

Finding Italy in Rochester

Whether it's the best Italian restaurants, most popular festivals, or must-visit markets and museums, Italy's influences in America are everywhere. In NIAF on Location, our members and friends provide insider information on special places that make them feel more Italian in their own hometowns. This issue, NIAF's Government Affairs Manager Phillip Donofrio finds Italy in his hometown of Rochester, N.Y.



Paul Brady Photography

What is the most Italian part of your city?

Traditionally, the west side of Rochester has been the epicenter of our Italian American community. In the 1860s, the first Italian immigrants settled in the corridor between Lyell Avenue and Jay Street, just west of the Genesee River. On June 2, during the city's Little Italy Street Festa, the City Council officially recognized the region along the Lyell Avenue corridor as Rochester's Little Italy Historic District.

But in the mid-20th century, the housing boom was in full swing, and large swaths of Italian Americans relocated to the suburbs. The suburb of Gates, due west of that Lyell-Jay corridor, became the most popular destination for these newly middle-class Rochesterians. A blue-collar town where, it seems, every other resident boasts Italian ancestry, Gates today plays host to some of Rochester's most important Italian cultural venues.

What are your favorite Italian restaurants?

First is Mamma G's. Part of Mamma G's appeal is its inconspicuousness. Housed in a former Friendly's on a dull stretch of East Henrietta Road, it serves generous portions of authentic Italian fare of the *abruzzese* variety. The family-operated Mamma G's has already achieved cult status among local foodies despite having opened in 2015. The Troiano family

chef and matriarch, Gilda (aka "Mamma G") hails from Pescara. She makes a *pasta alla mugnaia* that gives new meaning to "comfort food."

More institution than restaurant, Giuseppe's was established in 1927 by the Chinappi family, who still owns and operates it. Located on Spencerport Road in Gates, Giuseppe's familial, everybody-knows-your-name aura is what makes it so sublime. After four generations of perfecting its recipes, Giuseppe's pizzas, parms and cannoli separate this perennial restaurant from the rest of the pack. And its Friday fish fry? A bonafide religious experience.

Where do you go for Italian culture?

Another Gates institution, the Italian American Sport Club, is where Italian Americans of all ages learn to fall in love with their culture. The Sport Club regularly hosts nonna-inspired luncheons as well as bocce ball tournaments so competitive they might catch you off guard. Soccer is also held in high regard there; the Sport Club sponsors both adult and youth teams, and World Cup viewing parties for *gli Azzurri* (our beloved Italian national team) are always hot-blooded affairs.

Where do you go to get hard to find Italian ingredients?

If you're in search of Italian imports, all roads lead to Olindo Cash &

Carry on Lyell Avenue. Although the average Rochesterian swears by hometown-favorite Wegman's for most gastronomic needs, Olindo offers an unmatched, rustic shopping experience. If it's edible and Italian, Olindo most likely has it. Aside from prepackaged and non-perishable Italian foods, Olindo's pasta and olive bars are a hit, and it may well be the only store in Rochester where you can find that sweetest of Sicilian fruits: the *ficodindia dell'etna*. **What's the most Italian day of the year in your community?**

Just a few years ago, rumors began swirling that an official Little Italy might be established in Gates. Town regulators begrudgingly quashed those plans. Now, plans for a Little Italy have been revived, appropriately, in the historic Lyell-Jay corridor where Rochester's *italianità* had its genesis.

To raise awareness for establishing Rochester's official Little Italy in the Lyell Avenue and Jay Street corridor, the Little Italy Association of Rochester has been hosting its Little Italy Festival there every June since 2017. The Festival brings together local Italian American vendors and performers, attracting large, eclectic crowds in one of downtown Rochester's most promising neighborhoods. As plans for Rochester's first true Little Italy continue to gain traction, so too has the buzz surrounding the Festival. ▲