



The final Feast of St. Anthony brings multitudes of people into the streets of Boston's North End to pin money and gifts to a statue of the saint. Photo courtesy of Pete Anastasi Jr.

Celebrate in the North End

Italian feasts celebrate ethnic heritage with good food and good fun

by Kevin Concannon

Each summer, the streets of the North End are turned over to a number of different societies for a series of feast days. These societies, composed of people from various towns and villages in Italy, have been around for many years. Their original purpose was to provide a link with the New World for the friends and family still trying to get here. In earlier days, the societies arranged passage for these people, got them jobs and found them housing. Today, their primary function is the perpetuation of Old World traditions — the most celebrated of which are the feast days of the patron saints of their original villages.

Every weekend during the summer, a different society, each from a different village, hosts an elaborate festival that includes live entertainment, street vendors peddling Italian specialty foods and religious pageantry. At no other time will outsiders get a more intimate and flavorful view of life in this close Italian community. And there is no better season to visit the North End. The neighborhood's narrow streets overflow with residents and visitors alike for a summer-long cele-

bration of family and tradition.

The societies have run these feasts for the better part of the century, making them as much a part of tradition as a celebration of it. The custom of the feast weekends was brought here from the Italian villages from which these families emigrated. Even today, native Italians honor the patron saints of their villages with elaborately planned festivals. In the North End, these local feasts are re-enacted by members of the societies whose ancestors arrived on this country's shores long ago. What began as a way to continue the old traditions has become a tradition itself.

The Festivity Begins

Each of the feasts is organized by a different society. Carl Salvi, Financial Secretary of the Society of Saint Anthony of Padua traces his roots back to Montefalcione, Italy where that saint's feast is celebrated simultaneously with the corresponding North End festival. Saint Anthony's feast is the most famous. Salvi's organization sponsors the biggest of these feasts on Labor Day weekend.

The festivals begin on Friday evenings, as society members carry a statue of their saint from its church or chapel in their society headquarters through the streets to a temporary outdoor chapel, leaving it there for the duration of the weekend. From eight in the evening until midnight, bands perform concerts on stands erected nearby. Revelers roam the streets sampling the spicy sausages, tasty pastries and many other amusements which line the narrow, winding streets. On Saturday afternoons, the celebrations continue. Everything from traditional Italian music to contemporary rock may be heard as one navigates the streets of the small community.

On Sunday, the statue is carried through the streets again. People hold their children up to kiss the saints and pin ribbons of money to the statue — some do this from their windows above. Confetti fills the streets, streaming down from above along the course of the procession. The money which people donate to the statues is used to finance the festi-

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vals; whatever is left over goes to various charities, most of which are right in the community. Through these feasts, the societies are able to continue their mission of helping friends and family, at the same time reinforcing the family values for which each community is known.

As little as 10 years ago, the festivals were pretty much a local phenomenon, with a few groups from corresponding organizations in other parts of the country making the pilgrimage to share in the celebration with their fellow countrymen. Since then, the reveling has taken on more of a secular atmosphere, due in part to the efforts of former mayor Kevin White's promotion of the feasts as part of Boston's "Summerthing" program. The religious roots still hold firm on the local terrain, though.

"On Sundays, of course, the outdoor masses and the processions make for a more religious feeling. Some of the women make vows to their patron saints that, if they are granted some favor, they will walk in the parade. Some walk barefoot; others carry candles," explains Salvi. "Saint Anthony is the patron saint of lost articles, so someone might ask him to help find a lost wallet or something. And if they find it, they make good on their vow by walking in the procession."

During the same decade, 10 vendors could supply all the sausages that attendees could consume: today residents and tourists keep up to 50 vendors jumping, offering sausages, pastries and every other type of food imaginable. Salvi and his counterparts in other organizations have formed the United Feasts Organizations in order to coordinate all the logistics: parade permits, police details, publicity and all the other services which make the festivals run smoothly.

Each Saint's Day

While Salvi's club runs the big event on Labor Day Weekend, Saint Anthony's actual feast days are in the middle of June. Saint Leonard's Church kicks off the summer feasts with their own festival on that June weekend. The following week, the third annual Saint Jude festival raises money for Danny Thomas's famous research hospital. The Saint Jude feast is organized by a consortium of representatives from several groups; Jude is the only celebrated saint not directly associated with a specific village or constituency.

The festival of Madonna della Grazie (Our Lady of Grace) launches the series of festivals sponsored directly by the social organizations. The next feast, that of Saint Rocco, is celebrated not only in the North End and a corresponding village in

A Little Corner of Italy in Boston

Mention the North End of Boston, and you will get as many different responses as you have listeners. If there is any common denominator at all, it is probably due largely to a popular television commercial for Prince Spaghetti Day. "Anthony! It's Wednesday!" The image of the North End created by that advertisement celebrates family and tradition. The North End is Boston's oldest residential neighborhood; long before Anthony raced home for Mama's special pasta, Paul Revere rode the very same streets along what is now known as the Freedom Trail.

Since before 1645, Hanover Street has been the axis around which the community turns. Today, Italian restaurants, cafes and pastry shops pepper the sidewalks. For many, heaven is an extended feast partaken along more than half of Hanover Street. Espresso or a cocktail in an old world cafe, a specialty Italian dinner in one of the street's legendary eateries and mouth-watering pastries from a fancy bake shop.

In the neighborhood's earlier days, the waterfront buzzed with merchants and businessmen checking the comings, goings, and most importantly, the cargoes of trading ships at the wharfs. More prosperous merchants owned "pilot ships" that raced out to be the first to greet the potential business opportunities. And among the area's prominent citizens was Paul Revere. In the 1770s, when Revere and his family lived in the North Street residence now preserved as the Paul Revere House, the famous rebel used to display his political posters in the windows to be seen by the many passers-by.

If history or architecture are among your interests, a short stroll back up to Hanover Street will lead to Saint Stephen's Church, also known as the New North Church. Saint Stephen's, the only remaining church in the city built by the famous architect Charles Bulfinch, was dedicated in 1804. The New North Church is a fine example of the Colonial style. The brownstone pilasters (originally meant to be painted white in imitation of marble) and dome-covered cupola exclude the formal Puritan foundation upon which our nation was built.

Across the street, the Paul Revere

Mall (also known as the Prado) leads to the Old North Church, in whose steeple Revere's friends Captain Pulling and Robert Newman lit the lamps that ignited a revolution. The great equestrian statue of Revere embarking on his rebel ride enjoys the constant company of children playing and old-timers in animated conversation. A few steps away the seeds of American history rest in glass cases and on the walls of the Old North Church Museum and Gift Shop. Period paintings of Revere, a number of small artifacts and a selection of impressively yellowed documents attest to the North End's vital role in the birth of our country.

Over on Charter Street, one of America's oldest cemeteries is permanent home to dozens of political luminaries. Copp's Hill Cemetery has been a constant subject of fantastic speculation as far as its peculiar name goes. Different stories — both misinformed — have the name attributed to an imagined abundance of former policemen among its residents or a legitimization of its colloquial name: Corpse Hill. In reality, the cemetery took its name from one of its former owners, William Copps, who peddled shoes over on Prince Street in his time. Copps' children lie under the oldest headstones on the property.

In the years between Paul Revere and Ray Flynn, the North End has been home to all different types of people, most of them immigrants. Once Boston's first "suburbs" were created, the well-to-do of the Colonial North End moved on to Brookline and other fashionable districts, leaving the bustling community to the succeeding waves of immigrants then arriving on our shores.

The Irish held fort here for a while, giving way to an increasing Eastern European Jewish community by the 1870s. By 1920, the population was 90 percent Italian. The North End also included "New Guinea," Boston's first Black community at the foot of Copp's Hill.

At one time, Haymarket and Quincy Market were both part of the North End. Today, the Southeast Expressway (or more accurately, Distressway) slices both of these areas off of the neighbor-

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Italy, but in parts of France and Spain as well.

Saint Agrippina is the patron saint of thunderstorms, and according to Salvi, it almost always rains on the weekend that festival is celebrated; in the last 15 years, only three summers have passed without the mysterious showers. Salvi is quick to point out that the rain almost always gives way to sunshine soon after the festivities begin.

The feast of the Madonna del Sconciuso, known commonly as the Blessing of the Fleet, takes place at the waterfront on North Street. Upon the consecration of the fleet, white birds are released above the crowd along with what seems like tons of confetti to the jubilant cheers of the crowd. This feast has been extended to five days this year, in honor of its 75th anniversary, and promises to be a spectacular event.

The final feast weekend of the summer takes place on Labor Day weekend: the festival of Saint Anthony and Saint Lucy. Saint Anthony's feast is run by the men's society to which Salvi belongs. If you can only get to one festival, this is the one! In testament to the high esteem in which he is held by the residents, the summer begins and ends with Saint Anthony. As the last of the legendary summer feasts, the Saint Anthony's club plans this last long weekend honoring the patron saint of lost articles as one not soon forgotten.

The women's society caps off the series with the Feast of Saint Lucy, patron saint of eyes. Legend has it that Lucy was martyred by having her eyes put out. In any event, she is usually depicted holding her eyes out on a platter. Bible scholars attribute Lucy's association with eyes to the incredible beauty of her own eyes and can't really substantiate the martyr theory. More likely, she is represented by the eyes because of her name, which means "light." All eyes will be on this last parade of the season when the women march Saint Lucy through the streets on her colorfully decorated shrine.

All summer long, the North End will be sparkling with light, music and the aromas of good food. The feasts offer something for everyone including rock bands in the afternoons, sure to delight younger people. But the ethnic flavor is best represented during Sunday's festivities, which include traditional music from the likes of the Roma Band of Boston. During the procession, residents can be seen lowering ribbons of money onto the passing statues below their windows; those favored by the saint march in his or her honor; and the day is just generally resplendent with colorful pageantry. And, of course, everyone loves good Ital-

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hood way. With minimal effort, adventurous visitors can navigate their way under the overpass to sample the fruits and vegetables hawked from the street carts in the Haymarket. Right next door, Faneuil Hall/Quincy Market lures visitors with its seemingly endless variety of restaurants, bars and shops. Other nearby attractions include the Old Customs House and the New England Aquarium, also base of operations for some serious summer whale-watching.

No doubt due to its geographic isola-

tion from the rest of the city, the North End has always been a tightly-knit community. The British rebels, Irish, Jewish and Italian immigrants (and others as well) have all made the North End their own at one time or another. While evidence of the Irish and the Jews seems all but lost, the remembered patriots and the contemporary Italian community make today's North End a spicy blend of the new world and the old. No where else can one find European customs and foods more perfectly agreeable with American History. ■ — K.C.

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ian food. Salvi reminds us that "you won't find ordinary hotdogs and hamburgers" at the vendor's stands.

The feast attracts people from around the world. Many Italian social clubs throughout the country make the trek to Boston's North End every year. And in recent years, a number of travel agencies have organized special packages for the public. If you are looking for a taste of the old world a little closer to home, the Italian Feasts are a good bet. The North End is best reached by public transportation. Boston's North Station serves the area with commuter rail trains and subway cars. If you are coming into town by car, you might consider leaving the family wagon at a nearby garage or parking area; the narrow streets of the North End are hardly enough to accommodate the people who live there. There is plenty more to see in addition to the festivals, and it is best seen on foot. ■ — K.C.

North End Festivals & Feasts, 1986

July 11-13 Madonna del Grazie (Our Lady of Grace), Endicott Street.

July 18-20 Saint Rocco's Feast, Thatcher Street.

July 25-27 Feast of Saint Joseph, Hanover Street.

August 1-3 Saint Agrippina's Feast, Hanover Street.

August 8-10 Madonna della Cava (Our Lady of the Cave), Hanover Street.

August 14-18 Madonna del Sconclisso (Feast of the Fishermen), North Street.

August 22-24 Feast of Saint Rosalie, North Street.

August 29-31 Saint Anthony Festival, Endicott Street.

September 1 Feast of Saint Lucy, Endicott Street.

For further information regarding the North End Festivals, call Carl Salvi, Saint Anthony Society, (617) 523-3159.

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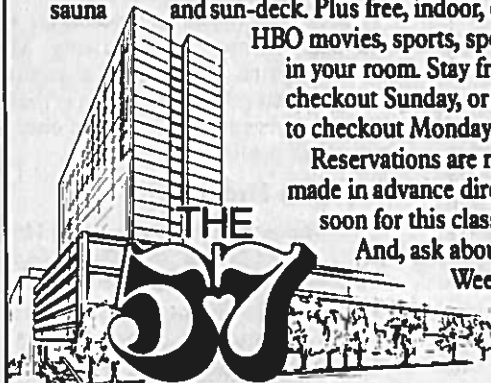
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