

Little Italy

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Little Italy, tucked below Cleveland Heights and next to University Circle, occupying a spot on the escarpment named Murray Hill, has long been one of the region's most well-known, colorful neighborhoods. Cleveland's growth in the late 19th and early 20th century supported a booming need for skilled craftsmen, artisans, and laborers. As Cleveland grew into one of the nation's largest cities, the demand for stone workers and masons rose to meet the area's growing need for architectural, interior, and funerary marble craftsmanship. This caused a rapid influx of skilled artisans from, for example, Abruzzi in Italy. Lakeview Marble Works employed many of the newcomers. Their refined stone work is on display for the ages at Lakeview Cemetery, located on the hilltop northeast of Murray Hill. Others worked in the garment and lace industries which grew to meet the needs of Cleveland's new managerial and professional classes and the rapidly industrializing country in the late 19th century.

At one time its name identified it solely as an ethnic neighborhood populated by Italian immigrant families, centered on Our Lady of the Holy Rosary Catholic Church (completed in 1892.) During the first sixty or so years of the 20th century, Little Italy remained over 90% Italian-American, and with this concentration of shared background and tradition, the neighborhood developed a reputation for being both insular and exotic.

The community's rituals, revolving around the Feast Days and other holidays of the Catholic Church, centered and protected its communal rhythms around family and religion. This remained the case even as the region underwent dramatic transformations starting with the end of the First World War.

The most singular of those celebrated rituals is the Feast of the Assumption in August. It became the time once a year when the community welcomed with open arms both fellow travelers and outsiders into the community and onto their main street for the region's grandest Italian block party.

Easter and the days leading up to it, and Christmas, are also essential stations on the calendar--but, here, the community would turn inward and quietly go about its sacred and familial duties. Nevertheless, Little Italy's shops and bakeries and restaurants would quietly tune their offerings to the traditional and often tasty requirements of those holiday seasons.

Over the last forty or so years, Little Italy's demographics changed along with the regional economy. Its renewal came about as it morphed from an ethnic enclave into the east side's first neighborhood oriented to art galleries and local artists. Art galleries and artisan's shops delightfully intermixed with the neighborhood's Italian character and its charming bakeries and, by now, famed restaurants and pizza joints.

Recently, secular holidays and special events have gained footholds on the calendar. In 2002, Little Italy commenced celebrating Columbus Day with a parade presented by Order of Italian Sons and Daughters of America and the Northern Ohio Italian American Foundation. In late November and early December comes the annual arts walk, a must-attend event for supporters of local arts and artistry. University Circle's own Parade the Circle energizes Little Italy's cafe and gallery and dining patio culture in June.

The opening of the Museum of Contemporary Art Cleveland, a half mile down Mayfield Road from Little Italy, has placed University Circle's latest cultural gem within walking distance of one of Cleveland's most charming Old World neighborhoods. Shuttles connect MOCA Cleveland and Little Italy with University Circle's renowned parks and cultural and educational and medical institutions. During the winter months, between the early December art walk and April's Easter Holiday, Little Italy's vibrancy is sustained by its culinary heritage, critical mass of fine and craft arts galleries, and, nowadays, its being so close to the stunning new museum.

That heritage is revealed should you visit The Little Italy Heritage Museum, across Mayfield from Holy Rosary Church. Its superb collection of historical photographs tells stories thousands of words couldn't tell as well. Continue up the street and visit the inviting new location of Presti's and have your espresso and people watching together. Further up the street is Corbo's Bakery, another place to indulge any predilection for traditional sweets.

Among so many excellent restaurants, both of the intimate or extroverted kind, Guarino's has been at it longest, since 1918, making it the area's oldest restaurant. If you want Italian food once a month, it would take years to exhaust Little Italy's magnificent culinary resources.

Turn left onto Murray Hill Road and trod the beaten path to the renovated and reconfigured Murray Hill School. For over three decades the school has been the neighborhood's most cosmopolitan multi-use space, hosting as it does galleries and offices, condos, and creative businesses. Continue on Murray Hill and you can appreciate how far up the hillside the original immigrants placed their small and large Victorian houses. Meanwhile on the street small brick buildings contain shops and cafes and other examples of intrepid entrepreneurial energies come to fasten soulful occupation with the soul of a neighborhood.

Cleveland and its surrounding area are dotted with neighborhoods such as Little Italy. In fact, how such neighborhoods renew themselves and continue to thrive is one way to write the ongoing story of our area. There's a great chapter always being added to in the area where Mayfield Road descends to Euclid Avenue. Between Feast days and parades Little Italy remains a tasty crown jewel and a place where heritage and change will always dance together.