

Les Dames D'Escoffier Visit Arthur Avenue

Michele Scicolone (April 20, 2010)



A culinary tour of Arthur Avenue in the Bronx with members of Les Dames D'Escoffier

“Helloooooo, Signorine!”, called Mike Greco as our group approached the counter at Mike’s Deli in the Arthur Avenue Retail Market. “Now I will show you how we make the moh-zah-rel-la!” His accent still thick even after more than 60 years in this country, the energetic octogenarian did not stop talking for a minute while he explained the cheese making process, gave orders to his helpers, posed for photos, flirted, and sang a few lines of an aria -- all the while massaging the cheese curd into bite size knots of fresh mozzarella.

Mike’s visitors on this particular grey Saturday afternoon were members and a few guests of [Les Dames D’Escoffier](#) [2], the premiere professional organization for women in the food, wine and



hospitality industries. As a long time member of Les Dames, I had been asked to put together an Italian wine and food walking tour of the city's largest remaining "Little Italy", together with my husband, Charles, an Italian wine authority. Many of the members, despite being long time New Yorkers, had never been to this part of the Bronx.

To help us with the arrangements, I sought out [Susan Birnbaum](#) [3]. A former social worker, Susan specializes in New York City Walkabouts of various neighborhoods and was delighted to organize an itinerary customized to our food and drink-centric interests. [Arthur Avenue](#) [4] is one of her specialties.

Our first stop on Saturday was Tony & Tina's Pizzeria. Though Italian food was the theme of the day, Tony & Tina's specializes in Albanian burek, flaky pies filled with cheese, spinach, pumpkin, or meat. We stopped at the kitchen to watch the workers expertly spin wads of dough into sheer sheets of pastry similar to fillo, and stuff them with a blend of feta and ricotta cheeses. Susan had arranged for us to have a taste, and we were soon munching on thick, hot slabs of crunchy, cheesy burek.

Fortified against the spring chill, we headed down Arthur Avenue for a stop at [Terranova Bakery](#) [5] and to take a look at their antique coal ovens. Teitel Brothers was next, where we explored their unique selection of dried pasta and sampled cheeses, olives and salumi, accompanied by chunks of freshly baked prosciutto bread from Terranova. Next we looked in at Borgatti's, a 75 year old shop specializing in ravioli and egg pasta, made fresh daily and cut to order. It wouldn't be Little Italy without pizza, so we headed to Full Moon Pizzeria for wedges of steaming hot New York style Margherita.

Though it sounds as if we spent the whole day eating, along the way, Susan pointed out architectural features of the neighborhood and told us a little about the history. Officially called the Belmont section of the Bronx, it was once owned by the Lorillard family who became wealthy from tobacco. If you visit the nearby Botanical Garden, you can still see the Lorillard snuff factory. Italian immigrants who arrived in area in the late 19th and early 20th centuries helped build the nearby Botanical Garden and Bronx Zoo and then settled in the area. We took a look at the beautiful interior of Our Lady of Carmel Church, built in 1906 for the Italian immigrants, and learned the history of the D'Auria-Murphy Square and Park and Ciccarone Playground. Did you know how Arthur Avenue got its name? A certain Ms. Lorillard, who was said to be the mistress of President Chester A. Arthur, suggested it.

While we sipped on frosty limoncello, Charles took us on a quick tour of Mt. Carmel Wine, a shop with one of the biggest Italian wine selections in the city. At the Casa Della Mozzarella, we tried some of their incomparably creamy ricotta and one of the group members was heard to remark that after tasting it, she could never make lasagna with packaged ricotta again. Then we sampled some spicy sopressata at Calabria Pork Store, admired the amazing selection of fresh and prepared meats at Biancardi's Meat Market, and dropped in at Addeo Bakers to see their state of the art ovens and eat some crunchy breadsticks.

At one time there were many Italian neighborhoods like Arthur Avenue throughout the city but as the Italian Americans moved up the social ladder and new immigrants came in, these neighborhoods have shrunk in size, or been incorporated into the surrounding neighborhood. Yet despite the influx of Hispanic and Eastern European immigrants into the area, the Arthur Avenue Little Italy has managed to keep its Italian feeling. It is truly a New York treasure that should be patronized and preserved.

Our final stop of the day was the [Arthur Avenue Café](#) [6] for coffee and dessert where Grandma Antoinette treated us to slices of her ricotta cheesecake and mini-cannolis. While we sipped our coffee, she told us proudly about her family history and life in the Arthur Avenue neighborhood. She ended her talk with a heartfelt rendition of "Maria, Mari" (Oye Marie) and invited us all to return, not to Sorrento, but to Arthur Avenue again and again. After our fun and delicious day of eating, walking and shopping, the members of Les Dames D'Escoffier are sure to take her up on that suggestion.



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