

# Finding Italy in Jersey City

**NIAF on Location visits American cities and towns in search of Italy! In each issue, NIAF members and friends lead us through the restaurants and markets, institutions and events that help them feel a little more Italian in their hometowns. This time around, Anna DiPaola takes us on a whirlwind tour of her beloved Jersey City.**

## **What's the most Italian part of your city?**

It's known as "The Village" and it starts at Brunswick Street between First and Tenth Street and goes to Holy Rosary Church on Sixth Street. Holy Rosary was founded in 1885. It's the oldest Italian Roman Catholic Church in the state of New Jersey and it's located in Jersey City! The neighborhood for many years was considered the city's "Little Italy."

Not far behind is the Marion Section of Jersey City. It's where most Italian immigrants settled after arriving from Italy. My parents made their first home on Wallis Avenue. I have a brief 8 mm film that I converted to video that captures their arrival in the New York Harbor from Italy on the Giulio Cesar. They were greeted lovingly by friends and family in the Marion Section.

Back in the day, relatives and friends would play cards and drink wine at the smoke-filled social club until morning or sit on the stoop on summer evenings reminiscing about the Old Country. Marion is still the staging ground for the Feast of Our Lady of Mt. Carmel in July. When my parents arrived from Italy, the feast was much larger, with the procession going up and down every block. It's slimmed down today, but the heart and soul of the neighborhood is still very much alive.

## **What are you favorite Italian restaurants in the city?**

Laico's is an old-school family-owned Italian eatery. It's located in a "house" on a residential block on Terhune Avenue. It's cozy and has a friendly atmosphere. In 2021, Laico's was named best New Jersey restaurant for its chicken Parmesan.

Salumeria Ercolano is adjacent to the former Puccini's Restaurant at the end of West Side Avenue. It's a great deli and you can get anything you want. They have both hot and cold dishes with daily specials. Lunchtime is always fun because it's filled with so many familiar faces. Everyone knows each other and the service is excellent and friendly. It's an awesome spot for catered functions, too. We have had many family gatherings and attended many events there.

## **To cook an authentic Italian meal, where do you go to get those hard-to-find ingredients?**

I start in my basement! That's where we store the sauce that we jar in August. The fresh basil in the sauce comes from our very own backyard garden. And summer salads are made from our homegrown tomatoes, cucumbers, etc. Everything else we buy from Salumeria Ercolano or Andrea Salumeria, or we take a quick ride to Arthur Avenue in the Bronx, which is always fun!

## **Where is the best morning espresso served?**

At home! I've been making espresso since I was a child. My mother made it for my dad every morning and after dinner. He always had a touch of sambuca in it.

## **When you need some Italian culture, where do you go?**

I go to Casa Columbo. It was built by Italian immigrants in 1936 and served for many years as their social center. The Casa hosts many events, like its popular Carnevale Italiano. They also host art and cultural exhibits and musical performances. Its Heritage Hall exhibits numerous artifacts brought to America by our ancestors. Walking through it is very emotional and brings back so many memories.



The skyline of Jersey City at sunset (top) and Anna DiPaola in front of Salumeria Ercolano (inset)

## **What's the most Italian day of the year in your community?**

That would be the Jersey City Columbus Day celebration. We have flag raisings, a gala with honorees and a parade! I was truly honored to be named Woman of the Year in 2018. On that day and throughout Italian American Heritage Month, we remember the countless contributions of Italian Americans. Our parade route runs through the historical village of downtown Jersey City.

Another wonderful celebration is La Festa Italiana at Holy Rosary Church. It's more than a century old and it showcases Italian heritage, food and faith. It maintains many of its time-honored traditions, including the ever-popular zeppole and arancini. I head right for the arancini as soon as I arrive because they sell out nightly! People return to their home parish from all over the country for reunions with childhood friends and family during La Festa. It's held in the beginning of August and it's the most popular feast in Hudson County. ▲

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