

The Evolution of Little Italy

BY PASQUALE IOELE, ASSOCIATE VICE PRESIDENT | MAY 2018

Little Italy.

Famous to San Diego, it has been described as historic, lively, chic and cultured. For me, Little Italy is more than just those things. It's a place that pays homage to my Italian roots, a neighborhood that is rich with history and strives for inclusivity amongst its residents.

Since moving to Little Italy in 2002, I have seen firsthand how the community has evolved and adapted to the changing markets while still staying true to its roots – a process that has proven to be quite difficult for other “Little Italys” across the country. Little Italy's food scene, with its long list of renowned restaurants, has played a key factor in its continued success – after all, the tuna industry is what started it all.

In the 1920s, thousands of Italian families rushed to San Diego's harbor to create what would become the world's “Tuna Capital.” From there, these families began to establish their community by founding Our Lady of the Rosary Church, followed by an array of Italian restaurants, markets and boutique shops. The neighborhood was thriving, prohibition ended and *Waterfront Bar & Grill* opened – one of the first bars to open in San Diego after prohibition. It wasn't until the end of World War II when urban decay began, as the tuna industry declined and part of Little Italy was separated or destroyed by the construction of the I-5 freeway, forcing many Italian families to leave Little Italy and move inland to the suburbs.

Despite the challenges, Little Italy persevered as Italian families fought to keep their community and heritage intact, leading to the opening of some of Little Italy's most iconic restaurants – from *Filippi's Pizza Grotto* to *Mimmo's Italian Village* to *Café Zuccherò*. In 1995, the Little Italy Association was established and soon followed by much-needed development. From 2000-2005, a boom in condominium developments and population growth helped reshape Little Italy into a hip and historic neighborhood.

Thus began the “craft” movement in Little Italy; the demand for diversity by its residents drew the attention of top chefs and restaurateurs. Following the opening of *Craft & Commerce* in 2010, other prominent concepts followed suit. These additions were vital to the success of Little Italy. Creating the right balance of new and different with traditional and authentic has been critical to the evolution of Little Italy. New craft offerings, like *Juniper & Ivy*, were balanced with Italian cuisine openings, like *Civico 1845*. To stay relevant and competitive in this new market, “mom and pop” restaurants that had been around for years knew they needed to re-conceptualize – *Café Zuccherò* became *Nonna* and *Po Pazzo* evolved into *Barbusa*.

The continued success of Little Italy relies on this balance: creating diversity for residents while still providing the authentic experience that attracts visitors. Not only working but also living in Little Italy, I feel a certain duty and loyalty to help maintain this balance, and trying to do so through the landlords and tenants our team represents.

“Our business district is rooted in the toil of immigrants and the perseverance and optimism of a new group of business owners.

The strength of their faith and our proximity to the waterfront is what has supported families in Little Italy for generations.”

MARCO LI MANDRI
 Chief Executive Administrator,
 The Little Italy Association of San Diego

At Flocke & Avoyer’s Urban Strategies Group, we strive to be progressive but responsible when it comes to putting the pieces together. By bringing in strong regional and national operators, like Salt & Straw and Shake Shack, we want to introduce well-recognized concepts that are trendy enough to complement Little Italy’s unique environment and vibe. As a member of the Little Italy Association’s Board of Directors, I am privileged to be part of the community working to keep Little Italy strong.

I have no doubt that Little Italy will continue to thrive so long as the community continues to be open to change while still remaining loyal to the tradition of the neighborhood and the families who started it all.



PASQUALE IOELE
 858.875.4665
 pioele@flockeavoyer.com
 License ID: 01488187



Little Italy
A TIMELINE

		1925 <i>Our Lady of the Rosary</i>
	1933 WATER FRONT <small>SAN DIEGO'S OLDEST TAVERN</small>	1950 Filippini's <small>PIZZA GIUNTO</small>
1956 Mona Lisa <small>Little Italy Italian Foods</small>		1973 Mimmo's <small>EST. 1973 ITALIAN VILLAGE</small>
	1984 PRINCESS PUB & GRILLE <small>PROCESSED BY THE STATE OF CALIFORNIA</small>	1992 caffe italia <small>espresso bar • little italy</small>
	1996 Cafe ZuccherO	1995 Little Italy Association
	2005 Sogno Di Vino	2003 Buon Appetito
	2009 BENCOTTO <small>ITALIAN KITCHEN</small>	2007 PAPPALECCO <small>cafe</small>
	2010 Craft & COMMERCE	2012 <small>ESTO CALIFORNIA</small> NAPIZZA <small>PIZZA AL TAGLIO BREAD BOWL</small>
	2014 KEX <small>BEVERLY HILLS</small>	2013 BALLAST POINT <small>DEDICATED TO THE CRAFT</small>
	PREPKITCHEN IRONSIDE	2015 CRACK SHACK
	JUNIPER AND IVY	2016 civico 1845
2017 SALT & STRAW		HERB & WOOD
	2018 BORN AND RAISED	ROVINO <small>ROTISSERIE • WINE</small>
	NO'NNA <small>ITALIAN CRAFT FOOD</small>	RAKIRAKI <small>RAMEN AND TSUKEMEN</small>
	SHAKE SHACK	