



Don Oldenburg



John M. Viola



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Veronica Bruno



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Christmas, on Arthur Avenue

By John M. Viola



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In preparation for the Feast of Seven Fishes

Opposite page, clockwise from top left: David Greco and his father, Michele Greco, (the original “Mike”) at Mike’s Deli—The Original Arthur Avenue Italian Deli; No shortage of panettone on Arthur Avenue; Pat Boiano keeps chestnuts roasting behind the counter at Boiano Foods; De Lillo Pastry Shop.

I started cooking Christmas Eve dinner for my family when I was 17 years old. My grandfather, the central figure of all of my family traditions, had passed away the spring before and it made me really think about the longevity of traditions and how, in an instant, a family could lose the entire spirit and memory of the things its members have been doing for generations. ▶



On Arthur Avenue sidewalk, John M. Viola and David Greco sample fresh clams on the half shell at Cosenza's Clam Bar.



Arthur Avenue from inside Madonia Brothers Bakery



The "NYC Santa" visits Little Italy's Vincent Ciccarone Park

So, I sat my grandmother down and told her that I needed her to teach me everything I would need to know to prepare the Christmas Eve Feast, so that no matter who in the family would come and go in the future, we'd be able to keep the holidays alive as they had always been for us. I made a point to have my brothers and cousins work with me so that our generation of the family would be able to learn together and work with one another for decades to come.

Those first few years, we would return to our old neighborhood in Brooklyn and frantically shop in the patchwork of pockets that still maintained the *Italianità* that my family had grown up around. Fish here and pastries there, and a few-minutes car ride to get to the vegetable seller, and an even further trek to get the perfect loaves of bread. But our whole tradition changed when I became a freshman at Fordham University in the Bronx, New York.

It was Christmastime, after a few months of barely being able to dig my head out of the massive adjustment that freshman year always turns out to be. Desperate to pull myself away from my impending final exams, I took my first real walk deep down Arthur Avenue. I

knew the name, but in my childhood the Bronx meant Yankee Stadium and quick ride home. This was a whole new corner of the world and Arthur Avenue would quickly go from faint idea to incomparable reality.

If you don't know the Belmont neighborhood of the Bronx, you're probably missing one of, if not the, most authentic Little Italies left in the United States. Arthur Avenue is no great thoroughfare, but what it lacks in grandeur and architectural patrimony, it makes up for in the authentic sights, sounds, smells and emotions of a true Italian neighborhood.

That freshman year, in the 1930s-era Arthur Avenue retail market, I made friends with a flamboyant business owner by the name of David Greco. Though it wasn't that long ago, in those days the market still had scrap metal sellers and mungo men and other holdovers from its roots in the Great Depression. Deep in the back right corner, yet somehow at the heart of it all, was Mike's Deli.

Getting to know David made me feel at home away from home, and when I let him know that my brothers and I were the architects of my family's Annual Festa della Vigilia (Feast of the Seven Fishes), David recommended I

think about sourcing my ingredients right here on Arthur Avenue.

So, that December 23, my brothers and cousins and I started the morning with a 5:30 a.m. departure from my parents' house to make it up to the market in time for the openings of all the stores. You see, if you've never been to Arthur Avenue in the days before Christmas Eve, you might not realize how crowded and competitive the area can get, with shoppers desperately trying to get their hands on the freshest and most desirable ingredients. Italians fighting over ingredients for the biggest feast of the year gives new meaning to "Hunger Games."

For my family and me, it became about finding the places that would go on to become the staples of our experience for many, many years. Cosenza's Fish Market became our go-to for the now 13 fish courses we prepare for our ever-growing family (50-60 seats have become commonplace at our Christmas Eve Feast). Cosenza's is a madhouse before the holiday... after all, fish is the staple of the Italian American Christmas Eve! But, even today, we walk in and Mike, the same fish seller who greets us each year, grabs a bag and begins to list off the fish he knows we will need.



Nighttime holiday window shopping at Biancardi's Meats

Then, he talks us through some of the specialties.

We carefully calibrate amounts trying desperately to bring some semblance of portion control to my large Italian family. My brother runs his eyes over every shrimp, smelt, and *scungilli* that goes into the bag. We turn our attention to the shallow pool housing the fat white slabs of *baccalà* that have been soaking in a constant drip of fresh water for weeks now. Examining it with the delicacy of a bomb squad, each of us pokes, prods, and measures to make sure it's just the right size to make a heaping bowl of my grandfather's famous *baccalà* salad. We make my youngest cousin pick out the eel, or the *capitone*, which will be the centerpiece of our vigil meal. When we were younger, we all got a kick out of watching the fishmonger's macabre ritual of shocking the fish into silence before peeling and chopping it. But, in these days, out of respect for the main course, we all turn our backs while the dirty work is done.

As we make our way up the street, we stop for fresh ground coffee and special spices. We enter Madonia Brothers Bakery to get not just the large, crusty loaves that will occupy the table, but also the brick-like *friselle*

that will sit at the bottom of our hot and sweet *scungilli* sauces. We get our bread crumbs there, too — always hand-ground with the perfect balance of herbs and spices — and, in most cases, the proprietors offer us a cookie or two to tide us over while we wait.

DeLillo Pastry Shop is the required stop for the heaping plates of *struffoli* and cookies that are the only culinary schooling I haven't inherited from my grandmother. The one year I tried to make them myself, I could've made a killing in the lead weight business, so now it's back to DeLillo's for those crunchy little balls of honeyed air that are a staple of any Italian American Christmas table!

And then, with all of this safely packed in our car (if by some miracle we find a parking spot), we make our way into the Arthur Avenue Retail Market. For those of you who have been there, you know the awe that a true Italian American feels when opening those doors. For those of you who haven't, I can only say that if you love our people, our culture, and our history, you must make a pilgrimage to this Mecca of the Italian American experience.

Just cracking open the door and smelling that special smell lets you know that you are once again at the

heart of it all. Here's where I get rabbit that we prepare on Christmas morning and the *panettone* that will almost certainly go uneaten at the end of a long night. The *torrone* and *castagne* (roasted chestnuts), and all of the sweets that we will spread over a buckling table, are loaded into our bags as we approach our penultimate stop of the day at the *fruttivendolo* Boiano Foods.

Here, my two brothers and I come face to face with the Boiano brothers, another threesome of proud Italian Americans who make sure to save us the best *ficurine* and *nespole* (cactus pears and loquats to the American epicure)—rare treats that my grandfather waits for each year. They help us find the leafiest celery stalks needed for the *baccalà* salad and supply us with bulb after bulb of ivory-white *finocchio* (fennel) that will aid in the digestion of our impending feast.

Of course, more than just getting the best and rarest produce is the feeling of being amongst friends. This is not the big-chain grocery, this is someone who cares. We joke together, my brothers and I demure when they offer us freebies, and eventually when we are forced to accept their generosity, hug and thank one another for that small yearly ►



Giovanna Cerini at Cerini Coffee & Gifts



Cucidati (Sicilian fig-filled cookies) at Caffé & Gelato Artisanal Italian Gelateria



The Boiano brothers—Anthony (left), Joseph and Pasquale (both on right), with their mother, Elisa Boiano, and Christopher Boiano. Known for its fresh vegetables and fruit, Boiano Foods is in the Arthur Avenue Retail Market.

interaction that reminds us of the best of what it is to be Italian American.

Our last stop, in the back corner, is to see my friend, David. Even though it is the busiest day of the year for him and he's spinning around like a just released top, scooping up buckets of olives or chopping out chunks of cheese, he always makes time to stop, sit with my family and me, and offer us an espresso and a meal.

As we have grown closer over the years, that meal has grown from a little *focaccia* to a sometimes multi-course experience, and anyone who knows David knows that the only thing that is as large as his personality is his generosity.

Somehow, when you're in a crowded room, there's no better feeling than having the attention of the person that everyone in the room wants to talk to, and David has made Arthur Avenue our family's second "neighborhood." We catch up on how everyone is doing, load up on the final supplies needed, and sneak out the back door near Mike's Deli to return to my parents' home and begin the two days of work that will lead to the happiest night of the year.

I'll spare you the nostalgia and the emotion that comes with describing my favorite night. Needless to say, my family and I will spend the next 48 hours crafting the day's acquisitions into a

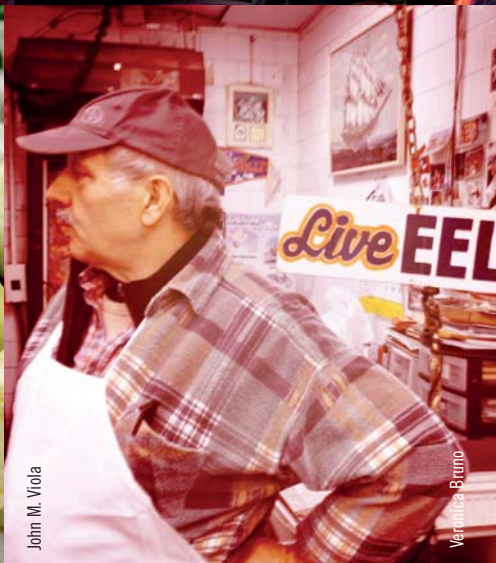
feast that I hope tastes just like it did when my grandfather was cooking it.

Over the years, we've brought in extended family and friends to join our tradition, and they almost all request a return invitation the next year. There's music and singing and dancing, and course after course of seafood and sweets. It's the one night of the year that no person has ever missed (and I hope will never miss).

It's the time that brings us together and reminds us that no matter where our family has gone, and while we have lost loved ones and gained new ones, it's this inclusive tradition and the maintenance of these simple acts that serves as the glue that keeps us all together.



Finocchio (fennel) for sale at Boiano's



Selling live eels at Cosenza's Fish Market

In my job at the National Italian American Foundation, I often hear people ask us what we can do to preserve America's Little Italies as our community continues to assimilate, and integrate, and move into the mainstream of America. There are those who would question whether it's our responsibility to preserve these neighborhoods beyond their natural shelf life, and many who believe we must let them go to the next group of hard-working new Americans as the Irish and Germans watched their neighborhoods become ours.

I'm no urban planner, but I can say this: had there been no Arthur Avenue, no David Greco, no market,

no neighborhood ... my family might have had a harder time preserving our traditions like we have, and we might not have the same sense of joy we do when December 23 rolls around each year.

When someone asks me why I fight to keep these Little Italies Italian, the answer is simple. I fight for them like the 16-year-old me fought to preserve grandpa's *baccalà* salad recipe. I do it because it's who we are, and if we lose our traditions, we will be losing something invaluable and ultimately irreplaceable. ▲

John M. Viola is the President and Chief Operating Officer of the National Italian American Foundation.

Holiday Gift Baskets from Mike's Deli



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David Greco recalls working behind the deli counter on Arthur Avenue as a 10 year old when orders for gift baskets from Frank Sinatra and other Italian American celebrities would come in.

"Frank's big thing was bread, we used to ship him bread and mozzarella," says the owner of Mike's Deli. "Most of it was going to Vegas."

Today, Mike's Deli is still shipping amazing gift baskets — especially this time of year as Christmas approaches. The original deli on Arthur Avenue is featuring dozens of different types and sizes of gift baskets, even custom-made baskets, everything from Italian Specialty baskets and Cheese Lovers Baskets to Truffle Baskets and Pasta Lovers Baskets. They range in price from \$25 to \$500.

Then there's the ViVi Bene Specialty Box for \$150. "This client, one of our NIAF customers, every Christmas calls and wants specialty items," says Greco. "He doesn't want frills. So this has one of our special sauces in it, a special pasta from Italy, our aged Provolone Don Michele.... The customer always wants some of our homemade products, so in here we have homemade dried Mozzarella, homemade Sopressata, homemade dried sausage...." The list goes on and on.

Greco says this particular customer "buys a few hundred of them, and we close and seal them, and send them out. And that's their Christmas gifts...."

The ViVi Bene Specialty Box usually is delivered by ground shipping because of its weight, but can be expedited as well, like the other baskets. "Christmas falls on Friday this year," says Greco, "so, up until that Wednesday, I guarantee you, we'll be doing a lot of overnight shipping."

For all of Mike's Deli's gift baskets, visit www.arthuravenue.com/gift-baskets.html. And, for the holiday season, David Greco is offering NIAF members and friends a 20 percent discount on ViVi Bene Specialty Boxes! (Ground shipping included!) See the Mike's Deli ad in this magazine.