



EXPLORE NEW ENGLAND | NORTH END

Local and loving it in the North End

Shopping with the Pallottas digs into a neighborhood of longtime culinary settlements

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It's 10:30 on a Saturday morning and the Pallotta sisters are eating square slabs of Sicilian pizza. "The other day I had three of these," says Carla Pallotta, tearing into a cheesy slice at the counter of A. Parziale & Sons Bakery. The tiny Prince Street shop is the first stop of the morning, and it's hard to tell if the sisters, who own Nebo Restaurant on North Washington Street, are working, socializing, or on a food bender.

The Pallottas, who grew up on Endicott Street, a block from where their restaurant sits, have a real Little Italy at their fingertips.

On the morning I meet up with them for a culinary tour, Carla, 51, and Christine, 48, are fresh from the “Today” show, where they made a squid ink dish for Kathie Lee Gifford and Hoda Kotb. The next day they are to film a segment with Mary Anne Esposito of PBS’s “Ciao Italia” and are in search of local ingredients to perk up a veal dish.

Food tours of the North End are a cottage industry, but few are as personal and participatory as the one these sisters embark on daily. “This is what we do. We walk, we eat, we eat some more,” says Christine, who oversees Nebo’s kitchen.

No matter what time of year you visit the North End, it’s always festive, but Saturdays, when tastings abound, are particularly alluring. Inside Salumeria Italiana, on the lesser-trod Richmond Street, the weekend bustle is at full tilt.

The totems of Italian cuisine are everywhere here: giant wheels of cheeses, imported olive oils. Men dressed in pressed deli whites with nametags stand ready to offer up an authentic taste from the old country.

A handsome cheesemonger lays some caciotta al tratufo (pecorino with black truffle) on the sisters and they swoon over its pristine, yet smoky flavor. In the corner, as in a mirage from a Sicilian piazza, the store’s founder, Erminio Martignetti, dapper in a cap and sport coat, keeps watch from a folding chair.

Taking a shine to Christine, Martignetti, 89, asks several times if she is married. She keeps him at bay with a chuckle and a flash of her sharp green eyes.

This specialty shop is no secret to Boston chefs. The anchovy oil is a favorite of Lydia Shire, says Alison Arnett, the store's culinary consultant. The owner of Scampo and Towne Stove and Spirits also picks up pappardelle and gluten-free pasta from this overflowing spot.

The sisters buy cheese and antipasto, chef's snacks, and are stopped on the way out the door. "I want you, before you leave, to try this olive oil," says an employee. "Ummmm," Carla coos after tossing back a spoonful of the newly harvested Sicilian gold.

Personal attention follows the Pallottas, and they enjoy mixing business with pleasure with the merchants here.



At Alba Produce, the owner brings out a carton of stunning medjool dates, like a jeweler with a string of pearls, for their scrutiny. They select a few plump specimens, debating how to work them into the evening's menu.

Another sample is offered and I happily accept. Biting into the velvety, sweet dollop is an elegant and exotic experience. Is this really dried fruit?

Every neighborhood needs a fruit purveyor like this one, which is hidden in plain sight on Parmenter Street. Prickly pears and pomegranates vie for shoppers' attention. There is no

sign, no phone, and like the secret to Nebo's savory cioppino, you may never detect it unless someone breaks down and tells you.

Looking at the handsome pomegranates for which Alba is known, Christine composes an escarole and fresh greens salad on the spot. "Every day we go, we'll walk by and see what he has - potatoes and string beans - we'll buy a dozen artichokes. If we run out, we run out. I'll use fennel in a salad or blood oranges if he has them," she says.

As owners of one of the liveliest kitchens in the city, and one of the latest open (Nebo has extended weekend hours and sometimes serves to 1 a.m. if an event runs late at the TD Garden), the Pallottas have little time to walk Copp's Hill Burying Ground or sip cappuccino at Caffe Vittoria. When they do step out, it's to shop and socialize. "We don't get away from the restaurant, so when we walk through the neighborhood, it makes it nice to see so many people we know," Christine says.

John Picariello, owner of Modern Pastry, is the next familiar face.

"Johnny" they shout, as we weave through a deep line into the anise-scented kitchen in search of amaretti cookies for a ravioli dish. Trays of buns and cookies cool on racks and dough is rolled at breakneck speeds by a focused team of bakers. "I've known them since they were kids," says Picariello, kissing my tour guides.

In a neighborhood bursting with cannoli shops, what's the difference from one to the next? To the sisters loyalty is everything. They are proud that Modern Pastry was named top bakery in the country by TLC last year and that Picariello's family is from the same region of Italy as their father: Puglia.

It's the torrone, a celebratory candy made of sugar, honey, nuts, and egg whites - a pleasing nougat - that has made this bakery a North End mainstay. Of the variety here, such as cappuccino and peanut butter, the marzipan and pistachio-studded torrone is still made by Giovanni Picariello, John's father, now in his 80s.

"We like it hard," says Carla. "So hard you have to crack it on the counter. And break your teeth," Christine adds with a childlike zeal.

For the sisters, almost every street in this mile-long neighborhood bounded by Charlestown and the Financial District is tinged with meaning. "We used to play hide and seek in the Old North Church," Carla says, as she walks down Salem Street to Polcari's Coffee.

Bounding through the door in search of polenta, like kids let loose in a penny candy store, they gravitate toward neat piles of confections nestled on the counter. Tearing open a small sack of roasted fava beans, Carla is proud of her discovery and offers me one. The buttery, nutty, and lightly salty beans are incredibly satisfying.

Little glass jars of powdered curry, ground ginger, paprika, and herbs de Provence entice professional and home chefs alike, but coffee is king here. Starting as a coffee roaster in 1932, Polcari's has become a local landmark and a Pallotta favorite.

Some of the most succulent entrees at Nebo originate from the Sulmona Meat Market on Parmenter Street a few steps away. Inside this white-walled, squeaky-clean butchery, it's like old-home week. The women jokingly flirt with Franco Susi and Christine falls into an intimate conversation with his white-haired father, Domenico, discussing which satellite channel televises Italian soccer games.

Their intense over-the-counter talk holds up the line of eager patrons. There are no snickers, heckling, taunting, or yelling as locals wait for their sausages and freshly ground meat.

A half hour later, Christine has a similarly intense powwow with Bryan Coms, former general manager at The Cheese Shop, about his prosciutto machine. Tips on the correct way to achieve the thinnest slice of prosciutto and the right wax paper to use are dispensed between bites of a memorable Italian sub.

It carries pasta, imported oils, 30 to 40 cheeses, but the runaway hit at The Cheese Shop is the classic sub. Chewy bread stuffed with fresh Italian cold cuts, cheese, and a splash of oil is a workingman's lunch that could carry you to dinner and beyond.

Everyone who has called the North End home has a culinary tale to tell, but the Pallottas' memories of childhood call to mind the grainy black-and-white reels from the Italian cinema.

Arriving at their Endicott Street building with chunks of cheese, freshly made sausage links, and Tuscan sticks, "We wouldn't feel like carrying it up," Carla recalls.

Out the window their mother would send a basket tied to a rope so the girls could unload their bounty. Then mom would yank it up to the fourth floor and start dinner with her sister.

The building has been rehabbed, and their mother lives now on the waterfront, but the memory is still vivid. Now they carry home chestnuts and cheese in coffee sacks from Polcari's.

Exiting the shops with a trail of goodwill in their wake, it's "Ciao," and they are back to Nebo to prepare tonight's special.

If you go...

'This is what we do. We walk, we eat, we eat some more.'

NEBO OWNERS Christine Pallotta (right) and her sister Carla with Erminio Martignetti, at Salumeria Italiana, the store he founded

Nebo

90 North Washington St.

617-723-6326

www.neborestaurant.com

Italian cuisine with an urban update. Handmade pasta, pizza, and zucchini lasagna (\$21).

Alba Produce

18 Parmenter St.

Fruit stand specializing in hard-to-find medjool dates, prickly pears, and artichokes.

The Cheese Shop

20 Fleet St.

617-973-9500

Possibly the best Italian sub in the North End. Subs are \$7 to \$11 depending on how many cold cuts you pile on.

Modern Pastry

257 Hanover St.

617-523-3783

www.modernpastry.com

Home of the torrone, a teeth-cracking nougat delight, \$20 a pound.

Sulmona Meat Market Inc.

32 A Parmenter St.

617-742-2791

Old-fashioned butcher selling meats cut to order. Fresh ground beef \$4.50 a pound.

Salumeria Italiana

151 Richmond St.

800-400-5916

Imported Italian olive oil (\$15 and up) and hard-to-find gourmet pasta (starting at \$4.50 a pound) attract chefs from across the city.

A. Parziale & Sons

80 Prince St.

617-523-6368

www.parzialebakery.com

Authentic pizza, bread, and cookies baked in this no-frills spot. A slice of Sicilian pizza \$1.45.

Polcari's Coffee

105 Salem St

617-227-0786

www.polcariscoffee.com

Coffee, herbs, spices, candy, and more. Italian roast coffee \$9.75 a pound. Roasted fava beans \$6.99 a pound.