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That's Amore

Sicilian Festival celebrates rich heritage in historic Little Italy

By SHAENA ENGLE
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The centuries-old traditions of Italian art, music and food will come alive Sunday, May 17, as members of San Diego's Little Italy neighborhood welcome visitors to their free 16th annual Sicilian Festival.

At the turn of the 20th century, San Diego was the destination for many Sicilian immigrants looking to achieve the American dream of wealth and success.

Little Italy, bounded on the south by Ash Street, on the north by Laurel Street, on the east by the Interstate 5 freeway and on the west by the San Diego Harbor, is steeped in the history of the Sicilian families that originally settled the neighborhood in the early 1900s.

By 1930, some 6,000 Italian families who had migrated from coastal fishing villages in Genoa and Sicily had settled in what is now known as Little Italy.

"Many who were tuna fishermen in Italy could work here, and Little Italy in San Diego was born," said Giovanna DiBona, entertainment director for the festival. "In the 1920s and '30s Little Italy was just that — the language was spoken there, Sicilian shops and restaurants opened and a huge community of Italian families lived in the neighborhood."

The big divide

In 1967, the idyllic community that had grown to 28,000 people was shattered when Interstate 5 was built, dividing the neighborhood in half and scattering Sicilian families into pockets all over San Diego after many lost their homes and businesses. It remained in decline until the early 1990s, when new real estate and retail developments began to revitalize the neighborhood.

People can explore Little Italy while at the Sicilian Festival.

In 1993, the late Mario Cefalu, a native Sicilian baker and owner of the Solunto Bakery in Little Italy, pulled together a few restaurant owners who put up outdoor booths and some bands to perform to bring everyone back to the old neighborhood again — and the first Festa Siciliana (as it was originally called) was born.

Over the past 15 years, the festival has grown to include three stages presenting singers, dancers and Italian bands. Also part of the day are children's rides, a Sicilian flag procession, arts and jewelry booths, a beer and wine garden, a Sicilian cultural center manned by residents sharing old photographs and memories, and dozens of booths offering such traditional Sicilian food as chicken Marsala, rabbit amandine and granita (a semi-frozen dessert).

There is also a tribute to Dean Martin, courtesy of the band Roman Holiday and vocalist Rick Costa, a San Diego resident for more than 45 years. Costa, who admits to being over 75, has performed at every Festa and has witnessed the neighborhood and festival grow.

"The festival brings the entire Italian community together," he said. "It's a way to come together, celebrate and preserve our heritage."

His performance includes such classic Martin songs as "That's Amore" and "Mambo Italiano," as well as stories about the late singer and his songs.

Giovanna DiBona and Bill Corwin of the Roman Holiday Italian band, will perform at the San Diego Sicilian Festival.

Little Italy's treats

The festival also offers a great opportunity to explore Little Italy, where the atmosphere is as mellow as the melted mozzarella that oozes over the crust of pizza pies and as robust as the meat marinara sauce on the pastas for which restaurants along India Street are known.

While food is an important part of the Sicilian culture here, there is much more to Little Italy than its restaurant row. Part "Moonstruck," part Milano modern, it's both red-checked and high-tech.

Our Lady of the Rosary Roman Catholic Church (at the corner of State and Date streets), remains the heart of the neighborhood. The church, built in 1925, is an Italian-style architectural gem housing stained-glass windows and murals by Venetian painter Fausto Tasca.

Down Fir Street, sloping toward the bay, fishermen's homes have been turned into colorfully painted shops housing Little Italy's largest selection of stores. Che Bella (621 W. Fir St. offers plants, flowers and gifts. Che Bella Nido (also 621 W. Fir St.) supplies modern glasses, kitchenware and lamps, and Disegno Italiano (1605 India St.) carries sleek stainless steel kitchen appliances and furnishings.

Amici Park (corner of Date and State streets) is a perfect spot to sit, sip a cappuccino and retreat into the more leisurely pace of the Little Italy of the past.

Not to be missed, Mona Lisa Italian Restaurant (2061 India St.) is a foodie's heaven — a restaurant that also carries such traditional staples as imported canned tomatoes, pastas and canned fish.

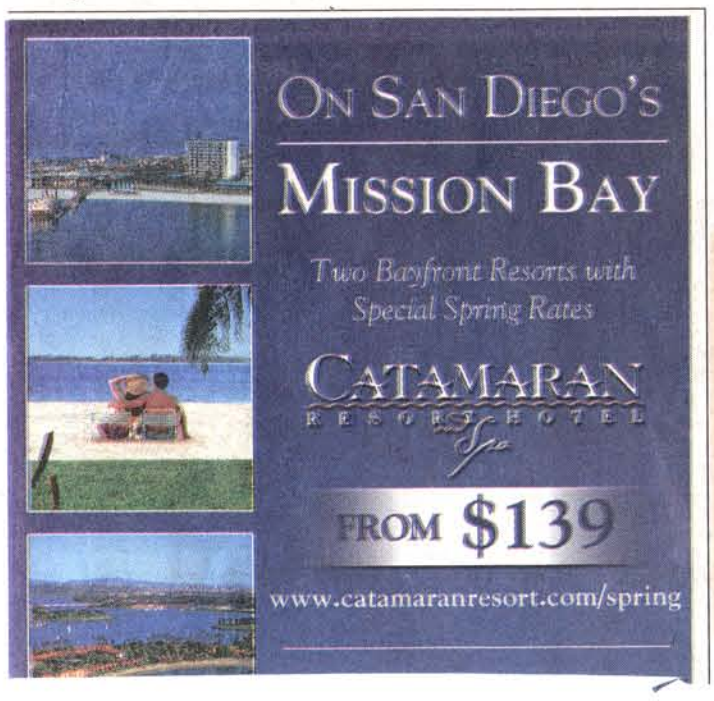
Follow your nose and it will lead you to Solunto Baking Co. (1643 India St.), offering display cases full of sweet and savory treats including cannelloni pastries and biscotti.

A block further is Filippi's Pizza Grotto (1747 India St.), an old school survivor (it opened in 1950) that still serves huge cheese sticks and thick-crust pizza with toppings of pepperoni or sausage.

A walk through the neighborhood, housing tiled fountains, sidewalk cafes and eclectic boutiques, exemplifies how Little Italy was built slowly and organically, with its Italian-American residents repairing, modifying and caring for it for generations.

"The Sicilian Festival is a big celebration for the community, and we want everyone to come out and see how great Little Italy is now," said DiBona.

Toluca Lake-based freelancer Shaena Engle writes about food and travel.



Facts on the festivities

WHEN: 10 a.m. to 6 p.m. May 17, on India Street between Beech and Date streets.

COST: Free admission; food prices range from $1 to $20.

WHERE TO STAY: The W Hotel (619.398.3100) offers a postmodern seaside ambience, and its location at 421 B St., San Diego is a block from the San Diego train station and a 10-minute stroll to Little Italy. The Manchester Grand Hyatt San Diego (619.232.1234) at 1 Market Place, featuring a spa, pool and tennis courts, is also nearby.

GETTING THERE: San Diego's Little Italy is at the northern edge of downtown. From Los Angeles, take the Interstate 5 south and exit at Front Street. Turn right on West Cedar Street and find parking from there.

Or take Amtrak to the Santa Fe Station and cross the street to the Trolley Station at One America Plaza. Take the Blue Line north one stop to the County Center/Little Italy stop.

INFORMATION: 619.469.2206, *www.sicilianfesta.com.*