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Larger Than Ever, La Festa Italiana is Still a Close-Knit Affair



by Ben Ackman

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Rolled in small batches by volunteer hands, La Festa Italiana's regulars often name them as the highlight of the entire event.



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When Michael Sears arrived to sell souvenir T-shirts at La Festa Italiana in 2010, he had only just started selling printed shirts. In fact, he had never sold souvenir shirts before.

“Somebody asked me if I wanted to try the festival because it was a little slow at the time,” Sears said. “And I said ‘Yeah, I’ll give it a try.’ I made a bunch of Jersey City shirts and they took off and people bought them. I did very well.”

This year, Sears said, the festival is larger. There are more vendors, and in addition to the usual clientele of downtown locals, a wave of fresh faces has arrived from new residential buildings downtown.

“I see young, old, a lot of new faces,” Sears said. “That’s very different, a lot of new faces. But there’s still an old crowd, still coming from the shore and other parts of New Jersey, just to come here.”



Michael Sears began his souvenir T-shirt enterprise at La Festa 15 years ago.

La Festa Italiana, the annual Italian culture festival hosted by Holy Rosary Church on Sixth Street, is throwing its largest party yet. But many of the event’s traditions are upheld by volunteers who have been returning for years or decades.

Nick Grillo, the chairman of La Festa, has been at the helm of the festival for 26 years. He said Italian festivals originated as religious celebrations for Italian immigrants, but over the years, they became vital fundraising measures for aging churches as their attendance declined.

Grillo, who is also Holy Rosary's music director and finance chair, said Holy Rosary will fund community outreach, soup kitchens, advertising for services and building maintenance with the revenue from La Festa.

"Years ago, you didn't need to do all that," Grillo said. "There were just so many members of churches, you had filled pews. But today it's not the same way."



La Festa's signature banners are raised outside Holy Rosary Church at festival time every year.

Reverend Rafal Smola, Holy Rosary's administrator, said this is a significant year for the festival. In addition to commemorating the Assumption of Mary, a Catholic feast observed on August 15, it overlaps with a jubilee year and the church's 140th anniversary.

The church was founded in 1885, which according to Grillo makes it the oldest Italian church in New Jersey. La Festa itself is in its 122nd year, but it's grown significantly over last year's festival.

This year, La Festa sports about 30 vendors, around a dozen of which are brand new, Grillo said. For the first time, the festival is offering extended hours from 2 p.m. to 11 p.m. And Grillo said the list of corporate sponsors has grown.

"Because the event is so big and popular, more companies wanted to be sponsors," Grillo said. "It makes it easy to sell that to companies, because we get thousands of people every day."



Booths must be meticulously squeezed into the festival grounds for all of La Festa's vendors to fit.



The sausages and peppers in La Festa's renowned sandwiches are grilled out in the open.

Grillo said people come to the festival for its signature food offerings. This year, people will line up across the block for rice balls, sausage and pepper sandwiches, and zeppoles.

The zeppole booth is another part of the festival that's grown – it's doubled in size since last year and added fried oreos to its menu. Lisa Meffe, a volunteer, said the crowded conditions behind the counter made the expansion welcome.

“We’re tripping on one another,” Meffe said. “So we needed a little bit more space. Now we have the Cadillac of booths at La Festa.”



At La Festa, Zeppoles are dusted with powdered sugar and sold by the dozen and half dozen.

Meffe is part of a volunteer team with decades of Festa experience. Gerry Meffe, Lisa's father-in-law, who passed away in 2021, started making the form of fried dough known as zeppole 40 years ago. His son Vito, Lisa's husband, has been helping out since then.

The current team of volunteers includes Meffe's mother-in-law and close family friends, she said.

"It's a family affair," Meffe said. "They're in their eighties and they're still working."

The customers, she said, are also consistent.

"Downtown, people spend the money," Meffe said. "They come year after year and we see a lot of the same faces. And even if they no longer live here, they come back."



Jill Jaeger is part of a close team of volunteers whose members have slung zeppoles for years or decades.

Repeat festivalgoers might recognize the live entertainment year after year as well. Returning after a scheduling conflict prevented them from playing last year, the Toga Party Band performed at the festival's opening night on Wednesday, marking their seventh appearance at La Festa since 2012.

“Anybody that’s seen us from prior years, they’ll often come up and say ‘Hey, good to see you again!’” said Eric Lear, the band’s lead vocalist. “So it’s like seeing an old friend that you don’t get to see all the time.”



Eric Lear, right, sings and plays rhythm guitar for the Toga Party Band, a familiar set of faces at La Festa.

For some of the festival's volunteers, it is very much a reunion.

Katy Sista has been making rice balls for the festival in Holy Rosary's basement for decades. Her fellow volunteers describe her as a matriarch. She compared the atmosphere of the kitchen to Christmas or Thanksgiving.

"You know when the whole family gets together, no matter what size they are?" Sista said. "They're having fun, it's tradition."



For many years, Katy Sista has helped lead a dedicated team of volunteers to make and sell thousands of rice balls every year.



To make rice balls, volunteers fold chopped meat inside rice dough, which is then breaded, fried and topped with tomato sauce.

The day before the festival opened, four volunteers came to Holy Rosary to prepare rice and chopped meat ahead of time. On Wednesday, more than 25 people came to roll the rice balls, only 1,000 of which are made per day.

Longtime volunteer Joanne Sommer said the mood in the kitchen on festival days is jovial. Working together, the volunteers tell stories of past years, like when one volunteer would juggle the rice balls, and honor traditions, like when Nick Grillo comes to try the chopped meat and rice so he can “make sure it’s good.”



The rice ball team includes members of all ages, from newborns to octogenarians.

Sommer, a teacher, said her children in their late twenties take time off work to volunteer, and they started when they were teenagers. One high-school-aged volunteer has come back every summer since she taught her in preschool, Sommer said.

“You just like coming here because it’s family, and it’s extended family,” she said.



Monsoon rains on Wednesday resulted in a sparse crowd at La Festa's opening night.

The festival opened on Wednesday night to a small crowd dispersed by heavy rain, but it returned in force on Thursday. La Festa Italiana runs through Sunday, August 17.