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A People's History of Washington D.C.

Thursday, November 26, 2009

Nicole on the Last Remnants of Italian Life on North Capitol Street



"I was born in France and came to the United States in 1960. I came because I had a sister who suffered a tragic accident. I ended up in Washington because I had a friend here. Thirty years ago, my husband and I bought the Catania bakery. Neither my husband nor I were bakers, but Grace Caruso, the former owner, taught me everything I know. For the last thirty years, we kept the place just as they did. We still make Italian breads using Grace's recipes and deliver them daily around the District, Maryland and Virginia.

"You know, most of these old Italians can't live without their bread. Many of them left the area, either died or went down south, but a few of them are still around. This place is the last remnant of Italian life on North Capitol Street. The Italians living around here and coming by are mostly older people. The newer Italian generation is more Americanized, but they will still come in on holidays to get some of our bread because they grew up eating our bread. We also do events with the Knights of Columbus, the Holy Rosary, Catholic Churches, and we used to do the bread for the big Italian convention in DC. Now, we also get a lot of Greek and Turkish customers who love the hard Italian breads, too, but not as many Italians.

About Danny Harris

I am a D.C.-based photographer and collector of stories. People's District is my attempt to catalogue a people's history of Washington, D.C. The stories listed here are presented in the words of the interviewee. I welcome your ideas on who should be featured on People's District. Please reach out to me at danny@peoplesdistrict.com.

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“Back in 1932 when the Catania bakery opened, there were Italian stores everywhere here. This was an Italian neighborhood. Most of the community here was from Southern Italy. The Caruso family came from Nicolosi, which was at the base of Mt. Etna. Catania, the name of this bakery, is the name of a province in Sicily where the Caruso family is from. When the bakery opened, they used a wood burning oven and delivered bread door-to-door. Then, after World War II, they started delivering to restaurants. Around the same time, the neighborhood changed and it wasn't Italian anymore. When we first bought the place, I never came at night because the neighborhood was so bad in the late 1970's. It got better, but it is still a very dangerous place.

“We have children, but they are not involved with the bakery. Because of this area, my husband was not keen on having our children or grandchildren come here. We've had a number of robberies, some of them were big time robberies. My granddaughter used to come down and spend Saturday's here with me ever since she was three-years-old. But, she was here during a robbery and her parents wouldn't let her come down anymore. Now, I am here by myself. Danger is still here. But, we have been here for a long time and will stay. We are resilient. The neighborhood is getting better, but that doesn't mean the bad elements are gone. At night, you wouldn't want to walk around by yourself, but, the neighborhood is slowly changing. Now, on Saturday's, I started making and selling croissants out of the bakery. That is my French addition to this place. Otherwise, it is and will remain Italian. You know, after all of this time here, I feel more Italian than French.”

The Catania Bakery is located at 1404 North Capitol Street NW.

Posted by - at 9:00 AM

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