

## The San Diego Union-Tribune

# Inside Little Italy's apartment rush

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And you thought Little Italy was busy now.

The San Diego hot spot is scheduled to add 559 new apartments by the end of the year, further transforming what is already a vibrant downtown neighborhood into a residential hub.

Most of Little Italy's [evolution in the last decade](#) has, understandably, centered on food — famous chefs, ambitious restaurants and unique cuisine. But the latest chapter in the neighborhood makes it a center of residential living, rivaled only by East Village's boom, needed for the city's growing population.

While residential development in Little Italy is nothing new, it does represent a major chunk of this year's housing supply. There are about [2,000 new apartments](#) coming out in the entire county this year, and Little Italy represents about a quarter of all new units for the region.

Once completed, the new developments will increase Little Italy's current housing stock of roughly 3,000 units by nearly 20 percent.

The new apartments have several things in common — they command higher rents than the city average, have maximized space with small unit sizes and feature amenities that can rival high-end condos.

Amid the smells of coffee, clanking of dishes and the crowds of loud tourists, the new ultra-modern buildings stand out from the Old World feel of the neighborhood — although the developments make nods to the neighborhood's past.

Towering over the iconic Little Italy sign is [Vici](#), one of the most luxurious new apartment buildings in San Diego County. Amenities at the seven-story building include a rooftop terrace, hot tub, gym, private courtyards, a breakfast-inspired restaurant on the second floor and a washer and dryer in every unit.

Vici's average asking rent for a one-bedroom apartment will be around \$2,900 a month when it opens July 1. The building was developed by San Diego's H.G. Fenton Company and designed by Orange County-based Architects Orange, known for their work at Westfield's University Town Center, [The Point in El Segundo](#) and [Urbana East Village](#).

"We wanted the building to have class, character and a timelessness," said H.G. Fenton CEO Mike Neal during a recent tour of the building.

H.G. Fenton is going big in Little Italy, developing most of the north and south sides of Date Street between India and Columbia streets. In addition to Vici, it also developed [Piazza Della Famiglia](#), a public plaza complete with chairs and tables, a fountain with multi-color lights and a coffee shop, Frost Me Cafe and Bakery. The piazza is now the new location of the Little Italy Mercato Farmers' Market, held every Saturday.

The piazza has tables and chairs that are already being used by visitors sipping coffee or for people watching. Even though everything is brand new, it co-exists with mainstays of the past, Filippi's Pizza Grotto and wood-frame single-family homes.

H.G. Fenton also constructed another smaller apartment building, with 28 apartments, called Amo, on the other side of the piazza where the average asking rent is \$2,513 a month, according to CoStar. The company said it staggered the two buildings' heights to avoid a canyon-like feel to the piazza.

Like Vici, Amo has plenty of amenities, including a sundeck overlooking the piazza, free wireless Internet hotspots, dual-paned windows and a private patio or balcony in many units.

The Little Italy Food Hall, on the first floor of Vici, will have historic photos on display of Little Italy's beginnings decades ago as a tuna industry center. A nearby fountain features sculptures of tuna.

Neal said while the units are top notch, the big draw is the experience of living in Little Italy. For instance, included in the Piazza Della Famiglia is the Little Italy Food Hall, a foodie paradise with six vendors that will have everything from New England seafood to Milan-inspired pizza. It is expected to open early this summer.

"We're renting a lifestyle," Neal said. "I would say it is a great value."

Higher prices don't seem to be stopping renters. Amo opened up March 9 and only has two units left.

### **Living in luxury**

Other new apartments are expected to have similar amenities and prices.

AV8 on Kettner Boulevard will have 129 apartments that come with a parking spot, free wireless Internet in parts of the building, a gym, bike storage, patios and waterfront views in many units.

A major draw will likely be its sky lounge. Turning what some might see as a downside to living in Little Italy into an amenity, residents can sit on rocking chairs on a patch of grass and watch planes fly overhead and land at San Diego International Airport. The lounge also includes an indoor area with a TV, pool table and couches for lounging, as well as the outside area with gas fireplaces, cabanas with speakers, and barbecue pits.

Monthly rents at AV8 start at \$2,210 a month for a studio, \$2,620 for a one-bedroom apartment, and \$3,455 for a two-bedroom unit. There are six penthouses that start at \$4,719 a month.

The two other apartment projects in Little Italy have less information available, such as future rent prices, but are expected to be completed by the end of the year.

The [Luma complex](#) at the corner of Ash and Columbia streets will be at the southern end of Little Italy and is slated to open by October. Luma will have 220 units and 323 parking spaces, according to CoStar. Alexan Little Italy at Columbia and Hawthorn streets will have 85 apartments and also should be completed by the end of the year.

An apartment building that opened at the end of last year, Eighteen Ten, has 99 units and an average asking rent of \$2,895. But it is offering six weeks of free rent if prospective tenants [tour the property](#).

Not everyone is ready to shell out so much for rent. Katie Smith, 37, of Bankers Hill, walking through the piazza between Amo and Vici with two coffees, said the rent just seemed too high for her. She said the new apartments' location could have drawbacks.

“(The apartments) are walking distance to bars and restaurants,” she said. “But they aren’t by a supermarket.”

### **Parking growing pains**

Parking is scarce in Little Italy and it is often easier to use a ride-hailing service or ride a dockless bike (even though the Little Italy Association isn’t a [huge fan](#) of the bikes blocking sidewalks) to get to a restaurant. It should be a big relief then to renters that the new buildings have parking spots.

Amo and Vici will have 125 apartments, but also 225 parking spots. The three-level underground parking lot guarantees at least one spot for all renters and will have 52 new spots of paid public parking. AV8 will have 170 parking spots for 129 apartments.

Even with the parking for residents, some of Little Italy’s old guard aren’t happy as more people move into the area.

Roberto Assenti, owner of Assenti's Pasta on India Street, said he was worried that when friends or family visit people who live in the new apartments they will take parking spots that should be used by his customers.

"I don't think this kind of density is good for any neighborhood," he said.

The fresh pasta store has been in Little Italy since 1981, which Assenti said "was nothing" when his family started.

The first Italians arrived in the neighborhood in the 1880s and it grew as a hub for San Diego's booming tuna industry starting in the 1920s. By the 1960s, the neighborhood was in decline as the fishing industry waned and the construction of Interstate 5 forced the relocation of hundreds of families.

AV8 is located on the site of a former aviation factory that was built in 1927. Its lobby features an old plane's fuel tank, a coffee table built out of pieces of a plane's engine and a propeller by the elevators. Developer CityView decided to keep the facade of the building that used to feature a sign advertising an airplane and engine mechanic school. Now it is painted a bright white with a blue tower of apartments rising behind it.

Marco LiMandri, administrator of the Little Italy Association, says the changes are part of the evolution of what is one of the first neighborhoods in the city, which already includes an elementary school and public spaces.

LiMandri said downtown shoulders a lot of the burden for the region's density needs, so it makes sense an area where a lot of people want to live is a prime target. Also, Little Italy had a lot of empty lots and available spots to build, starting with the Village Walk condos in 2002, so it's not like people were being displaced.

As far as parking goes, LiMandri said its valet parking program (\$9 a vehicle) in the evening alleviates some traffic (about 1,000 car owners a month use the service), and the adoption of ride-hailing services make it possible to go there without a car.

“The easiest places to park are the places you don’t want to go,” he said. “If parking was an issue, no one would ever go to San Francisco, never go to New York City, never go to the better places in Los Angeles. Parking is just something you deal with.”

Not all shop owners are worried about all the new residents, which should at least mean more than 600 new permanent residents.

Daniel Mocerì, general manager of Filippi’s Pizza Grotto and one of the founders of the Little Italy Association, said there is no stopping progress in the neighborhood. He said more residents means more shoppers, something owners should be pleased about.

Also, he noted there are extra parking spots at the 10-story garage on the corner of Cedar Street and Kettner Boulevard. It is a county parking lot during the day, but is available for use after 5 p.m. and on the weekends.

“It’s a thriving community,” Mocerì said, “and people find a way to get there.”