



Food, festivals and games abound for embracing the Italian heritage

BY LINDA ZAVORAL AND JASON MASTRODONATO

If you're a Bay Area resident with some Italian heritage, you're in good company — 400,000 people across the region claim the same. And if you're simply Italo-curious — interested in taking a walking tour of North Beach, say, or bowling toward a pallino — you're about to be in very good company. Here are five ways to channel your inner Italian around the Bay.



Right: The iconic Caffe Trieste in San Francisco's North Beach neighborhood draws locals, tourists and celebrities alike. It's said that Francis Ford Coppola worked on "The Godfather" script here.

KARL MONDON/STAFF ARCHIVES

Opposite: Italian restaurants, pizzerias and coffee bars line the streets of North Beach.

DOUG DURAN/STAFF ARCHIVES



HIT THE FESTIVAL CIRCUIT

Where can you learn to toss pizza dough, belt out “O Sole Mio” in a crowd or watch grape-stompers do their best Lucy impersonations?

At the Bay Area’s Italian festivals, of course, which celebrate food, wine, music and history. Add these dates to your 2025 calendar:

North Beach Festival, San Francisco:

In 2024, this 11-block-long event celebrated its 70th anniversary with interactive art activities, a chalk zone, poetry readings and a traditional Blessing of the Animals in addition to food, music and vendors. Details: Typically held in June along Columbus Avenue and nearby streets; www.northbeachfestival.org

Italian Family Festa, San Jose:

Cultural experiences are a specialty of the Italian American Heritage Foundation. Previous festivals have featured Venetian mask making, medieval-style flag throwing, grape stomping, Italian card games and sessions on growing an Italian garden. And kids can play on a bocce court that’s just their size. Details: Early August at History Park in San Jose; www.iahfsj.org

Festa Italia Monterey: Officially



Top: Morgan Hill Mayor Mark Turner was one of several mayors competing in the grape stomp last summer at San Jose’s annual Italian Family Festa.

Above: It’s not an Italian festival without cannoli.

SHAE HAMMOND/
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called the Festa Italia Santa Rosalia Fisherman’s Festival, this event — now in its 92nd year — includes a Blessing of the Fishing Fleet, tarantella performances, live music and food, including a calamari cooking demo. Details: Early September at Custom House Plaza; <https://festaitaliamonterey.org/index.html>

Little Italy San Jose Festival: Located where some of the city’s earliest immigrants settled, the Little Italy event features local restaurants, live music, museum tours — and Italian cars. More than 150 Ferrari, Lamborghini, Pagani, DeTomoso models and Italian motorcycles were on display last year. Details: Early October from the arch at Julian and Almaden over to St. John; www.littleitalysj.com



MAKE CONNECTIONS AT THE ITALIAN-AMERICAN CLUBS

For Italians in the East Bay, there's nothing like monthly dinner at the Ligure Club, where members pay \$25 for a three-course meal with unlimited wine and a family atmosphere that has kept the club going strong since 1934. And while it originated as a men's club, it has since opened its doors to women.

"We want to let people who are curious come and see what we're doing," said board member Matthew Moglia, 42, an Oakland

native who has been going to club dinners since he was 15. For the 350-plus members and guests, the Ligure Club hosts Italian cooking classes, salami-making and wine-tasting events, holiday parties, monthly dinners and, of course, bocce tournaments. In San Jose, the Italian American Heritage Foundation puts a focus on Italy's regions at monthly luncheons and holds language classes, recipe demos, a crab feed and live music events, including opera. The nonprofit also maintains an

The Colombo Club members and their guests gather for one of the club's frequent dinners. Founded in Oakland in 1920, the group is America's largest Italian social club west of the Mississippi.

DOUG DURAN/
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extensive bilingual library at its Fourth Street center. Most important, these are places where life slows down and people put their phones away and focus on connecting in conversation. "Our society is just so fast-paced," Moglia said. But in Italy, "get ready to slow down. It's about people. They don't ask what you do, they ask where you're from or who your family is. That's the starting point. That's what the clubs are intended for. To leave all of that high speed behind. You come to sit



Tim Gomes takes a practice shot before a league night for winery teams at Livermore's Da Boccery. DOUG DURAN/STAFF

down, have dinner and be with people, enjoy each other and the food and the drinks?"

Other Italian-American clubs in the Bay Area include the Peninsula Italian-American Social Club (San Mateo), Buon Tempo Club (Castro Valley), Colombo Club (Oakland), Italian-American League (Alameda), Fratellanza Club (Oakland), Galileo Club (Richmond), Alpicella Club (Oakland) and the Italian-American Social Club (San Francisco).

Details: figureclub.com; italianamericanfederation.com.

PLAY BOCCE

Believe it or not, bocce was first played by the Egyptians in 5,200 B.C. and didn't make its way to Greece and Rome until 800 B.C. The Italians renamed the game bocce — plural for boccia, which means "bowl." Today, the game is played everywhere, and many Bay Area wineries, as well as some restaurants, have their own courts, so you're in luck.

Los Gatos' Campo Di Bocce serves up not only a full menu of antipasti, pasta and pizzas, but its bocce areas, both indoors and out, can be reserved for play.

Livermore's Da Boccery offers bocce courts plus all-day brunch, pizzas and more. And Sausalito's Bar Bocce pairs its court with a patio and spectacular Bay views — and all the pizza and aperitivo action you'd expect.

You can play bocce by the San Francisco Ferry Building and at Joe DiMaggio Playground in North Beach. Or head for one of the dozens of Bay Area wineries with their own bocce facilities — Pleasanton's Rubino Estates, perhaps, or Santa Rosa's D'Argenzio Winery.

Details: Find Campo di Bocce at 565 University Ave. in Los Gatos; campodibocce.com. Da Boccery, 175 E. Vineyard Ave. in Livermore; www.daboccery.com/. Bar Bocce, 1250 Bridgeway, Sausalito; barbocce.com.

TAKE A WALKING TOUR IN NORTH BEACH

A reconstructed North Beach rose after San Francisco's Great 1906 Earthquake and fires and welcomed a great wave of Italian immigrants who brought their food, wine and culture to this now-famous neighborhood. By the 1930s, there were 60,000 residents of Italian descent living in North Beach — and five

Italian-language newspapers circulating. Many Italian residents dispersed after World War II, making way for the Beat Generation, but the area continues to carry rich Italian traditions, and trattorias and pizzerias dot the district.

A self-guided walking tour by Tours by Foot will help you hit the essentials on Columbus Avenue. Among them: the Transamerica Pyramid (once San Francisco's tallest building), Cafe Zoetrope (Francis Ford Coppola's cafe offers classic Italian grub and plenty of film decor), Vesuvio Cafe (once a regular Beat hangout spot for Jack Kerouac and Neal Cassady), City Lights Bookstore, Molinari's old school Italian deli, Caffe Trieste (where Coppola worked on "The Godfather" script) and Saints Peter and Paul Church (the site of Joe DiMaggio's funeral).

Details: freetoursbyfoot.com

NEED WE SAY IT? MANGIA, MANGIA!

We don't dare pick favorites when it comes to Italian or Italian-American restaurants. Who could, with all of the fabulous food here in the Bay Area?

However, we do recommend chatting up Italian restaurant owners — especially the ones born in Italy, who came to these shores during the most recent waves of immigration.

They can often provide a window into your past or talk about what your family's hometown is like these days — while serving you regional specialties you may not have realized were in your DNA. Think Genovese pesto, Calabrian chiles, Sicilian cannoli and Milanese risotto.

And if these *paesani* reprimand you (in jest, of course) for preferring your pasta with extra sauce or saying yes to grated cheese atop your seafood entree, don't say we didn't warn you.