



Gateway to San Diego's Little Italy during a festival. Paul Nestor / Little Italy Association of San Diego

**A** food mecca.  
 “The hottest place in San Diego County to eat, live and play.”

“One of the U.S.’s Top 10 neighborhoods for millennials.”

“A sophisticated and thriving urban community.”

Such is the overall tone of the local and national media coverage of San Diego’s Little Italy. The waterfront neighborhood, once the core of the city’s Italian community, is indeed a favorite destination for locals and tourists alike.

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That is in stark contrast to the deteriorated state of the area not too long ago; after being home, from the late 1800s to the early 1970s, to Italian immigrants, mostly fishermen employed in the then booming tuna fishing industry, San Diego’s Little Italy was gradually abandoned. The construction of the Interstate 5 freeway, which cut through the neighborhood displacing many families took its toll. So did the decline of the tuna fishing industry, which had attracted many Italians to San Diego, especially after the disastrous San Francisco’s earthquake of 1906.

In an attempt to save Little Italy, a group of the neighborhood’s business and property owners came together in 1996 to form the Little Italy Association of San Diego, a nonprofit district management corporation aimed at reviving the area. Today it is regarded as a model of urban redevelopment nationwide.

“We wanted to ensure that our Little Italy would not decline, as it was happening to the few Little Italys left in the country,” Marco Li Mandri,

chief executive administrator of the Association, told me during a tour of the neighborhood.

Today, San Diego’s Little Italy is a place where modern and traditional coexist: old-style restaurants and food shops stand next to the hippest eateries in town; and few remaining historic fishermen’s cottages survive, somewhat dwarfed by the recently constructed towering condos that sell for millions. Several new piazzas are



Little Italy Association of San Diego



# Renaissance of San Diego's Little Italy

By Silvia Donati

under construction, including Piazza della Famiglia, which will become Little Italy's main square.

"The value of Italy is in its piazzas, so we're taking this concept to San Diego's Little Italy," said Li Mandri. "People will be able to eat and sit at the piazza and watch people, like they do in Italy."

Common issues faced by Little Italys include how to survive without losing historical and cultural significance, and how to maintain the old neighborhood's vitality without stereotyping it. How best to meet such challenges is part of a new initiative of the National Italian American Foundation.

I discussed these issues with Pasquale Verdicchio, a professor of

in a building that was originally the home of a local Italian family, the Madalena. The building is historically significant because it would later become part of Our Lady of the Rosary Church, the Italian community's parish built thanks to Italian fishermen's funds. The annual procession of the Madonna del Lume, protector of the fishermen, still departs from the church. It's celebrated concurrently with the Sicilian town of Porticello, the ancestral home of many of the Sicilian fishermen who settled in San Diego (the other major ancestral town represented in San Diego's early Italian immigration is Riva Trigoso, Liguria).

San Diego's Little Italy occupies 48 blocks in downtown San Diego, near the waterfront. The main commercial thoroughfare is India Street, where a big Little Italy neighborhood sign welcomes visitors. A tiled mosaic on its left pillar depicts the tuna fishing industry, which was so important to the growth of the neighborhood; a portrayal of the fishermen's families is on the right pillar. Banners celebrating prominent Italians and Italian Americans hang on lampposts; granite plaques around the neighborhood indicate the contributions of local families. Every Saturday morning, the Mercato farmer's market is said to attract as many as 10,000 visitors. Italian and Italian-inspired restaurants, cafés and shops draw visitors to India Street and neighboring streets.

Meanwhile, San Diego's Little Italy is also attracting some immigrants from Italy as well. One of the popular cafés is Pappalecco, where I stopped for coffee. Skeptical as I am about drinking good espresso in America, I was pleasantly surprised by the macchiato I was served. Intrigued, I inquired about the people behind Pappalecco and learned that it is owned by two Tuscan-born brothers, Francesco and Lorenzo Bucci, who



Above: Tait's Meat Market and Grocery at India and Beech streets, Little Italy, c. 1930



Paul Nestor / Little Italy Association of San Diego



Paul Nestor / Little Italy Association of San Diego

Grape stomping at San Diego's Little Italy Festa

Italian and Comparative Literature at the University of California in San Diego, as we walked around San Diego's Little Italy. "Cultural presence must go hand in hand with economic and commercial redevelopment," he explained. "It's important to preserve the local memory by preserving signs of its history."

In the 1990s, with a grant from the California Council for Humanities, Verdicchio started documenting the history of San Diego's Little Italy by interviewing the neighborhood's older families and collecting old photographs. The result of his work is displayed inside the Italian Cultural Center of San Diego, a non-profit organization founded in 1981, located

are part of a recent wave of young Italian immigrants setting up businesses in San Diego's Little Italy. They opened the first Pappalecco location in Little Italy 10 years ago and, in 2017, they celebrated the opening of their fifth location in San Diego County.

"I strongly believe that there should be more Italy in Little Italy," Francesco said. "There is not another authentic Italian cafe besides Pappalecco."

Authenticity is, indeed, at the core of the brothers' mission, and Pappalecco is reminiscent of Italy, both in the quality of the products served (which include gelato, pizza and panini) ➤



Sidewalk in San Diego's Little Italy

Lowe Laguno

and in its amiable atmosphere. Guido Nistri and Valentina Di Pietro are also part of this recent wave of Italian immigration. The couple from northern Italy owns, with chef Fabrizio Cavallini from Emilia-Romagna, two popular restaurants on Fir Street—Bencotto, whose signature is the pasta exhibition tray served tableside, and Monello, which has introduced Milan-style *aperitivo* to the neighborhood. Initially, Valentina said, they did not want to open in Little Italy, thinking it was too cliché, but the commercial space that became available was perfect for the modern concept they had in mind for their restaurants. Thus came Bencotto in 2010, and Monello, next door, in 2014.

Valentina thinks the neighborhood still has an Italian feel. “You can walk around, you know everybody, you have stores at walking distance,” she said. “I think Americans like the Ital-

ian feeling of community, of a ‘small world,’ the closeness of everything, like in Italy. I personally enjoy the energy, the modern feeling, and the location: close to the water, yet with an urban look.”

The most recent addition to the Italian restaurant scene has been Civico 1845, which opened in June 2015 and is owned by two young brothers from Cosenza, Dario and Pietro Gallo. Civico 1845 features classic



Taste of Little Italy festival outside of Civico 1845 restaurant

Paul Nestor / Little Italy Association of San Diego

## Other Prominent Little Italys

By Silvia Donati

For many Italian immigrants to the United States a century, and more, ago, a city's Little Italy represented a safe place in an unfamiliar, often scary, new country. There, they could still hear Italian spoken, find food they knew, and feel part of a community.

As Italian immigrant families assimilated and became increasingly wealthy, they moved to the suburbs. At the same time, urban changes transformed the character of Little Italys. While many Italian Americans still feel a sense of attachment to their local Little Italy, these neighborhoods aren't what they used to be. Jerry Krase, professor emeritus of sociology at Brooklyn College, says too often they are “preserved as spectacles for the appreciation of tourists.”

While most Little Italys are struggling to find ways to sur-

vive, many of their proponents would resist Krase's “ethnic theme park” perspective. With that in mind, here's a roundup of the prominent Little Italys in the United States:

- **Mulberry Street, Manhattan, New York City** — Ninety-five percent of Italian immigrants arrived in New York City. They looked for a place to live close to where the ferry dropped them off, i.e. Mulberry Street. This was once one of the largest and most thriving Little Italys in America, spanning more than 50 blocks, home to almost 10,000 Italians. Today, with the expan-

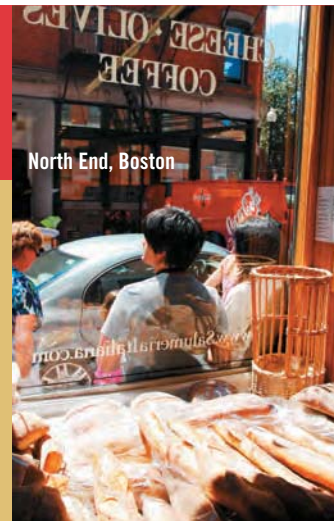


Arthur Avenue, The Bronx, New York City

sion of neighboring Chinatown and gentrification, only three blocks remain, along with a few good restaurants, festivals and an Italian American museum, to carry on the traditions and culinary experience.

- **Arthur Avenue, The Bronx, New York City** — Some say the real Little Italy of New York is in the Bronx, on Arthur Avenue. It has a small-town feel, its blocks lined with traditional restaurants, artisanal food shops, and the Arthur Avenue Retail Market that attract many loyal shoppers. “Many of the businesses here have been around for nearly 100 years or more and are still owned by descendants of their original founders,” says Alissa Tucker, assistant director of the Belmont Business Improvement District.

- **North End, Boston** — Despite going through tremendous gentrification, Boston's histor-



North End, Boston

ic North End has managed to retain an Italian feel. Even the newcomers have been respectful of the community they found, which has helped save it. “They want to live in an Italian neighborhood,” says Boston University professor James Pasto, an expert on the history of the North End. “They don't want to change it too much.” The recent opening of the first Italian American bookstore, I AM Books, is a testament to the liveliness of this Italian American neighborhood.





Vintage Italian fisherman's house in San Diego's Little Italy today

recipes with a modern twist and vegan versions of Italian classics (this is health-conscious California, after all).

Dario has lived in San Diego's Little Italy since he moved from southern Italy in 2014. "I love to be able to walk around the neighborhood, enjoy a small cup of espresso and chat in Italian before I go to work," he says. "Because sometimes, when you're so far away from home, this is what you don't want to lose."

It's a sentiment echoed by Francesco Bucci of Pappalecco. "I love walking around and then hiding away into a couple of restaurants that are full of Italians," he says. "They always ask me... 'Che bevi?' (What would you like to drink?). It makes me feel at home." ▲

*Silvia Donati is a freelance journalist. A native of Bologna, she divides her time between Italy and California, which she considers her second home. Silvia specializes in everything Italy-related and has a passion for Italian American topics.*

**For more information:**  
**Little Italy Association of San Diego:** [www.littleitalysd.com](http://www.littleitalysd.com)  
**Italian Cultural Center of San Diego:** <http://icc-sd.org/>  
**Pappalecco:** [www.pappalecco.com](http://www.pappalecco.com)  
**Bencotto & Monello:** [www.lovebencotto.com](http://www.lovebencotto.com)  
**Civico 1845:** [www.civico1845.com](http://www.civico1845.com)



Chef Lorenzo Bucci of Pappalecco

• **South Philly, Philadelphia** — By 1900, South Philly had the second-largest Italian American community. While other ethnic communities have now settled in the area, the neighborhood has maintained several traditional shops and restaurants, some run by third-, fourth-, and fifth-generation proprietors. The Italian Market occupies about 10 blocks on Ninth Street and is one of the oldest and largest open-air markets in America—though today, Italian booths and shops stand side-by-side with those of other ethnicities. The National Italian Museum of America is in the works.

• **Taylor Street, Chicago** — The large Italian population that settled around Taylor Street in Chicago's Near West Side in the 19th and early 20th centuries began declining in the 1950s with construction of the University of Illinois campus, and then the Eisenhower Expressway, and finally gentrification. Signs of the

neighborhood's Italian past can still be found in its many Italian restaurants, the National Italian American Sports Hall of Fame, Piazza DiMaggio, and our Lady of Pompeii Church.

• **Federal Hill, Providence, R.I.** — Italians started moving heavily into the neighborhood, shared with the Irish, in the early 20th century. While it is more diverse today, "the Hill," and Atwells Avenue in particular, are still the center of the city's Italian American community. The annual Columbus Day Festival is recognized as one of the best nationwide. De Pasquale Square is reminiscent of an Italian piazza, and several of its traditional restaurants and shops are still family-owned.

• **The Hill, St. Louis** — Italians, mainly from northern Italy and Sicily, settled in the area starting in the late 19th century, attracted by jobs in nearby plants. "I do feel the Hill has lost some of its Italian feel because I rarely hear people



San Francisco

speaking Italian on a daily basis anymore," says LynnMarie Alexander, director of the Hill Neighborhood Center. The cohesive neighborhood is home to many locally renowned Italian American eateries, grocery stores, salons, and two bocce gardens. It hosts several Italian-inspired festivals.

• **North Beach, San Francisco** — Much like other Little Italys, San Francisco's North Beach saw a decline of its Italian population after the 1950s. Today, the most obvious sign of its Italian heritage is the number of Italian restaurants and cafés. Saints Peter and Paul Church is still the beloved home church of

San Francisco's Italian-American community. Libreria Pino, a bookstore specializing in Italian books, music and film, recently opened; and the Museo Italo Americano, with its exhibitions and Italian language classes, is nearby in the Marina.

• **Baltimore, Little Italy** — While suffering similar problems as other Little Italys, Baltimore's Little Italy has benefited from the growing, bustling, touristy development of the city's popular Inner Harbor, an easy walk directly to its west. This quaint neighborhood is lined with well-kept 19th-century row houses and boasts a family-run Italian restaurant on nearly every corner, plus charming cafes and bakeries. A tight-knit Italian community, it features bocce courts, open-air cinema in the summer, the Star-Spangled-Banner Flag House, Italian festivals, a Civil War museum, and events at Saint Leo the Great Roman Catholic Church. It's even accessible by water taxi!