

Los Angeles's Little Italy

Darrell Fusaro (February 25, 2010)



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LOS ANGELES, CA. If a picture is worth a thousands words, then, with over two hundred pictures, “[Los Angeles’s Little Italy](#) [2],” by Mariann Gatto, reveals quite a bit about the one hundred and ninety year history of Italians in Los Angeles.

While Los Angeles possesses the nation's fifth-largest Italian population today, little is known about its Italian history, which has been examined by only a handful of historians over the past 70 years.



Much of historic Little Italy has been erased from the map or is masked by subsequent ethnic settlements. However, the community's memory lives on. From pioneer agriculturalists and winemakers, to philanthropists and eccentric personalities, Italian Americans left a lasting impression on the city's social, economic and cultural fabric and contributed to Los Angeles's development as one of the world's greatest metropolises.

So it seems like a surprising discovery that Italian settlers came to reside in this area nearly a century before those who came to America by way of Ellis Island. It is even more fascinating to learn how these early Italian settlers were instrumental in the successful development of Los Angeles. Gatto tells their stories through black and white vintage photographs.

As presented in "Los Angeles' Little Italy," the early Italian settlers in this area can be dated back to 1827, that is twenty-three years before California achieved statehood. They were quite successful agriculturalists, and by 1869, Los Angeles had established itself as California's wine center, producing four million gallons of wine annually. Five Italian owned wineries were operating in the neighborhood. Olvera Street, which runs through a section of downtown Los Angeles that by all appearances seems to be influenced mainly by Mexican settlers, was actually smack in the middle of what was known as Los Angeles's Little Italy. It was originally, Calle de la Vignas, "Wine Street." The truth is Olvera Street didn't become the "Little Mexico" it is today until the 1930's.

Author Marianna Gatto likens tracing the history of Italians in Los Angeles to that of "chasing ghosts," since much of the history hasn't been preserved. This fact seems to be due to the Italians' success in Los Angeles. Being a very humble and yet progressive group, the Italian immigrant community spent more time perpetuating the American dream in the "land of opportunity" than they did worrying about drawing attention to their accomplishments. They contributed by working together and cooperating with other early settlers, primarily Mexican, in order to create a new community, Los Angeles. Some streets still bear the names of those Italians whose positive influence left an impression on this great city.

For example, Italian settler, Frank Sabichi was President of the [Los Angeles City Council](#) [3] in 1874. Amerigo Bozzanni who started out by opening a modest bicycle shop with his brothers, Joe and Carlo, and went on to become the [California Highway Commissioner](#) [4] who oversaw the construction of the state's first freeway. And then there is the Uddo and Taormina families' coming together to form "[Progresso Soup](#) [5]," which was the very first canned soup in America and still a quality choice of consumers to this day.

Mariann Gatto, a curator of History and Education for the City of Los Angeles, doesn't shy away from the notorious. Depicted are the protests against prohibition, the escalation of criminal influence during prohibition and what is referred to as "una storia segreta" when Italian-Americans were "enemy aliens" during World War Two. The archival pictures depicting the lines formed to register as "enemy aliens" are dramatic.

Open to any page of "Los Angeles's Little Italy" and you will feel like Indiana Jones uncovering buried treasure in the form of a rare photo and enlightening historical fact.

Ms. Gatto's book, "Los Angeles's Little Italy," it is available at area bookstores, independent retailers, and online retailers, or through [Arcadia Publishing](#) [6] at (888)-313-2665



Links

- [1] <http://newsite.ility.org/files/los-angeless-little-italy>
- [2] <http://www.amazon.com/Angeless-Little-Italy-Images-America/dp/0738571881>
- [3] <http://www.lacity.org/>
- [4] <http://www.catc.ca.gov/>
- [5] <http://www.progressosoup.com/>
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