



## Asia's coolest luxury trend? Gelato pop-ups

As brands from LVMH to Diptyque trade espresso counters for gelato carts, the artisanal frozen treat becomes luxury's newest vehicle for experiential marketing and social media content creation.

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Luxury brands have found their new experiential obsession: gelato. From Celine's Provençal courtyards in Shanghai to Diptyque's scent-inspired flavors in Seoul, maisons are ditching coffee counters for gelato carts to woo Asia's experience-hungry Gen Z consumers.

Long prized in Italy as a hand-crafted delicacy, gelato has quickly morphed into a Gen Z-favored symbol of health, taste, and status. Unlike traditional icecream, gelato is positioned as an artisanal, low-fat, high flavor treat — in sync with the lifestyle aspirations of a younger, wellness-conscious consumer base.

On platforms like Xiaohongshu (also known as RedNote), #Gelato has racked up over 600 million views, while on Douyin, short videos showcase teens and young professionals queuing for 59 RMB (\$8.50)-per-scoop creations, often featuring lavender, fig, or cactus pear, flavors lifted from fragrance brands and sun-drenched resorts.

### Now, luxury houses are catching on.

What began as a subtle extension of the luxury hospitality playbook (think Prada's Marchesi café or LVMH's ownership of Cova), has now become a full-fledged sensory marketing movement. Maisons from Celine to Diptyque have been swapping out espresso counters for gelato carts, drawing inspiration not from Paris runways, but from the Italian Riviera. Forget merely sipping a branded cappuccino. Today's shoppers want to "taste" Saint-Tropez and Xiaohongshu (China's equivalent of Instagram) themselves beneath branded umbrellas in urban faux-beach pop-ups inspired by Capri.

### Luxury brands bring riviera vibe to Asian metropolises #

Celine's recent pop-up in Shanghai's Zhangyuan embodied this new experiential playbook. From April 12 to May 11, the French house transformed a historic Shanghai alleyway into a Provençal courtyard, complete with olive and lemon trees, a bubbling fountain, and Mediterranean snack carts.

At its center stood the real draw: a summer café serving Triomphe-logo popsicles and gelato flavors like fig and lavender-honey. In true luxury fashion, the outdoor café was less about satisfying hunger and more about feeding content creators — images of pastel desserts nestled beside Celine leather goods flooded Xiaohongshu within hours of opening.

Last year, Diptyque's Hedonistic Summer activation also blended fragrance, food, and fantasy. In a pop-up designed as a coastal resort in Seoul, South Korea — with oversized pool floats, striped umbrellas, and lounge chairs — the French perfumer invited guests to sample five gelato flavors inspired by its most beloved scents, including vanilla, mint, orange blossom, and cactus pear.





Shoppers who purchase Diptyque's limited-edition ice cream could exchange their receipt for perfume samples — a clever inversion of the traditional product-sampling funnel. The campaign included cross-promotion via Diptyque's WeChat and Xiaohongshu channels, further embedding the brand into China's digital lifestyle economy.

This is more than a social stunt. Across Shanghai and beyond, luxury houses are importing dolce vita aesthetics wholesale. At L'Antico Gelato in Hong Kong's Central district, Miu Miu has launched a limited pineapple-flavored gelato to celebrate summer. Meanwhile, Marni teamed up with Shanghai bistro Gubigubi for a playful 520 campaign offering complimentary oat- and earl-grey-flavored gelato to customers who photograph their Marni Riviera bags on-site.

Elsewhere, Bottega Veneta is offering gelato in Wuhan's landmark Wushang Mall. Though modest in scale, these activations strategically insert luxury brands into consumers' daily lives, not via products, but through shareable experience.

### **Beyond China: Global strategy, local flavor #**

The strategy mirrors moves being made globally. As Flavio Cereda-Parini, investment director at GAM Investments and former Jefferies managing director, recently posted on LinkedIn: "When I was a sellside analyst, I used to refer to LVMH as the foremost MEDALS stock — Music, Entertainment, Digital, Arts, Lifestyle, Sports — representing the 'premiumization of everything.' Today we need to add F for food."

Indeed branded food pop-ups have emerged as the latest iteration of this strategy. From Dior's Parisian cafés to Gucci's Osteria, fashion houses have been experimenting with gastronomy as a brand extension. But the current wave of gelator pop-ups comprises a shift from static cafés to mobile, seasonal experiences.

For brands, this format offers a couple of strategic advantages. First, it lowers the barrier to brand engagement: a \$5.5 gelato is far more accessible than a \$5,000 handbag. Second, it offers a potent content engine, as customers document their "taste of luxury" across Xiaohongshu, WeChat, Weibo, and Douyin.

Yet, this democratization comes with risks, according to Cereda-Parini. "I remember well that one of the issues with the newly acquired Tiffany was that the entry point was just \$6 for a drinking glass, which LVMH hated," he says. "Today, the entry point for LV is a branded gelato at 4.5 euros (\$5.50). Go figure."

### **Not just food, but escapism #**

This summer's branding push isn't just about food — it's about the fantasy of escape.

More than ever, luxury houses are trying to conjure the illusion of Mediterranean holiday through curated aesthetics: sun loungers stamped with logos, umbrellas in branded hues, and stylized "beach club" settings transplanted into urban malls.

Diptyque's poolside installation, complete with oversized ice cream sculptures and lounge chairs, was less about fragrance and more about fantasy. Visitors posed beside inflatable props, wandered through "scent-to-flavor" tasting booths, and imagined themselves transported from downtown Shanghai to Saint Tropez.

At a time when international travel remains aspirational for many, these activations provide an emotional journey.

The gelato boom reflects a broader truth: Luxury is no longer just about the product. It's about cultural fluency, sensory activation, and emotional connection.

As brands continue to fold leisure into their playbooks, expect more food-based collaborations, pop ups, and seasonal campaigns to blur the line between indulgence and identity.

