

Authentic Little Italy: Che Cos'è?

Jerry Kruse (January 12, 2008)



Is there an "authentic" Little Italy, and if there is, what does it look like? To the first part of the question, I say "No." The second part is more complex, as Italian neighborhoods real and imagined, are presented as spectacles for tourists and unfortunately are seen as representations of "real" Italian Americans.



Preface

There are many in the field of Italian American Studies who are not especially sanguine about its future; either as an academic or a more popular cultural enterprise. At meetings of the American Italian Historical Association and the Italian American Writers Association the eyes and smiles of old-timers widen whenever a new young voice is heard. As everyone knows, scholars and authors of all ethnicities require intellectual progeny. To die unquoted or unread is the fate of those in a special section reserved for intellectuals in Dante's First Circle of the Inferno.

On the brightest side, I had the recent pleasure, and indeed honor, of helping to launch a new journal with my "Authentic Little Italy: Che Cos'è? A Photo Essay" (presented here in brief) in The Harvard College Journal of Italian American History and Culture. The Journal was created by Editors in Chief- Justin Rossi and Sabino Ciorciari, under the guidance of their Faculty Advisor- Elvira DiFabio, Director of Undergraduate Studies in Romance Languages at Harvard.

The Harvard Italian American Association started this project in November, 2006 to be distributed on campus as well as to Italian American leaders, scholars, academic programs, and organizations. Its goal is to promote the highest level of scholarship and provide a forum and resource for those with a passion for all levels of Italian American culture. HIAA's Mission is "to promote and engage the rich culture of all things Italian American and to provide a welcoming Italian American community on the Harvard campus." More information about the group can be found on its website: <http://www.harvarditalianamerican.org> [2]

Introduction

Is there an "authentic" Little Italy, and if there is, what does it look like? On the first part of the question, I take the negative position. The second part of the question though is a bit more complex. In cities across the United States, Italian neighborhoods of one sort or another, real and imagined, are presented as spectacles for visitors from far and near. Even more unfortunately, these places are seen as representations of "real" Italian Americans.





Portland, Maine July, 2000

During a trip to Portland, Maine I asked where I might find the Italian American section of town. He gave me simple directions that I followed across a recent highway extension to a partially cleared mixed residential, industrial, and commercial part of the city. There I found a few "Italian" restaurants and businesses, "St. Peter's Catholic Church founded by the Italian Community" as well as indications of an Italian past in the form of fig trees and grape vines growing wild. It seemed to have an Italian Present, but little in the way of an Italian Future except for this delivery van making a claim of ethnic authenticity for "Amato's Italian Deli."

Despite the fact that more than sixteen million claim to be Italian American today and that Italian American stereotypes are common, a many scholars maintain that Italians Americans are not a "real" ethnic group at all. Rudolph Vecoli strongly disagrees and argues that Italian American are not "just like" any other White Folks. In American society today being an Italian American, or being identified as such, has significant effects on one's life chances which are different from others, even other White Ethnic groups. For better as well as for worse, that which stands for Italian Americans and Italian America is Little Italy. For some Italian Americans, it is also the place where they periodically seek authenticity and a return to "Their roots." One often reads in local newspapers about Italian Americans who return to the "old neighborhood" from the suburbs to shop, touch base with remaining old friends, or to attend a religious or cultural festival. In most cases the neighborhood they or their offspring are returning to is not what they left behind. Some "Italian" neighborhoods are virtually empty of those with Italian roots. In other cases remaining Italian Americans are surrounded by restaurants and shops more designed for tourists than for them. Little Italy entrepreneurs have often responded by "creating" authenticity in sometimes perverse ways.

Most of these Little Italies are examples of what I have termed "Ethnic Theme Parks" which are preserved as spectacles for the appreciation of tourists. I must caution the reader however that I have selected for this essay some images which are the most glaringly, in my opinion, non-representative of Italians in America today. Although the images are taken in different Little Italies they could have been found in almost all of them. In many of these same neighborhoods there is much to be commended and recommended as to local Italian American life and culture. Unfortunately it is not these more accurate ethnic elements which are the easiest to turn into saleable commodities.





North End,
Boston, 2004

I have been observing and photographing the changing urban landscape of Boston for a quarter of a decade. The North End of Boston has long been an urban tourist space with a split personality. All year long, in this now highly gentrified neighborhood most of the visitors come in search of American Colonial and Revolutionary War landmarks such as the Old North Church, and follow one or another variant of the Freedom Trail walking tour. For many others, it is a place to find “Authentic Italian Cuisine” at restaurants like Al Dente, and, in season, observe an Italian feast. Note that as tourist restaurants open, old neighborhood ones close to make room for them.





Wooster Street, New Haven, 2003.

As most other Little Italies, the Wooster Street version in New Haven has well defined boundaries. In addition to an impressive street spanning arch marking the grand entrance to the Wooster Street, red white and green banners like this festoon the commercial strip. Not far away, minus the banners, one might discover the more historically important Italian Consulate building.





Al Capone at the Italian Market on Arthur Avenue, The
Bronx, 2006



Umberto's Clam House Replica on Arthur Avenue, The Bronx, 2006

As other Little Italies in New York City continue to demographically wane, Arthur Avenue in the Belmont section of The Bronx has made a strong claim to be the most authentic of the remaining enclaves. This is despite the fact that only a small minority of persons who identify themselves as Italian American still live there among Latinos and Albanians. Old institutions such as the "Italian" Public Market still remain, but others such as a replica of Manhattan Little Italy's Umberto's Clam House have recently appeared on the scene.



Al Fresco Eating on Mulberry Street, Manhattan, 2007.



San Gennaro among Wooden Indians in a Cigar Store Window,
Manhattan, 2007

The most venerated, perhaps venerable , and certainly the most visited of all of America's Little Italies continues to be on Mulberry Street which is squeezed on three sides by a growing Chinatown and on the other side by gentrifying NoLito (North of Little Italy). The barely religious Neopolitan feast of San Gennaro still takes place here but most of the year it is simply a collection of more or less "Italian" eating places and emporia.

Frank Rizzo Mural
Philadelphia, 2002



The ethnic composition of Philadelphia's Bella Vista neighborhood has been ethnically mixed and changing for almost a century and a half. Italian Americans comprise the one European group that stayed in large numbers after Irish Catholics, and Russian Jews moved away. Yet the neighborhood is still described in tourist brochures as a "Little Italy." In the same sense Black, Chinese, Jewish, Korean, Lebanese, South Asian, Vietnamese and other merchants bring their ethnic foods and other products to sell at the famous Ninth Street "Italian Market". In 2002, Philly's Italian political icon, two-term Mayor, Frank Rizzo (1920-91) was still watching over the neighborhood in a mural by Diane Keller.



Al Pacino as Don Michael Corleone, *The Godfather III*, 1990,
Baltimore, 2003

Baltimore's Little Italy can be found just east of the city's Inner Harbor Area and boasts that it is one of the city's busiest restaurant districts. The photo below was taken in one of its most well-known eateries, but Al Pacino's familiar face is frequently plastered on the walls of Little Italy bistros. As in other urban enclaves, Italians moved into the area during the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Even though most other groups left, the neighborhood is still home to a significant Italian community in a "hot" local housing market.





Gift shop in The Hill,
St. Louis, 2002.

When I visited “The Hill” in 2002 I knew that the area was settled in the early 1900s by Italian immigrants and that some of its residents carry on traditions in this neighborhood which is a short distance from a rather unimpressive downtown. I also knew that baseball personalities Yogi Berra and Joe Garagiola had once lived there. Having visited similar sites, I was not surprised to find fire hydrants painted in the Italian tricolore and gift shops which sold products like those displayed in the photo above.





North Beach,
San Francisco, 2001.

At the late 19th century the space near Fisherman's Wharf was known as "Italy Harbor" as Italians, originally crammed into the steep sides of the bay side of Telegraph Hill overflowed into the valley and formed the North Beach "Italian Colony." A hundred years later little is left of the illustrious maritime community near the wharves at the base of Columbus Avenue other than numerous "Italian" restaurants.

Note: Some of my photo galleries on Little Italies in The Bronx, Philadelphia, Baltimore, and New Haven can be found at: www.brooklynso.org [3] on the right had side of the page.

Reference

Rudolph J. Vecoli, "Are Italian Americans Just White Folks?," in Jerome Krase and Frank Sorrentino (eds), *The Review of Italian American Studies*. Lanham, Maryland: Lexington Books 2000: 75-88.

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