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New Twists on Running Family Store

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NEW YORK — Monia Solighetto had good news and bad news for her parents. Good news: She had changed her mind and now wanted to pull the family gelateria another generation forward. Bad news: She wanted to put things like salmon, onions and blue cheese into the gelato.

For her Italian parents, nearing retirement from the shop they built on the margins of Milan, it was like being hugged and kicked at the same time.

It happens on the plains of Punjab, where farmers' sons reap the courage one day to tell their fathers they will not farm. It happens in mechanic shops in Oregon and granaries in Kenya and garment factories in Argentina: family businesses lovingly built and yet loved too little by the next generation to endure. But sometimes there is a faint, meandering trail between the road of slavishly copying the past and the road of rejecting it. A way to honor parents and yet go in a new way, to absorb the wisdom of ages and yet think for oneself.

It was 2006, and Ms. Solighetto's parents, Marina and Luigi, were preparing to shut down the small Lombardy gelateria they had founded and run for more than two decades. State pensions awaited them, and years of pressuring their daughter to take over had failed.

"I was born in the store," Ms. Solighetto explained. She was happy with her position doing communications for Fossil, the American fashion brand. Her husband, Alessandro Trezza, enjoyed his work in finance.

That November, as they closed the store and arranged its affairs, something strange and ineffable came over Ms. Solighetto. She told her parents they needed to talk.

"We start again," she told them, to some shock.

When she said "start again," she meant it. This was not an annulment of the decision to shut down. Shut down they would. And then they would start again, on her terms — using, of course, many of the old recipes.

They closed the old store and opened a new one, with a new name, L'Albero dei

Gelati, not far away. Those changes foreshadowed a bigger one: a new, rather elastic definition of gelato.

She and Mr. Trezza began with cheese gelatos. They got used to “No, thank you,” with an emphasis on the “no,” when they offered free samples. But on they went: saffron and rice gelato; olive oil and rosemary; green bean and mint; salmon and sour cream; radish and chamomile; and black squid ink.

“You can make gelato into something modern without breaking the tradition,” Ms. Solighetto said.

Eventually, their gelato subversion won over skeptics in [Italy](#). But Ms. Solighetto felt drawn to make her renegade gelato in a place where people had no fixed idea about what gelato should be. “New York is the city where everything starts,” she said. And so this summer, they left their three Italian shops in the hands of her brother and her parents, and they built a gelateria in Brooklyn.

Ms. Solighetto was initially nervous about Americans. “They cannot understand real food” is the Italian vision she inherited. Friends warned that she would have to make peanut butter gelato. She feared people would want ketchup and mustard in her shop. But the country has surprised her, its eating habits far more refined in parts than a generation ago. And yet what she most values in the country is its openness. “In Italy, we don’t dream anymore,” she said. “They try to make you think that everything is impossible.”

Here, she says, it’s different. Here you make salmon gelato, and people unquestioningly buy it. In Italy, Ms. Solighetto said, “they don’t want to taste change.” But Americans, she added, savor the taste of the future.

She and Mr. Trezza, who are raising a 3-year-old son in New York, say they might never return to Lombardy. The only thing Ms. Solighetto could see bending her plans is if her son, when his turn comes, wants to make a ketchup-and-mustard gelato. He will be an American-bred boy, after all.

“Then I will move back to Italy,” Ms. Solighetto said with a smile.