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U.S.

As San Francisco's Aging Italians Grieve From Afar, a Gelato Maker Drops By

Guido Mastropaolo delivers the frozen treat to immigrant residents who have watched at a distance as Covid-19 devastates their homeland

By [*Marc Vartabedian*](#) / Photographs by *Brian L. Frank* for *The Wall Street Journal*

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SAN FRANCISCO—The normally bustling Marina district here is quiet, but Guido Mastropaolo's gelato shop was buzzing on a recent morning. His head gelato maker packed kilos of colorful flavors into 10 containers, and Mr. Mastropaolo rolled his eyes at his teenage daughter, who, at 10:30 a.m., had already gotten into the frozen treat.

He is on a mission to cheer up a group that is suffering differently from many others during the coronavirus pandemic: San Francisco's aging Italians.

For these "old generation" immigrants—many of whom live alone, speak little English and have helplessly watched deaths from Covid-19 in their homeland soar above 25,000—free gelato can provide some solace.

"In Italy we have two antidepressants: espresso and gelato," says the 59-year-old Mr. Mastropaolo, who opened Gio Gelati 2½ years ago.



Guido Mastropaolo, owner of Gio Gelati in San Francisco, says, 'In Italy we have two antidepressants: espresso and gelato.'

While many of these Italians arrived half a century ago, bonds to the motherland linger. Loved ones in northern Italy, the country's hardest-hit region and where a significant portion of San Francisco's Italians trace their roots, are now surrounded by death.

"Everyone here has a story," Mr. Mastropaolo says.

THE PANDEMIC IN ITALY

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The Italian Community Services here, which has funded and helped organize the deliveries, has distributed more than 1,000 of its own care packages filled with reminders of the old country: pistachio cream from Sicily, chocolate from Umbria, De Cecco pasta from Abruzzo.

"They don't forget [Italy] easily," says Executive Director Pietro Bonanno. "It's important to console the community, especially those who've not found great success here."

While far from the size and concentration of New York or New Jersey's Italian enclaves, San Francisco's Little Italy emerged as a main Italian hub west of the Mississippi. By the 1930s nearly 30,000 Italians had settled in several small neighborhoods, by far the city's largest immigrant community, according to U.S. Census data and historical records.



Teresa Mastropaolo delivered free gelato to homebound residents in San Francisco.

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Generations of these families are buried at the Italian Cemetery just outside the city, and on rare occasions remains are flown in from Italy to rest alongside them.

On the delivery route last week, Mr. Mastropaolo's daughter Teresa, 19, drives mostly through North Beach, the city's remaining Italian stronghold. Double-checking a sheet of addresses, she leaves the shop's refrigerated van idling and walks up a steep hill in search of a recipient.

A second-story window opens from a pink building and Maria Magno, 80, calls out to claim the dessert. She lowers a wicker basket tied to a string and instructs Ms. Mastropaolo to put her vanilla gelato inside.

"Everyone is very scared," Ms. Magno says in Italian from her window sill while pulling up the basket. So far, family in Turin and Milan are OK, she adds.



In addition to business deliveries, Gio Gelati has also started dropping off gelato to a local hospital's emergency staff.

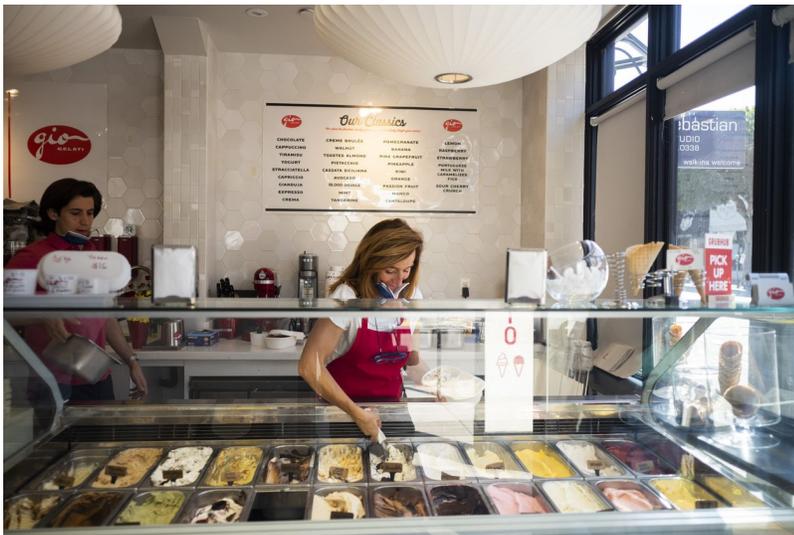
Several blocks away, Ms. Mastropaolo asks around at a low-income, single-room-occupancy building for someone expecting gelato. Conte Vincenzo, who immigrated to San Francisco in the 1960s and speaks mostly Italian, emerges to claim it.

Mr. Vincenzo banter with his friend Antonio Francavilla, who says it's a time of collective grieving in the neighborhood.

"When I arrived in my '65 Impala in the '70s, fishermen at the wharf spoke only Sicilian," Mr. Francavilla says. "It was like I was in my own country. This situation is hard."

Bells toll at the nearby Saints Peter and Paul Church, an old Italian Catholic parish run by an order that originated in northern Italy, near the worst of the outbreak. At the church priests are live-streaming Masses daily while at least one mourns the death of fellow priest Giuseppe Ghiggini, who was killed by Covid-19 near Brescia.

Death in the homeland has touched Mr. Mastropaolo, too. His close friend died from Covid-19 in Rome last month, and frequent calls to his family in Pesaro, a small town on the Adriatic Sea, often reveal more cases.



Gio Gelati serves a community of Italian immigrants where many residents have family ties in northern Italy, an especially hard-hit region in the country's outbreak.

“Sometimes you don’t want to check,” Mr. Mastropaolo says, for fear of more bad news.

While the number of new cases in Italy is slowly decreasing, the death toll continues to climb. Mr. Bonanno delivered a fresh round of care packages this past week. Mr. Mastropaolo, in addition to business deliveries, has started dropping off gelato to a local hospital’s emergency staff; last month he said he delivered so much gelato that he pulled his Achilles tendon.

Selling gelato, which contains less cream and is less fluffy than ice cream, is a second act for Mr. Mastropaolo. Previously he spent 20 years with Walt Disney Co., publishing print adaptations of such titles as “Toy Story.”

“Gelato transmits the same happiness,” Mr. Mastropaolo says. “The situation is very bad in Italy; I felt helpless, emotionally attached. Gelato I hope can help a bit.”

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