

ICE CREAM SUBLIME

BY WENDE WILLIAMS MICCO

Ici—meaning “here” in French—is an apt name for Mary Canales’ small organic ice-cream shop. Opened last September in the Elmwood neighborhood of south Berkeley, Ici is all about *here*. Canales worked for nine years as a pastry chef at Chez Panisse, the epicenter of local, seasonal, organically grown food, and she has brought that sensibility with her.

A dozen ice creams and sorbets are made on-site in small batches every day, sharing the stage with a small selection of classic desserts and handmade candies.

Ici’s menu is based on inspirations of the seasonal garden, and Canales is committed to locating organic sources. The changing menus focus on ice creams and sorbets served simply in handmade cones, or fashioned into intricate, celebratory bombes.

“The ice cream we make is labor intensive and entirely from scratch,” she says. “It is made and eaten in one to two days. The eggs are from local farmers, the dairy is Straus or Clover Stornetta organic, and fruits are from farmers’ markets and local growers, many of whom I have known for years.” Canales enjoys working closely with growers and producers to obtain the best of everything, from heirloom fruits picked at perfection to varietal vanillas. Her day’s work springs from questions such as, “How is it possible to make this peach more perfect? What other flavors or texture will capture its essence?”

Canales’ pastry career developed quite unexpectedly after she took a job at Oakland’s Oliveto restaurant in 1990, while putting together a portfolio for art school. At the encouragement of Chef



Paul Bertolli, she went on to work in the kitchen and had a “that’s it” experience while making pastries. In 1996, she learned of a pastry chef opening at Chez Panisse. She tried out—making walnut crêpes with date ice cream and a blood orange caramel sauce—and was offered the job under Chef Lindsey Shere. Canales credits Shere as the single most important influence on her dessert making. “The way Lindsey describes flavor combinations and draws from the garden completely drew me in. She’s the one who introduced me to the art of foraging for great fruit and how to taste so carefully.” At Chez Panisse, Canales also fell in love with ice cream, making about 50 gallons every week. She says she never tires of ice cream, finding it the perfect vehicle for flavors.

In just nine months, Ici has grown to capacity and is planning an expansion of its kitchen to keep pace with demand. In addition to Canales, there are two sous chefs and a full-time pastry chef pursuing “unlimited ideas” with what’s in season, and drawing from the flavor combinations of classic desserts. The friendly shop staff serves scoops, cones, ice-cream sandwiches, bonbons and artful dessert bombes to a steady stream of smiling customers. There is often a line snaking out the front door, which only adds to the anticipation: What will it be? Hazelnut chocolate, peach, coffee-caramel swirl or honey-lavender ice cream? Raspberry, Meyer lemon, or coconut sorbet? A malted vanilla and chocolate ice-cream sandwich, or nectarine and brown sugar-pecan? Rest assured, some perfect version of chocolate and vanilla ice creams are on the menu daily, too.

“It’s a happy business. There’s something fun about going to the shop for ice cream—the experience. Ice cream is to eat now; it’s a simple pleasure, a simple indulgence. And eating handmade ice cream is a break from the modern rush,” muses Canales. We couldn’t agree more.

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Mary Canales and partner Mattea Soreng