



WENDY MAEDA/GLOBE STAFF

Cannoli shells at Modern Pastry in the North End.

ROLLING IN DOUGH

By Stephanie Steinberg

GLOBE CORRESPONDENT

Standing under glowing red and lime-green neon lights of the pastry shop sign, Adam Vigiano takes a large bite of a crisp, golden cannolo filled with sweet ricotta. The visitor from Manhattan and his three friends hold white pastry boxes to catch crumbs and any filling that might slide out as they devour the dessert on a Hanover Street curb.

Vigiano, 30, claims he's a "cannoli connoisseur" and pulls out his cellphone to prove it. He scrolls through pictures until he finds a photo of himself standing next to someone in a giant cannolo costume at an Italian festival in New York. But he

had never sampled one in the North End, so his friends brought him to Modern Pastry one Friday night last month.

The verdict?

"Boston has New York on cannoli," he says, finishing his last bite and pronouncing it "outstanding."

Down the street, Justin Reese is standing in a line that wraps around the door outside Mike's Pastry. Reese, 31, from Charlotte, N.C., and his two friends say they never waited in a line this long for any kind of dessert. "A friend from Boston said it would be a crime to leave Boston without trying Mike's Pastry," Reese says from his spot outside.

Over the last few decades the North

OLD-SCHOOL OR AMERICANIZED, CANNOLI REMAIN A FAVORITE TREAT

End has become the mecca of cannoli (the plural form does not have an 's'; cannolo is the singular). On any given weekend, especially in the warm months, tourists and locals flock to pastry shops like Modern, Mike's, and Maria's to order the flaky fried shells piped with ricotta or custard filling. Since Italian immigrants started making cannoli in bakeries 100 years ago, the dessert has found its place in the American pantheon of pastries.

"Cannoli is one of those products that is becoming very well known and enjoyed by all types of people — not just the little old Italian lady who lives on Hanover Street," says Valerie Ann Bono, vice president of sales and marketing at Golden Cannoli Shells Co., a manufacturer based in Somerville.

But cannoli in America do not look, or taste, like the cannoli stacked behind glass display cases in Palermo, Sicily, where the dessert originated. According to Arthur Schwartz, author of "The Southern Italian Table," the pastry has gone through the "immigrant experience." Like all ethnic food entering this country, Schwartz says, "it gets bigger, it gets fatter or richer, it gets distorted by the abundance of America."

The main difference lies in the filling. In Sicily, ricotta — the traditional filling — is made with sheep's milk, which gives the cheese a tangy taste and dense texture. In the United States, Italian bakers use cow's milk ricotta, creating a loose consistency that causes it to slide out of the shell. To hold the filling, bakers add confectioners' sugar or a starch, which makes the dessert "too sweet or too starchy," says Schwartz, who has a cooking school in Italy.

In Sicily, traditional fillings include pieces of chopped chocolate, slivers of almond, or candied fruits such as orange and lemon peel, pears, and cherries. Those extras are hardly found in America because customers don't want them.

John Picariello, 43, a great-nephew of Modern Pastry founder Michael Mazzeo, who runs the bakery with his mother and sister, tried selling cannoli with fruit, but it didn't go over well. "People would always complain that they didn't want citrus fruit in their cannoli so we stopped putting it in," he says. Now, the bakery only offers ricotta, vanilla, and chocolate custard, or whipped cream.

"As people's taste buds changed, we changed with them," says Picariello, a sixth-generation pastry chef from Southern Italy. "So when people say, 'Oh, that's

not the real McCoy? Well, we might not be able to sell the real McCoy."

Mike's Pastry, which declined to be interviewed, offers what cannoli experts consider unconventional filling flavors such as Oreo, hazelnut, and strawberry.

Bono, whose Golden Cannoli specializes in shells, but also produces ricotta, agrees that the "old-school, traditional cannoli" has become Americanized. She points to clients who pump shells with soft-serve ice cream. She's even heard about dog treat manufacturers who fill shells with dog food. The latest phenomenon is cannoli chips and dip, in which restaurants like Northeast chain Ninety Nine sell cannoli shell chips and ricotta cheese dip.

With all the new variations, Bono says her family-owned company faces the challenge of holding on to the essence of the ethnic dessert. Her father, Francesco

Bono, started making cannoli for his Arlington bakery in 1970 with a cousin and two employees. Local pastry shops placed orders for shells, and the business eventually grew into a manufacturing company that produces more than 100,000 shells a day for bakeries in the North End and supermarkets across the United States.

About 24 employees, mostly Italian, including some who don't speak English, oversee the process from the time flour, sugar, vanilla, and vinegar enter a mixer, to when the dough fries in lard, and the hot cannoli cool on a rack.

Amid clouds of flour and an aroma of frying dough, several women flank a conveyor belt, rapidly folding dough over short lengths of metal tubes. At the end of the assembly line, a man grabs freshly fried shells four at a time, and with one swift motion, flicks the tubes into a box. The echoing clinks can be heard outside



PHOTOS BY WENDY MAEDA/GLOBE STAFF

Top: At Golden Cannoli Shells Co., dough is wrapped around metal tubes. **Above:** At Modern Pastry, shells are filled and garnished.

the factory.

While other manufacturers use mostly machines, Bono says her factory — though it does have some equipment from Italy — takes pride in the fact that the shells are made by hand. "We do what bakeries want to do, but we do it for them," she says.

Picariello of Modern isn't embarrassed that he orders shells from Golden Cannoli. Modern made its own shells until about 15 years ago — when Picariello says his cannoli sales "went through the roof." The business grew so much that he didn't have the space to make hundreds of cannoli and 24 other handmade pastries. "I just couldn't produce enough shells to meet my demand," he says, adding that it was impossible to predict how many to make. "Some days you need 500 cannoli. Other days you need 1,500 cannoli."

As for the filling, the baker still makes his own from locally produced Purity Cheese ricotta, adding sugar and flavoring before blending the ingredients in a mixer.

"It's the right blend of sugar and ricotta that makes it work," says Purity Cheese owner Peter Cucchiara, whose father, a Sicilian immigrant also named Peter, founded the business in the North End in 1938. (The company moved to Quincy in 1998 because of the Big Dig.) Unlike factories that make processed ricotta ready to sell in hours, which Cucchiara says has the consistency of mayonnaise, Purity Cheese makes ricotta with 100 percent raw milk and freezes it overnight.

A system of tubes pumps milk into four steel kettles, where 186-degree heat causes the liquid to separate, so the whey sits at the bottom and curds rise to the top. The curds are scooped into a plastic container and then chilled.

Cucchiara, 68, says Purity Cheese is the only local company that still produces ricotta the way it's done in Italy. "I'm still using a Model T Ford," he says. "Everybody else is driving around in a Mercedes."

The cheesemaker slides open a heavy freezer door to reveal hunks of plain ricotta stacked in crates, freshly made the day before, ready for delivery to Mike's. Mike's and Modern are his biggest clients, and he produces about 1,600 pounds of ricotta a day for the two bakeries.

"They're the reason I come to work," Cucchiara says.

In Modern's kitchen, Picariello pipes shells with a pastry bag as several em-

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 ployees shout orders to him on a night when the line is out the front door. You need someone who can move, he says. “The object is speed.”

Cannoli experts say Modern Pastry sells cannoli the right way — by not pre-filling shells and displaying them in cases for hours, when shells get soggy and soft. “In Italian you say a cannoli needs to be croccante,” says Picariello. “It needs to be crisp when you bite into it.”

As Schwartz explains, you won’t find a pre-filled cannolo in Italy, nor will you find one 5 inches long. An inch and a half is more common. “In Italy it’s a consumable size,” says the author. “Here you have to divide it and split it with someone it’s so big.”

The size is more evidence the dessert has become “Americanized,” Bono says. “Places in the North End think bigger is better,” she adds. “They really want to impress people that walk in the door and have this really filled, big cannoli shell.”

But bigger doesn’t necessarily translate to better. Michele Scicolone, an Italian-American and author of “1,000 Ital-

ian Recipes,” laments the fact that bakeries have outsourced some of their ingredients for the dessert. “I think a better bakery would take the trouble to make their own fresh [cannoli],” says Scicolone. The best one she ever ate was in Sicily.

Picariello and some of his family members can’t judge cannoli for themselves. “My father is a diabetic, I’m lactose-free, and my sister is gluten-free, and look at what we do,” says Picariello, laughing at the irony of not being able to indulge in their own specialty.

Connoisseurs like Vigiano and all the tourists who flood the North End can savor the pastry for them.

Modern Pastry, 257 Hanover St., North End, Boston, 617-523-3783

Mike’s Pastry, 300 Hanover St., North End, Boston, 617-742-3050

Maria’s Pastry Shop, 46 Cross St., North End, Boston, 617-523-1196

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Cannoli with ricotta

Makes 12 small cannoli

You need at least 6 cannoli tubes and a pot in which you can deep-fat fry. You can roll the dough on a pasta machine or by hand. These cannoli are smaller than you typically get in Italian-American pastry shops.

FILLING

- 15 ounces whole or part-skim milk ricotta, drained, if necessary
- $\frac{3}{4}$ cup confectioners’ sugar
- $\frac{1}{2}$ teaspoon vanilla extract
- $\frac{1}{4}$ teaspoon ground cinnamon
- 1 ounce semisweet chocolate, chopped (optional)
- 1 tablespoon finely chopped candied orange peel (optional)

1. In a food processor, blend ricotta until creamy. Add confectioners’ sugar, vanilla, and cinnamon. Blend until smooth.
2. Transfer to a bowl. With a rubber spatula, fold in chocolate or candied fruit, if using. Cover and refrigerate.

SHELLS

- 1 $\frac{1}{4}$ cups flour
- 2 teaspoons granulated sugar
- $\frac{1}{2}$ teaspoon unsweetened cocoa powder
- $\frac{1}{4}$ teaspoon ground cinnamon
- $\frac{1}{4}$ teaspoon salt
- 4 $\frac{1}{2}$ teaspoons vegetable oil
- 1 $\frac{1}{2}$ teaspoons white wine vinegar
- $\frac{1}{3}$ cup white wine
- Extra flour (for sprinkling)
- Vegetable oil (for the tubes and deep-fat frying)
- 1 egg white, lightly beaten
- $\frac{1}{4}$ cup chopped unsalted shelled pistachios (for garnish)
- Confectioners’ sugar (for sprinkling)

1. In a food processor, combine the flour, granulated sugar, cocoa, cinnamon, and salt. Pulse to blend them. Pour in the oil, vinegar, and wine. Blend to make a soft dough. Turn the dough out onto a lightly floured counter and knead for 10 minutes or until smooth. Shape the dough into a ball. Cover with plastic wrap and let it rest at room temperature at least 1 hour.
2. Cut the dough into 4 pieces. Work with 1 piece and keep the remaining dough covered with plastic wrap. If using a pasta machine, start at the middle setting, run the dough through the rollers. Lightly dust the dough with flour as needed to keep it from sticking. Pass the dough through the machine repeatedly, until you reach the highest or second-highest setting. The dough should be about 4 inches wide and 12 inches long. It will be thin

- enough to see your hand through. Alternatively, roll the dough with a rolling pin, using a very small amount of flour. Cut the strip of dough into 4-inch squares.
3. Repeat with the remaining dough. If you do not have enough cannoli tubes for all of the dough, lay the pieces of dough on sheets of plastic wrap and keep them covered until you are ready to use them.
 4. Oil the outside of the cannoli tubes. Place a tube crosswise from corner to corner on top of one piece of dough. Fold the two remaining corners of the dough around the tube, being careful not to stretch or pull it. Dab a little egg white on the dough where the edges overlap. (Avoid getting egg white on the tube, or the pastry will stick to it.) Press to seal. Set aside.

5. In a deep-fat fryer or large deep saucepan, pour enough oil to reach a depth of 2 inches. If using an electric deep-fryer, follow the manufacturer’s directions. Heat the oil to 370 degrees on a deep-fat thermometer; a small piece of the dough will sizzle and brown in 1 minute. Have ready a tray lined with paper towels.

6. Use tongs to lower a few of the cannoli tubes into the hot oil. Do not crowd the pan. Fry the shells for 2 minutes or until golden, turning them so that they brown evenly. With the tongs, grasp a cannoli tube at one end. Very carefully remove a tube with the open sides straight up and down so that the oil flows back into the pan. Place the tube on the paper towels; repeat with the remaining tubes. While they are still hot, grasp the tubes with a potholder and pull the cannoli shells off the tubes with the tongs. Let the shells cool completely. Continue to make and fry shells using the remaining dough. If you are reusing the cannoli tubes, cool completely before wrapping them in the dough.

7. Fit a $\frac{1}{2}$ -inch plain round tip into a pastry bag or have on hand a heavy-duty plastic storage bag. Fill the bag with the ricotta cream. If using a plastic bag, cut about $\frac{1}{2}$ inch off one corner. Insert the tip into the cannoli shell and squeeze gently until the shell is half filled. Turn the shell and fill the other side. Sprinkle the ends with pistachios. Sprinkle with confectioners’ sugar. Serve within 3 hours.
- Karoline Boehm Goodnick. Adapted from “1,000 Italian Recipes.”*