "an area with a good disposition towards spending on high-quality food products," says Mr



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an area with a good reputation towards spending on high-quality food products," says Mr. Martinetti, 33 years old, who worked in winemaking before turning to ice cream. Last April, Grom opened its second New York store in the West Village. Now, Grom is scouting locations in Tokyo, hoping to open a store there next year. A big test for Grom's business, however, is likely to come this summer when the company opens its first store in Paris.

It will face established competition just around the corner, where Amorino has been doing business for several years. Like Grom, Amorino was founded by two Italian friends who had no experience making gelato. The first Amorino store opened in 2002 on the smaller of the two islands that dot the Seine in the city's center, the Île Saint-Louis. There, Amorino goes head-to-head against one of the oldest names in Parisian desserts: sorbet-maker Berthillon. "We sort of did it on purpose. If we could make it there, we could make it anywhere," says Paolo Benassi, 42, a business partner of the store's founder, Cristiano Sereni.

Amorino puts more emphasis on in-store experience. Colored in a shade of pale brown and prominently displaying Amorino's logo, a cone-carrying Cupid, all Amorino stores look alike. The walls are decorated with bare stone and panels in solid walnut made by a carpenter in Reggio Emilia, the hometown of the company's two founders. Amorino has specific requirements for stores, from the way lighting should fall on the vetrina -- the refrigerated counter where gelato is displayed -- to the minimum distance between each of the elements in the store.

"The ice cream is what's important, but the store is nice and cute," says Andrea Sahyoun, a student from Brazil who stops at Amorino for Italian gelato every time she is in Paris. "I adore Amorino," she says.

According to the founders, on a busy summer day, an Amorino store will sell some 1,000 cups or cones, priced between €3 and €8, higher than most other ice-cream vendors in the city. In the winter, Amorino supplements its ice-cream sales with a wide selection of high-end Italian chocolates and candy. A box of Italian bonbons sells for €29.

Amorino operates the majority of its 33 stores under franchises and has so far stayed out of Italy, focusing instead on France. It also has one store in Barcelona and three in Shanghai. For the stores in Shanghai, the Reggio Emilia carpenter supervised Chinese workers to make the stores identical to the ones in Europe.

Mr. Sereni, 38, says he hopes to reach 100 Amorino stores in France within the next five years, while also expanding in neighboring countries like Germany.

Mr. Cocchi, whose Carpigiani business makes ice-cream machines in Italy, U.S. and China, says the Asian market is the next big frontier for gelato makers. The challenge, he says, is to lure consumers to a dessert that they aren't used to. "Unlike in Europe, where gelato was introduced around five centuries ago, frozen dessert is simply not yet part of the Asian tradition and way of eating," says Mr. Cocchi.

Amore Gourmet Gelato co-founder Nayyer Hussain, 46, says Amore makes and stores its ice cream with machines imported from Italy. The brand's ice-cream cones -- from Tiramisù to Guava sorbet -- sell for an average price of about a euro. That's more than double any local store's price, says Mr. Hussain. The bigger challenge, however, is spreading the word among Indian customers, who prefer complex flavors like star aniseed with cumin and ginger to simple, traditional Italian flavors like pistachio or plain egg cream.

"It's fair to say that most Indians don't know about it," says Mr. Hussain. To fix that, Amore is starting with the vetrina, which Mr. Hussain calls "a completely new way of presenting your product, with sculpted and decorated gelato and flavors that change every day."

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