

Ciao, Italia

The more things change, the more they stay the same. Welcome to Wilmington's own slice of the Old Country.

BY REID CHAMPAGNE PUBLISHED MAY 11, 2010 AT 11:12 AM



Barber Gus Perodi, an owner of the Little Shop on the Hill, says Little Italy has always had a diverse population of residents. Photograph by Jared Castaldi

Abanquet manager for the Christiana Hilton was looking for a good source of Asian appetizers. “If you want authentic Asian food,” an employee said, “you should call the Italian pastry shop in Little Italy.” The recommendation was not the result of ethnic confusion. It was more like global fusion, as Tom Oei likes to call it. Oei and his wife, Nanik, are first-generation Indonesian immigrants with family backgrounds in industrial and retail baking. They bought the iconic Papa’s Pastry Shop in Wilmington four years ago.

The Oeis have transformed the shop, which had been almost exclusively a cake shop, to one that offers baked goods with French, Asian and Spanish influences, not to mention traditional Italian. “We’re now catering about one quinceañera (a Latina coming-of-age celebration) per month,” Oei says. “This shop is nothing like the way it was before we took it over.”

You could say the same of Little Italy itself. It’s nothing like it used to be—though longtime residents don’t see it that way.

“I’ve been living here for 60 years,” says Virgil Pacelli, who operates a dental lab on West Eighth Street. “The neighborhood hasn’t changed a bit.”

“People say that Little Italy is more diverse today, but that isn’t true,” says barber Gus Perodi. “The neighborhood has always been a mix of ethnicities that included Jewish shop owners and blacks who served as domestics for DuPont executives and as postal workers.”

It is the genius of this neighborhood, bounded by Pennsylvania Avenue on the north and Fourth Street on the south, that it has been able to flow with both economic and demographic change while maintaining its Italian identity, even as that identity extends to include thriving Greek, Polish, Hispanic and Asian populations. Those groups blend with those of the old country during the iconic St. Anthony’s Italian Festival, which, this month, will turn Little Italy into a kind of United Nations of Wilmington. It truly is a place for all.

Dating to the Settlement House Movement of the 1880s, The West End Neighborhood House—originally the Italian Neighborhood House—was founded to help in housing, employment and literacy training for Italian immigrants. Their descendants continue to provide stability and perpetuate traditions. Today West End Neighborhood House provides employment and housing services, along with youth services and financial education.

“We are one of the largest real estate developers in the city and the state,” says West End executive director Paul Calistro. He cites more than \$35 million invested in neighborhood housing projects over the past 10 years.



Officers of the Little Italy Neighborhood Association include (from left) Ciro Poppiti, Jessica Meany, Nick “The Hat” DiBuo, founder and president Luigi Vitrone, and Mike Porro. Photograph by Jared Castaldi

Cornerstone West, an effort of St. Francis Hospital and West End Neighborhood House, is a not-for-profit corporation that turns blighted homes into rental and ownership opportunities. Molly Keresztury, assistant director of development for West End, says Cornerstone has built or renovated 240 resident-owned homes since 1999 and has helped in renovations and improvements to another 94 homes. “Where we’ve completed these projects,” Keresztury says, “property values have risen more than 100 percent.” Toren Williams bought a twin townhome through Cornerstone seven years ago. “I bought in Little Italy because of the design and price,” says the 30-something architect. “But since then, I’ve come to see the neighborhood as close-knit, where everyone knows everyone else.”

Ensuring quality housing has been key in keeping Little Italy away from what Calistro calls the “tipping point” at which a community begins an irreversible downward spiral. He and other local leaders knew a change in attitude would have to accompany physical improvements.

“There was a time about 13 years ago, when businesses and residents were at odds with each other,” Calistro says. “Conflicts over parking and noise were at the head of the list.” Part of that stemmed from Little Italy having evolved into a bar community, more than a restaurant hub. “We had to find common ground on what it took to bring in outside capital instead of just locally generated revenues,” Calistro says. Little Italy has since emerged as a dining destination.

The restaurant industry achieved a real boost when Italy native Guiseppe Furio took over Restaurante Pomodoro Italiano on Union Street in July 2009. “I make all my mozzarella, pasta and sausage from scratch,” says Furio, “and my seafood comes directly from the Mediterranean.”

An early pioneer of the Little Italy restaurant revival was Brooklyn native Luigi Vitrone, who arrived in 1988 and opened the popular Pastabilities at Fifth and Lincoln.

“I previously owned restaurants in Baltimore and Columbia [Maryland] and had traveled to Little Italy many times to buy fresh ricotta from Fierro’s,” Vitrone says. “Vinny Fierro would always tell me that I should come here and open a restaurant.”

Vitrone started other restaurants in other cities, but he always kept Fierro’s advice in mind. “One day I read a story in the Wall Street Journal about Wilmington’s Riverfront development. When I visited the area, it wasn’t quite ready, but I still saw the need for my type of Northern Italian cuisine.”



St. Anthony of Padua Pastor John F. McGinley oversees a parish of about 900 families. The church will hold its popular Italian Festival this month. Photograph by Jared Castaldi

After looking briefly for a suitable space in Old New Castle, Vitrone developed Pastabilities in a butcher shop on Lincoln. The first thing he noticed was that there was nothing in Little Italy to identify it as such. With two other leaders, Vitrone formed what has become the Little Italy Neighborhood Association. “One of our first acts was to sponsor a contest to build an arch that would mark our southern entrance.” That steel gateway today reflects tradition and change.

Christian Willauer moved to Little Italy as the result of a job relocation from Charlotte, North Carolina, a year ago. The Boston native wanted an urban landscape.

“I was attracted to the neighborhood’s diversity,” she says. “The commercial area is all in walking distance, as is Brandywine Park.”

She cites Fierro Cheese, Black Lab bakery and Papa’s Market—the grocery, not the bakery—as some of her favorite stores. “Mrs. Robino’s and Bangkok House are two of my favorite restaurants.” Getting to know the owners, she says, is a great advantage, and the low cost of living is very attractive. “Plus you get all the amenities of city life.”

To coincide with the beginning of St. Anthony’s Italian Festival in June 2009, LINA unveiled a mural on the railroad overpass at the north end. Painted by local artists Maria Pepe and Louis Wilson, it depicts traditional Italian scenes, the milk silo at Fierro’s cheese plant and its signature ricotta container.

Landscaping was provided by the Delaware Horticultural Society. Combined with recent streetscaping on Union, the arch and mural lets Little Italy put its best foot forward. Its first foot forward—the very foundation of the neighborhood—is St. Anthony of Padua Parish.

The parish is a national parish, a body defined by ethnic identity, not by a geographic area. The original trickle of Italians into Wilmington, drawn by work on the railroads and, later, in the DuPont powder works, the Bancroft Mills and area quarries, grew to a substantial community clustering in an area known as The Hill. They were not always received in surrounding parishes, says St. Anthony Pastor John F. McGinley. “One day a group of them were late for Mass at an Irish church and were not allowed inside. That was the beginning of St. Anthony’s.”

Skilled artisans, the immigrants began building homes. With the founding of St. Anthony’s, these masons, steel workers, carpenters, plasterers, glaziers and painters began building a church. Considered “one of the most magnificent testaments to the glory of God in America,” St. Anthony’s opened its doors on Palm Sunday of 1926.



Executive director Paul Calistro says West End Neighborhood House has invested more than \$35 million in neighborhood housing projects during the past decade. Photograph by Jared Castaldi

Having come from parishes in Harrisburg, Philadelphia and Allentown, Pennsylvania, McGinley has been privileged to be pastor of a church and a leader of schools built by the hands of its parishioners, though he acknowledges the original ethnic focus of the parish has changed.

“We are neither ethnically limited to parishioners of Italian descent, nor are we territorial,” McGinley says. “For instance, we have one parishioner who keeps a candle lit here who lives in Baltimore. We’re holding steady at about 900 families now, and for 2011, we’re seeing the first increase in school

enrollment over the past years.” He attributes the growth to the reputation of the parish schools—St. Anthony’s Elementary and Padua Academy—as well as other ministries, such as the Antonian Highrise Senior Center. “Every Meal on Wheels that is distributed throughout New Castle County passes through the Antonian,” McGinley says. The parish also operates St. Anthony in the Hills, a youth and family center in Toughkenamon, Pennsylvania.

The parish remains a magnet for Italians, and its annual festival serves as a homecoming for parishioners who moved out of the neighborhood. Another magnet is the Little Shop on the Hill, a traditional “tonsorial parlor” at Ninth and DuPont. The place is run by old friends Gus Perodi and Ernie Delle Donne.

“Many of our customers are the people who grew up here,” says Perodi. “But there are young people who are coming in wanting to hear the stories of their uncles and fathers who lived here before them.”

Like longtime resident Christine Serio, who grew up on Lincoln Street and recalls the large Italian families whose children were both cousins and playmates. Perodi and Delle Donne talk of a time when “your neighbors were your brothers and sisters.”

“We knew when someone was born and when someone died,” says Delle Donne. “Today most people don’t know who their neighbors are.”

The two say the advent of television and air conditioning killed the “stoop sitting” era, when neighbors socialized outside. “My mother’s family lived on one block, and my father’s lived on the one behind it,” says Delle Donne. “People walked everywhere, too.” The Little Shop is adorned with photographs of those days. One customer was prompted to say that, with all that history at their fingertips, Perodi and Delle Donne should make a documentary.

They are. With the help of television producer Jack Fischer, “The Bells on the Hill” will bring to life those pictures. It will also pay homage to legendary St. Anthony’s pastor Robert Balducelli. A native of Italy, Father Robert, a hale and hearty 97, pastor for more than 50 years, led the volunteers that built the schools and other properties. Says Perodi, “We really wanted to do something to mark his legacy here.”

Though roots are both foundation and identity, renewal and growth are the hallmarks of a healthy community. That’s Little Italy.

“There’s a strong employment base, thanks in part to the auto businesses on Pennsylvania Avenue,” says Realtor Mike Porro. “St. Francis Hospital is another major employer, along with West End Neighborhood House. Newcomers are drawn by the ability to walk to their jobs, as well as the parks and restaurants.”

Woodlawn Library on Bancroft Parkway is another asset, Porro says. “The community meetings here are filled with residents, and then there’s the pleasant Wawaset Park pedestrian bridge, which connects the community with surrounding residential areas for easy access to restaurants and other attractions.”

Little Italy’s appeal stretches all the way back to the Old Country. In 2001, *Ciro Poppiti*, whose roots run deep in the neighborhood, attended a meeting in Philadelphia conducted by the Italian Consul General, where he learned Italy was interested in establishing trade with individual states here. Poppiti then gathered an ad hoc team of Delaware leaders at *Madeline’s Italian Restaurant* to talk about a trade mission.

In 2005, then-Governor *Ruth Ann Minner* went to Italy, where she invited a delegation to visit Delaware while she hosted the national Council of State Legislatures in Wilmington. The visit was a big success, not incidentally due to local Columbus Day festivities. The Italians were impressed. In 2008 they opened the Italian Mountain Development Agency office on the Riverfront.

“Businessmen from Italy use IMDA to meet with business leaders here to establish trade relations,” Poppiti says. “Delaware and Wilmington are strategic locations for Italian trade groups.” Wilmington’s banking and finance network is also an asset.

But Little Italy’s roots must continue to be nurtured. LINA’s mission statement stresses the importance of home ownership in keeping communities strong over time. “What has remained the same here is that we are still a tight community interested in maintaining our quality of life regarding public safety and noise, as well as owning versus renting,” *Vitrone* says.

Oei says he and *Nanik* are fortunate to have been “adopted.” “Italian pastries are difficult to make, but local residents gave us their family recipes to use for ourselves,” says *Oei*. “It’s still the real thing, though.”

And Little Italy remains the real thing, too.