

A small bite of Italy

ARTHUR AVENUE, IN NEW YORK'S BOROUGH OF THE BRONX, CAPTIVATES WITH ITS AGE-OLD ITALIAN CHARM

New York has always been defined by its colorful ethnic enclaves. You can follow your nose to the curry-saturated air of the East Village, or the pungent aroma of *moo goo gai pan* that permeates Chinatown. The sensual spiciness of *moussaka* identifies Astoria's famous Greek community, while a savory Polish *kielbasa* is always an occasion in Williamsburg. But with the advent of gentrification, many traditional mom 'n' pop establishments have been priced out of existence. An authentic cultural dining experience isn't that easy to come by – one with a provenance reaching back to New York's 19th-century immigrants, where bygone recipes and preparation methods are carefully preserved and served up daily. Little Italy, for example, has become an extension of Soho, both districts having seen their unique identities eroded by an onslaught of chain stores.

That said, you can still get a truly Italian culinary experience in New York, but you'll have to travel a bit farther afield to avoid mass-produced Italian fare. One of the best-kept epicurean secrets in New York is Arthur avenue in the Belmont section of the Bronx, a haven of fabulous Italian cuisine to rival what's left of the better-known, but much pricier, Little Italy in downtown Manhattan. Everything from long-established, family-run bakeries like **Addeo Gennaro & Sons** to charming *ristorantes* like **Pasquale's Rigoletto** await in this quintessential New York neighborhood.

Most non-New Yorkers, thanks to TV crime shows and the very real blight during the '70s and '80s, cringe at the thought of "the Bronx." No more. In reality, most of this large borough was untouched by inner-city violence, while the notorious South Bronx has undergone astonishing urban renewal. Since most of the outside world remains unaware of this, a trip to Arthur avenue confers a badge of adventure along with memorable dining. One important proviso: bring a large bag for specialty items from the many bakeries, pastry shops, fishmongers, cheese, spice and pasta makers that populate the area. Founded in 1940 after Mayor Fiorello La Guardia placed a ban on street-clogging pushcarts, the landmark **Arthur Avenue Market** overflows with fresh fruits, vegetables, flowers, unique housewares and more.

Many Manhattanites themselves are unaware of *via Arturo*. But for countless Arthur avenue alumnae now relocated to the suburbs, "the old neighborhood" is remembered affectionately as a place of stickball games by streetlight, where everyone knew each other by name, by parish, by Italian family origin, and where a homemade gnocchi was never far from reach. Happily, the suburban exodus of the younger generation has not altered the street's distinct ambience – enough *paesani* stayed behind to maintain the ancestral traditions, aided by a dependable influx of new arrivals from Italy.

The neighborhood owes its stability to an exceptionally united community. After a comprehensive explanation from a friendly merchant in the Arthur Avenue Market about the crucial importance of mascarpone as the essential cheese for tiramisu, it was

explained to me that McDonald's had had the effrontery to open a franchise in 1997. Thankfully, it disappeared a few years later due in large part to the quiet determination of Roberto Paciullo, owner of the hugely popular **Roberto restaurant**.

With a steady clientele from the suburbs, a reliable flow of visitors from the nearby **Bronx Zoo** and the **New York Botanical Garden**, plus a legion of passionate regulars, Arthur avenue thrives as a hot destination. Rows of century-old tenements, originally housing the immigrant builders who constructed the world famous zoo, now rock with *abbondanza!* As Peter Madonia, owner of **Madonia Brothers Bakery**, says: "The food revolution happily coincided with the discovery of Arthur avenue by 'foodies' who are committed to non-processed, fresh and preservative-free ingredients." Founded by Madonia's Sicilian grandfather in 1918, Madonia Brothers continues to create its famous breads and pastries by hand, with ancient methods that originated in communal Sicilian ovens. In a nod to modern tastes, Madonia Brothers now includes jalapeño and cinnamon swirl among their signature olive and cheese breads. Along with a vast array of mouth-watering Italian pastries, their fresh cannoli – small, crunchy shells, freshly filled with thick, citron-laden semifreddo – stand out as a foretaste of the heavenly banquet.

A few doors down, pizza lovers flock to trendy **Trattoria Zero Otto Nove** (translation: 089 – the area code for Salerno, Italy), also owned by Paciullo. Thirteen different kinds of pizza emerge from wood-burning ovens to satisfy the exacting tastes of a large, loyal following that includes the likes of Uma Thurman, Marisa Tomei, Joe Torre and Mike Wallace. Fancy a great cigar to top off your meal? You'll find that too. **Arthur Avenue Cigars & Lounge** offers a superb selection of hand-rolled cigars and accessories. Settle into a comfortable leather armchair and enjoy a Maduro, Winston Churchill's personal favorite – more than a ritual for the great man, he called it his "sacred rite." Have fun discovering your own sacred epicurean rites on Arthur avenue!

Phoebe Collins

Bronx address book

- Addeo Gennaro & Sons, 2372 Hughes Ave., tel. 1.718.367.8316
- Arthur Avenue Cigars, 2332 Arthur Ave., tel. 1.646.393.5202, www.arthuravenuecigars.com
- Arthur Avenue Market, 344 Arthur Ave., tel. 1.718.295.5033, www.arthuravenue.com
- Bronx Zoo, 2300 Southern Blvd., tel. 1.718.367.1010, www.bronxzoo.com
- Madonia Brothers Bakery, 2348 Arthur Ave., tel. 1.718.295.5573
- New York Botanical Garden, 200th St. at Kazimiroff Blvd., tel. 1.718.817.8700, www.nybg.org
- Pasquale's Rigoletto, 2311 Arthur Ave., tel. 1.718.365.6644
- Roberto restaurant: 603 Crescent Ave., tel. 1.718.733.9503, www.roberto089.com
- Trattoria Zero Otto Nove, 2357 Arthur Ave., tel.1.718.220.1027, www.roberto089.com

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