

Little Italy hotter than ever

San Diego's 'dining mecca' drives growth of the historic neighborhood



By [Michele Parente](#) | 6 a.m. July 10, 2015



Little Italy's iconic neighborhood sign was erected in 2000. At right, is Nick Pecoraro's house. — *U-T file photo*

As he has on most nights for the last 46 years, Nick Pecoraro was watching the world go by on Wednesday from the porch of his ornately embellished two-story house on India Street, right at the foot of the Little Italy sign.

The Sicilian-born Pecoraro, 73, is a reigning member of the historic neighborhood's old guard, as much of a fixture as the sign itself.

And he's not going anywhere, even if he knows he's sitting on gold-leaf-adorned gold mine.



Nick Pecoraro said he decorated his house himself, using 24-carat gold leaf from Italy. The home has been in his wife Josephine's family since 1950. — Michele Parente
photo

“Money? There is no money for this. You can’t put a value on this,” he says, pointing to the bustle on the street. “I love the people, I love the noise.... I don’t need to watch TV with the fake people. The fake people, they don’t talk to you. I’ve got the real people right here.”

The reality show Pecoraro has been tuned to is Little Italy’s striking transformation over the past decade from a working class Italian-American enclave, dotted with red-checkered-tablecloth restaurants, to San Diego County’s undisputed hottest place to live, eat and play.

Unlike Little Italys from New York to San Francisco that have shrunk in size and relevance so much that some refer to them as “Littler Italy,” San Diego’s is not only thriving, it’s booming.

Dubbed last year as one of Forbes' Top 10 neighborhoods for millennials in the U.S., the area is experiencing the fastest growth in its history, according to the [Little Italy Association](#), a nonprofit district management corporation. About 3,000 new condos and apartments have been built since 2002, with up to 700 under some construction and an estimated total of 5,000 units added by 2017, the association said.

“See this little house, it just sold for \$1 million and it’s next to a parking lot,” said Marco Li Mandri, chief executive of the Little Italy Association, during a tour of development and civic projects in the area.



Marco Li Mandri, CEO of the Little Italy Association, left, talks with Frank Busalacchi of Cafe Zucchero, an Italian caf in Little Italy. – *K.C. Alfred*

Commercial rents in Little Italy, generally starting at \$5 per square foot, are as high as any of the marquee locations in the county, including the Gaslamp and Del Mar, said Pasquale Ioele, a broker with the Urban Strategies Group of [DTZ Commercial](#).



Chef Richard Blais. Eduardo Contreras • U-T

Driving much of the growth — and national buzz — has been the proliferation of acclaimed restaurants, including [Ironside Fish & Oyster](#), [Kettner Exchange](#) and, most notably, [Juniper & Ivy](#), the perennially packed “Left Coast Cookery” from “Top Chef All-Stars” winner Richard Blais.

On Thursday, Baja star chef Javier Plascencia opened [Bracero Cocina de Raíz](#), the region’s most highly anticipated new restaurant of the year.

“Little Italy is the food mecca of San Diego right now; it has elevated San Diego in a great manner,” Ioele said.

“They write about us; they talk about us in New York and LA. It brings people here, it complements what you hear on a global level about our craft beer, which bodes well for our economy as a whole.”

Catt White, founder and operator of the [Little Italy Mercato](#), one of the biggest farmers markets in San Diego, attracting an estimated 10,000 visitors a week, said Plascencia, who has restaurants from the Valle de Guadalupe to Tijuana to Bonita, is making a statement by planting stakes in Little Italy.



Chef Javier Plascencia.— *Courtesy photo*

“Javier is a big thing on an international level. He has gotten a lot of attention in the press and travels all over the world, cooking dinners overseas,” White said.

“The fact that he’s chosen Little Italy is a big thing.”

Blais said the neighborhood's appeal was in it feeling downtown — and hometown.

“I'm a native New Yorker, so I can say I'm part Italian,” Blaise joked.

“I love the little mom and pop part of Little Italy, but there's this modernness and there's this core that's amazing. You see not only diversity in the food scene, but in the people as well.”

Though Plascencia's lamb neck barbacoa tacos and Blais' shishito peppers in Wagyu beef fat are the new hip dishes, there is still plenty of Italian flavor in Little Italy.

Li Mandri noted that of the more than 40 restaurants and food stores that have opened over the last 12 years, more than half were opened by Italian immigrants.

“We continue to be a melting pot, however the majority of new businesses are Italian-owned or Italian-oriented,” Li Mandri said.

For his taste, Frank Busalacchi, whose [family's restaurants](#) are credited for spurring Little Italy's economic revitalization in the 1990s, thinks the neighborhood today is somewhat bland.

“It's not Little Italy anymore, it's Big Italy,” Busalacchi said, in between pushing tastes of his cannoli, sfogliatella and cartocci pastries at India Street's [Cafe Zuccherò](#).

“It's becoming more Americanized, it's getting more commercialized. It's not as quaint as it was years ago.”

The first Italians arrived in the neighborhood in the 1880s, with many migrating from San Francisco after the great earthquake and fires of 1906.

The rise of San Diego's tuna industry in the 1920s turned Little Italy into a vibrant home to canneries, shipyards and about 40,000 employees, a large part of them Sicilian immigrants. The neighborhood flourished until the

1960s, when the construction of the Interstate 5, and later the decline of tuna fishing, left Little Italy battered.

Homeless tents went up, workers moved elsewhere, but a core group of Italian families remained.

In 1973, there were just three Italian food businesses in the area, Solunto's, Filippi's and Mona Lisa, said Domenic Brunetto, co-owner of [Mona Lisa Italian Foods](#).

"This was a great neighborhood back then. It's still great, but it's different with all the younger people and all the new restaurants," Brunetto said.

"We went through some rough periods. The '80s were not good. It was very quiet, but we had our old clientele."

And while the economic resurgence that started in the 1990s solidified the ethnic identity of Little Italy, its current trendiness doesn't have to destroy it, he said.

When it's mentioned that the ambience of Mona Lisa seems frozen in time, Brunetto responds, "I'm glad to hear that.

"I personally love the fact that we haven't changed.... I don't think anybody can threaten us," he said. "We've seen so many businesses open, but we've continued to flourish and even break our own records."

Li Mandri is widely lauded, by old-timers and newcomers alike, for helping preserve Little Italy's unique feel and guiding its expansion into a modern urban center.

"He's got a vision and isn't afraid to ruffle some feathers to get something done. He tries to push things forward," said Arsalun Tafazoli, whose Little Italy restaurants include [Ironside](#), [Underbelly](#) and [Craft & Commerce](#), which went into the neighborhood in 2008.



FENTON LITTLE ITALY LITTLE ITALY, SAN DIEGO, CALIFORNIA
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An artist's rendering of the mixed-use development project going up on India and Date streets, that includes a central "Piazza Famiglia. – *Courtesy Little Italy Association* Beyond a major revamping of Amici Park, across from Little Italy's hub, Our Lady of Rosary church, Li Mandri is working with Fenton Construction on the centerpiece of a five-story, residential/retail project on India and Date streets: [a 10,000-square-foot public square called "Piazza Famiglia."](#) The piazza will host the Mercato on Saturdays, music, events and will serve as a community gathering place.

"Little Italy, Li Mandri said, "is so much more than food.