

Mike's Deli: Animating the Bronx's "Big Italy"

Tommaso Cartia (October 11, 2016)



Fresh off the G train to the Bronx - you have just landed in Italy. Given that a "Little Italy" already exists in N.Y.C. the Bronx, and in particular the Arthur Avenue area, should really deserve to be appointed the city's "Big Italy." The Arthur Avenue Retail Market offers some of the best and most authentic Italian food products in town. The very heart of this retail realm is Davids Greco's "Mike's Deli," a place permeated with history, folklore and a religious commitment to quality.

It is by listening to the passion with which David and his father Michele narrate the story of their family business and witnessing the sparkle in their eyes when they present you their products that you remember what the term genuine means. You close your eyes and you feel like somebody is reading an adventure book to you.



1947 - Fresh off the Sobieski ship

"I am from the Cosenza province in Calabria, and I've been living in the Bronx for 68 years," Michele Greco begins. "I came here in 1947, right after the war, with my twin brother Joe. We took a Russian boat, the Sobieski, and arrived in America after 30 days of crossing. My father was an American citizen. We were eighteen and full of life, and we started working at the Cappiello's grocery store on Arthur Avenue. I've always lived in this neighborhood. Now here I have my son David and my grandson with me; we are three generations. The place has always been promising."

In 1922, the Cappiello family, originally from Naples, carried their butcher trade on Arthur Avenue and by the time that [Mayor Fiorello La Guardia](#) [2] built the new indoor market; they were the first original butchers. Michele started working for them, and he married their only daughter, Antonietta. Driven by a stirring passion for this job he then bought the place and called it [Mike's Deli](#) [3].

"My father loved this market," explains David. "He always said that this place is like a theater because my father wanted to be an actor, you could come here and have a show; it was like a stage to him performing for his costumers. His relationship with the clients has always been a friendly one. My parents taught me the work ethic of breaking your ass to satisfy your clients. My mother told me five F's: Family, Food, Faith, Friends and Forever. My father three C's (in Italian): Cervello - brain; Cuore - heart and Coglioni - balls. I live by that. If you don't have the balls to work here, you don't go through the day. This is not a job for dummies; in order to satisfy people you have to be able to read them even through their body language."

Genuine products and delightful dining

"Supermarkets have plenty of imported products, but just because something is from Parma it doesn't necessarily mean that it is good quality," explains David while presenting the Arthur's market best products.

"They never tell you how many qualities of parmigiano exist. There's five grades of parmigiano according to the aging. We store it for 36 months, and we keep it for another year, and we care about the crystallization. Parmigiano has to be cracked with the right knife, not randomly cut, otherwise it loses its flavor. We buy the best parmigiano from Italy, just like we buy the best provolone. We change the provolone bag four times; we put the extra effort to let the cheese dry and not cut it right away because it's aged. Likewith our "sopressata," it is like the one grandpa makes, the one you store in the cellar at home. I import prosciutto from the Galloni riserva. And we buy the Parma of course, but 24 months aged prosciutto, you rarely find this quality. We make homemade mozzarella here: the secret is about the curd you use to make it, there are different qualities, the cheaper the quality the more profit you make but I don't do that."

Not just a simple market, Mike's Deli also showcases chef David Greco's cooking expertise and genius. You can stop by to have a full meal or a tantalizing panino. "I like to cook the Italian style believing in the quality, not overdoing, but I like to mix it up with a more Italian American flavor. For our kitchen we have access to the greatest quality thanks to the butcher, the fruit stand and all the other shops in the market."

Celebrity clients and a special mozzarella maker

Along with other special clients like [Hillary Clinton](#) [4], [Martin Scorsese](#) [5], [Robert De Niro](#) [6] and many others for whom Mike's Deli prepares sumptuous caterings; David had the privilege to be visited by the illustrious Mayor of Naples [Luigi de Magistris](#) [7].

"I insisted that he made mozzarella with me. He was so excited about it because he said that everything is now made in the cheese factories; it is not personal anymore. The mayor is a very passionate man, even though he was all dressed up in his professional outfit he wasn't afraid to get his hands dirty. We made the charcoal mozzarella. He liked it because it showed that here we preserve and we care about Italian true traditions and heritage."

David's diligence at NIAF



David's commitment to Italian heritage is, in fact, as visceral as the commitment to his job is. That's why he, through the years, established a prolific relationship with [NIAF](#) [8] (the National Italian American Foundation). "For eleven years I've been considered NIAF chef. I'm an honorary member and I do the catering for the gala in Washington every year. NIAF helps people like me; they help the blue collar person. They do so much to represent and value Italian culture and heritage in this country, bringing it to another level. Nobody helps the Italian community in America, Italians are not listed as ethnic, there's no Italian welfare; to be an Italian American business man is very difficult."

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- [2] https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Fiorello_H._La_Guardia
- [3] <http://www.arthuravenue.com/>
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