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Under Your Nose: Bakery That Time Forgot

Catania Recalls A Once-United Community

By Tom Williams
Roll Call Staff
May 11, 2009, Midnight

It's early on a Saturday morning at Catania Bakery at 1404 North Capitol St. NW.

Joe Lagana, who comes every Saturday to pick up fresh bread for his family and use the leftover bread

as feed on his hog farm in Prince George's County, answers a question with a question.

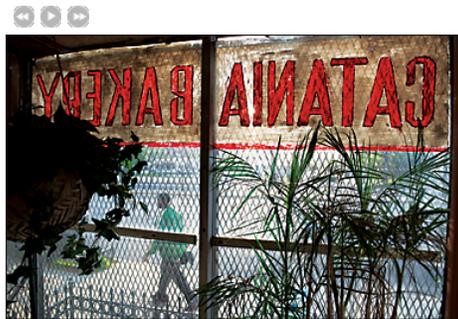
"How old am I?" he shouts to Nicole Tramonte, the owner of Catania Bakery. Then Lagana remembers: He's 86. He has been coming to Catania since the mid-1930s when he would deliver wood for the bakery's brick oven.

Catania began selling bread out of this spot in 1932, when the Caruso family relocated their bakery from Hartford, Conn. The family included the father Alfio Caruso, mother Marie, daughter Grace and three brothers — Louie, John and Sam. The eldest son, Louie, 94, still remains a fixture every Saturday — when he is not on one of his regular trips to Italy — even though his family sold the bakery to Tramonte in 1978.

The store is mainly a wholesale provider of rolls and bread to local restaurants and delis, including the Capitol Hill establishments Taverna, Mangialardo's and the Irish Times. But on Saturdays, the bakery opens to the public, selling croissants, muffins, turnovers and, its specialty, Italian hard rolls and bread.

Beyond that, the bakery acts as a social club, with the majority of the regular Saturday patrons lingering to catch up over coffee. Many walk behind the counter to select their rolls and help themselves to coffee. There are no tables, but the old-timers will sit for hours on a bench along the front window.

Alan Penberg, a retired police officer, helps serve others and occasionally fills in for Tramonte when she is away. Penberg says he started coming in 1968 when he joined the force. He left in 1992 for a job in Florida. When he returned to the District in 2001, he says, Catania was "one of the first places" that he visited.



Tom Williams/Roll Call

The storefront of Catania Bakery on North Capitol Street is covered with a grate. The neighborhood had once been a thriving community inhabited by Irish, Jewish, African-American and Italian families. Click [here](#) for more photos.

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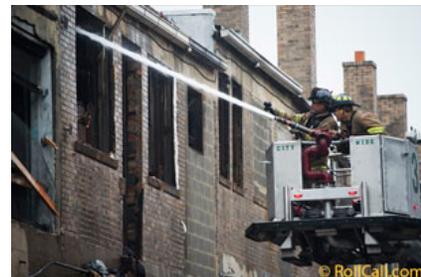
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Karen Thomas of Bloomingdale, a first-time customer, sighs in delight as she looks at the collection of old photos on the wall. She chats with Tramonte about the bakery's history before leaving with her muffin. "Don't ever give up this thing," she says to the owner.

The Caruso family lived above the store for much of the time that it owned the business. When he sold the business about 15 years ago, Louie Caruso moved. He started delivering bread at age 18 but eventually got to take over "the whole deal." He was gone for three years while serving as an Army medic during World War II, treating the wounded in the Battle of the Bulge.

Caruso, also known as Señor to one of the regulars, arrives late in the morning and sits with Pasquale Barbaro, his friend of more than 30 years, and a couple other visitors. Tramonte pulls out a number of old photographs and needs him to identify the images.

"Oh yeah, that's Sam!" Caruso says in a booming, gravelly voice. "Oh, that's Grace!" One picture shows a wedding party in Italy. "You can tell it's in Italy," he says. "Look how they dressed back then!"

Caruso recounts how that stretch of North Capitol Street, where today most of the buildings are unoccupied, was once lined with tailors, a shoe repair, another bakery, barbershops and a coal yard. The demographic of residents living in the nearby row houses included a mix of people of Irish, Jewish, African-American and Italian heritage.

The neighborhood has been gentrifying in recent years, but the stretch of North Capitol stills retains its edge. "We're like an island here," Tramonte says, recalling that when she took over in 1978, there was constantly police tape around the latest crime scene. "It was business as usual."

During the 1968 riots that tore apart parts of Capitol Hill, Caruso put up a sign saying "Soul Brother" to protect the bakery from vandals and recognize his friendship with blacks in the neighborhood.

After Caruso leaves with his small entourage, Tramonte remains to deal with finances and attend to a stray customer. "Times are tough," she says, with restaurants closing or cutting back with the economic downturn. But Tramonte rejects the idea of moving on, saying the bakery has been like a sanctuary for her when times get tough in life. "I don't think I'll retire," she says.

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