



Are America's

LITTLE ITALYS

Making a Comeback?

By Marco R. della Cava

What is Little Italy? A concept, a place, a business enterprise, a memory?

Marco LiMandri pondered that question a decade back in deciding whether or not to help revitalize an area that had nurtured him, San Diego's Little Italy. Founded a century ago by Italians who had come to this sunny southwestern corner of the continental United States to find work in its thriving tuna industry, the tight warren of streets sandwiched between Balboa Park and San Diego Bay had fallen into disorder and disrepair after fishing collapsed and a highway cleaved the area in two.

San Diego photos courtesy of the Little Italy Association of San Diego



A 2010 street festival in San Diego's Little Italy



Ultimately, LiMandri's heartstrings seduced his business side. He launched into a mini-crusade to breathe life back into his old neighborhood, creating a self-governing business improvement district that has helped revitalize and rebrand his Little Italy as a safe, self-sufficient enclave that honors Italian American culture. And now he wants other cities and their Little Italys to follow suit.

"We were born out of the struggles of the people who toiled in these communities, and it's important to pay tribute," says LiMandri, who travels the country dispensing neighborhood restructuring advice that sometimes isn't as welcome as he'd like. But that doesn't deter him.

"What's at risk is losing an incredibly rich part of our history, so I keep at it," he says. "If we don't work to preserve Little Italys, they and other historically ethnic districts will simply become non-existent."

Or worse. They can stick around and promote the wrong message about Italian Americans, says LiMandri. He has a zero-tolerance policy for area business owners who put up posters of the mafia kingpins from "The Sopranos" or the inarticulate cast of "Jersey Shore."

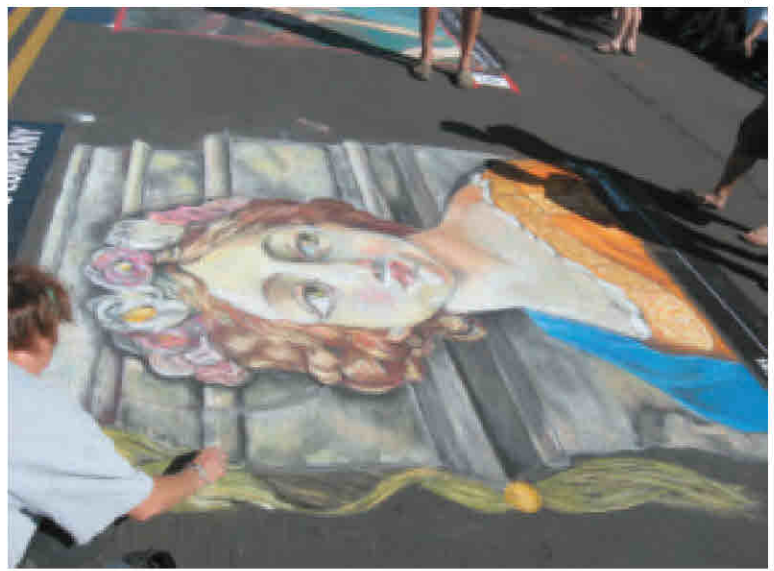
"You won't see that stuff here in San Diego," he says firmly. "Who you will learn about through plaques that we've put up are people like (Amadeo) Giannini, who founded Bank of America (in 1904 in San Francisco). The bar needs to be set higher."

Nearly six million Italians have emigrated to the United States since the 1800s, but the vast majority—some four million—arrived between 1880 and 1920. Initially settling on the eastern seaboard, these largely southern Italian immigrants eventually fanned out across the United States in search of opportunity.

Clustering together as every new immigrant population does, they formed small pockets of their Italian homelands in cities such as San Francisco, St. Louis, Philadelphia, Boston and New York. Little Italy was born. But whether these once bustling cultural hothouses can survive and indeed thrive as more than just a collection of restaurants and shops is a matter of debate. Some, like LiMandri, argue that it's a travesty to let Little Italys die; others contend that their changing nature is inevitable.



The Gran Fondo San Diego starting line in Little Italy last April. The Italian bike ride was brought to San Diego from Italy.



Sidewalk chalk painting in San Diego's Little Italy

"My father came to California in 1922 and my mother in 1945, and they called North Beach home," Dante Serafini says of San Francisco's fabled Little Italy, where he owns The Stinking Rose and nine other tourist-magnet eateries in and around the stomping grounds of his and Joe DiMaggio's youth.

"When I was a kid in the '50s, you'd hear all different kinds of dialects of Italian on the streets; it was beautiful," he says. "You know, back in the old country, maybe none of those people would be getting along. But in Little Italy, they did. Once we got here, we were all just Italians."

For many of these new immigrants, hard work soon bred success. And that success, ironically, led to the eventual demise of those enclaves that fed their dreams.

"As with any immigrant community, the measure of success in North Beach was could you move out of the neighborhood," says Serafini. "In the past, this was a place with Italian doctors and dentists and social centers. But people slowly moved to the suburbs, and everything started to fade away. That's why you often see the more vibrant ethnic communities being the ones where the residents are the newest immigrants, such as the Chinese and Latinos.

"It's natural," he insists. "The notion of preserving these ethnic spots around the country is tough. In many ways, they existed in a period of time that no longer is. After all, we Italians came here to become Americans."

Today, North Beach is a collection of Italian-themed restaurants and shops stretching along aptly-named Columbus Avenue, not far from Fisherman's Wharf. Serafini says North Beach doesn't have a cohesive business district like San Diego's, largely due to too much infighting. "I resigned from the local (North Beach business) association because everyone was just out to protect their own niche," he says, resignation in his voice.

But Serafini still loves his old neighborhood, which he strolls often as he checks on his many restaurants. Sometimes the lilting sound of his native Italian fills the air; he often runs into newly emigrated Italians—the young, sharp minds lured West by the likes of Apple and Intel—who seem to ▶

enjoy renting apartments in an area that nominally celebrates their culture. But he and his peers largely have retreated to the suburbs.

That's a shame, says Oscar D'Angelo, a lawyer and longtime community activist in Chicago who continues to fight for the revitalization of that city's longtime Italian port of entry, Taylor Street.

"Yes, many immigrants left Taylor Street and ran to the suburbs in search of nirvana, but I don't think they found it," says D'Angelo in his gruff yet grandfatherly growl. "I'm waiting for a renaissance of this street, and I think we can recapture the vitality it once had. Then maybe people will consider coming back."

Spurred by the demolition three years ago of neighboring housing projects that had long cast a menacing shadow over Taylor Street, D'Angelo and other like-minded civic leaders now are pushing a number of projects that include building a 60,000-square-foot Italian-themed food emporium (reminiscent of New York's Mario Batali-led hit, Eataly), commissioning large artworks celebrating Columbus, and convincing the city's Italian consulate to move its offices and cultural institute off posh Michigan Avenue.

"Right now, 22 percent of the residents here are Italian American, and it's really a hit with the yuppies, because we're near the University of Illinois and a large medical center," says D'Angelo. "Look, the Little Italy of old can never be. So if you're



Courtesy of Steven Restivo Event Services LLC.

A weekend festival fills the streets of San Francisco's Little Italy in North Beach

trying to recapture the past, you will fail. But if you want to reflect Italian American culture, that will be a success. What you're saying is, 'Come to Little Italy and share in the Italian way of life.'

That neatly sums up the mission of the Belmont Business Improvement District, better known as the entity that keeps New York's Arthur Avenue among the most vibrant Little Italys around. Perhaps not as well-known or frequented by tourists as southern Manhattan's Little Italy, this Bronx enclave boasts not only restaurants but also old-world shops that in many cases are run by the descendants of the original proprietors.

"I go to the same butcher my grandfather Rocco went to," says John Calvelli, a Belmont board member whose other hats include executive vice president of public affairs for the Wildlife Conservation Society and secretary of NIAF. "Arthur Avenue has been an Italian American community for more than 100 years, and while people did move away, many didn't move far."

In fact, the street's proximity to both Manhattan as well as Westchester County makes it a natural magnet for anyone looking to either restock their cupboards or reel in the years. "Our world today is fast-changing and fast-paced, but going to Arthur Avenue for a few hours allows you to step back and get in touch with your cultural roots and identity," says Calvelli. "You'll go and get a canoli or a ball of mozzarella, and you'll get it from people who care deeply about both. And, besides, having a sense of belonging is always important."

Belmont is fueled by annual dues to merchants, typically around \$600 a year. With its \$400,000 budget, Belmont helps cover everything from security to transportation to parking to streetscapes. "We want to brand ourselves as a destination for those who love Italian things," says Calvelli. "We like to say, 'You don't have to be Italian to be Italian.'"

But in promoting *la dolce vita*, the sweet life popularized in Italian film, food and culture, it's vital that the image of a thoroughly modern Italy be represented alongside more facile references, says Fabrizio Marcelli, consul general of the Italian Consulate in San Francisco.

"There should be organizations out there whose missions are to push the image of Italy

Celebrating Garibaldi Day at Chicago's Taylor Street Little Italy





Pie dough tossing demonstration during the annual Festa Italiana in Chicago's Little Italy



The Italian American Sports Hall of Fame is located in Chicago's historic Little Italy

forward," says Marcelli. "Italy is not 'spaghetti' and the 'mandolin.'"

He laments the "lack of soul" in those Little Italys that are little more than themed commercial avenues that often play off cultural stereotypes. He says the antidote is making sure newly emigrated Italians see their current homeland reflected in those neighborhoods, perhaps through the occasional film or art festival.

"There's no question that historically Little Italys were always viewed by Italians as wonderful nuclei within great American cities. But Italians did such a good job of integrating themselves into American life that the need for such things diminished," says Marcelli. "That said, it would be a shame for Italy to lose these American neighborhoods altogether."

In San Diego, LiMandri's biggest obstacle in creating his Little Italy-boosting business improvement district was human nature. "No one could really see how we could help ourselves, and in the meantime everything was slowly decaying," he says.

Once local business owners agreed to tax themselves, LiMandri quickly made sure they saw the results. Instead of relying on the city of San Diego's services, he spent money on making sure sidewalks were swept, 250 new trash cans were emptied and 800 trees were tended. Later, granite plaques noting Italian American historical contributions sprouted around Little Italy. Soon, noting the clean, family-friendly atmosphere, new retailers wanted in and additional condos were being built.

"The bottom line is that people are coming back to our Little Italy, and that's wonderful to see," says LiMandri, who hopes his old neighborhood's resurgence proves both a beacon and a harbinger of things to come. "Some of the older generation Italian Americans here say, 'Well, it's not the way it was.' No, I'm sure it's not. But there are many others who now love the way it is."

Marco R. della Cava lives in San Francisco and writes about popular culture for USA TODAY.

Historic photo of San Diego's original Little Italy

