

Let's Eat for \$7.70: JavaCat's gelato recalls summer in Italy

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For those eager to recreate the Italian coffeehouse experience, stopping in for "a little taste of Italy" generally means a nice shot of espresso or frothy cappuccino. But at JavaCat on Monona Drive, Italophiles can sample another Italian favorite: gelato.

JavaCat is the first coffeehouse in Madison to make and serve gelato on-site. Co-owners Shari Olson and Renee Raspiller trained with an Italian gelato master in Baltimore, Md., for a week before opening JavaCat in December 2005.

The hardest part, according to Olson, was the nature of the gelato business: "It is kind of a secret society. Nobody shares their recipes." So over the past several years, Raspiller has created the flavors through experimentation.

The two women make the gelato in a dairy plant set up in JavaCat's basement. They produce both cream-based and sorbet (water-based) gelato flavors, and have between 130 and 150 different flavors in their arsenal. Flavors change daily, and in the summer, 24 are offered at a time. During the winter, they offer 16 choices daily.

The most popular flavor is Cake Batter, followed by Coffee Crunch and Peanut Butter Crunch. JavaCat offers unique gelato such as Rose and Lavender in addition to traditional Italian flavors like Pistachio, Hazelnut, Amaretto and Crostata (a light, lemony-cake flavor and an Italian standard.)

For sipping, a signature item at JavaCat is its mocha. While typical mochas are made with only one syrup, JavaCat uses both dark and sweet chocolate syrups, creating a unique and rich flavor.

We tried a small dish of the Black & Boysenberry gelato for \$3.15 and a small mocha for \$3.20. With tax, the bill came to \$6.70.

JavaCat plans to expand into the vacant space next door in the near future, and hopes to add a stage, bookshelves for a free book exchange, a private room in the back for events and more seating. Bare wall space for local artists to display their work will also be offered as part of the expansion.

In an effort to become more eco-friendly, the coffeehouse recently switched from foam take-out containers to simple brown paper bags and now uses non-disposable cups whenever possible.

The kid-friendly atmosphere of JavaCat is apparent through its carefully decorated Disney cookies, a special kids' area and even a puppet show every Friday. With its comforting atmosphere of purple walls, cat-themed figurines and paintings, it offers a truly tight-knit community feel.

"We know people more than just their drink. It's not just a customer relationship, but very much a family relationship as well," said Olson.

JavaCat Coffee

javacatmadison.com

Address: 3918 Monona Drive

Phone: 223-5553

Hours: 5:30 a.m.-8 p.m Monday through Thursday; 5:30 a.m.-9 p.m. Friday; 7 a.m.-9 p.m Saturday; and 7 a.m.-7 p.m. Sunday