

Little New York

By Cynthia Navadeh
Photos by Heather Mull

When you think of New Castle – supposing that happens on any given day – do you think of baklava? Of pizza and chili dogs? Of two distinct ethnic cuisines, Middle Eastern and Italian, coexisting happily – sometimes on the same menu?

If you don't, think again. Recently I sampled New Castle's astonishingly diverse food, guided by my friend Audrey Geer Masalehdan, who grew up there, and her friend Fran Occhibone, who's lived there all her life. Too bad you don't know them. But I'm going to tell you all about their favorite places.



"LITTLE NEW YORK"

Italians in New Castle, I had heard of. Syrians, Greeks, Poles, Slovenians and Irish, I had not. No wonder the town nick-named itself "Little New York."

Scots-Irish settlers lived here by 1800. In the 19th century, the town became an industrial center and the county seat. But what really jump-started New Castle – and brought a flood of immigrants – was the tin industry.

In 1893, two local entrepreneurs opened a tin plate factory, the Greer Tin Mill, which became the largest in the world and attracted workers from the Old World. By the early 20th century, New Castle was a one-industry town with a multicultural population.

After that came the violent 1909 strike, the Socialist mayor and much more, which you can learn from the Lawrence County Historical Society. Nowadays, like many other old factory towns, New Castle is working to reinvent itself, and it can count on at least one great asset: its delicious and diverse culinary traditions, established by immigrants and maintained by their descendants to this day.



"HOT DOG CAPITAL OF THE WORLD"

On the wall of the M&P Coney Island in downtown New Castle hangs an old black-and-white photo of two solemn-faced men wearing neckties and long white aprons. They are standing in front of a shop, where neatly-lettered signs in the big glass windows offer "Tables for Ladies and Gents" and "Hot wieners 5¢."

The photo was taken in 1923; the men were John Mitsos and George Papazickos; the shop was their newly-opened Coney Island, the main attraction, chili dogs. Today, the Coney Island has two locations, but it's still in the family, run by cousins John Mitsos and Chris Mitsos, the nephew and son, respectively, of the original John Mitsos.

The Mitsos-Papazickos clan is partly responsible for another of New Castle's names for itself: "Hot Dog Capital of the World." As the local visitors' bureau tells it, "New Castle's chili dogs are the product of Greek immigrants who came to New Castle in the early 1900s and established restaurants along with their homes. These were among the first in the country."

One day not long ago, a steady stream of customers came to the downtown Coney Island to eat in and take out, some ordering their hot dogs with ketchup, some with mustard and onions, but all with chili sauce.

The dogs are Sugardale, the buns Schwebel, the sauce a secret recipe. Its base is a mixture of 15 different spices, which John Mitsos cordially refuses to name. But he let me look around in the back room, and I saw cayenne pepper and oregano on the shelves.

Mitsos' chili sauce is not the thick, tomato-based stuff that I remember from Coney Islands in Detroit, but a brown sauce with lean ground beef that at first tastes innocuous and after a minute begins to sting your tongue. Whatever's in it, people like it; Audrey, the New Castle expatriate, bought a pint to take home to Point Breeze. True sauce lovers drizzle it over French fries, and John recommends it on spaghetti.

John, 80, came to New Castle from northern Greece in 1956 and began working for his uncle; he still works every day. "I retired 15 years ago," he says with a twinkle. "Still, I'm working. What am I going to do at home?"

M&P Coney Island, 9 East Washington Street, 724-654-6761, and 2712 Wilmington Road, 724-654-4522

THE LADIES GET EVEN

For handmade pasta and slow-cooked sauce, schedule your New Castle visit for Sunday. That is the only day you can eat at the Ladies of the Dukes.

Peek in the window during the week and you might see people making cavatelli, ravioli and spaghetti or stirring vats of sauce. But you can't get inside until Sunday morning – at 10 for take-out, 11:30 for sit-down.

The place got started in the early 1960s, when five women in a card club wanted to rev up their fund-raisers. They tried to align themselves as a ladies' auxiliary with an Italian men's organization, the Dukes. But the men wouldn't have them, so the women struck out on their own. They bought a small restaurant and started cooking.

"It just sort of mushroomed," says Norma Memo, who joined the Ladies in 1970 and started managing the restaurant in 2002.

Today, the Ladies of the Dukes employ 22 people and occupy a sparkling white, one-story building with red awnings north of downtown New Castle. (Parking's in back; turn on Fern Street.) All profits go to area charities.

On a given Sunday, the Ladies serve about 600 people, who lick their plates so clean that "some of those dishes don't need washed," Norma says with a laugh. Many customers come from the local area, others from far away. Norma recalls one man who flew in from Colorado and packed up a big cooler with tubs of sauce, which is made from Norma's own recipe.

Photo illustration
by John McWilliams



Little New York

The Ladies are still going strong, but would like to start handing down their knowledge to the next generation. “We need young people to start taking over,” Norma says. “But the younger generation, they aren’t interested in making all this. It’s a lost art, I’ll tell you.”

Ladies of the Dukes, 1114 Croton Avenue, 724-658-9258

(MIDDLE) EASTERN PROMISES

Picture this: a dainty little log of crisp, light filo, about an inch wide and three inches long, with a center of chopped nuts and a sprinkling of pistachios on top. That is Maria Simpson’s baklava, and it is as much like the usual big, gooey chunk as a hummingbird is like a hippo.

Maria, a smiling woman with a habit of calling everyone “honey,” came to New Castle 14 years ago from Damascus, Syria, to work for her uncle in his computer business. Today, she is the wife of a New Castle native, the mother of two children and – lucky for us – the proprietor of Alcham Restaurant.

“I try to bring people the right taste,” she says of her authentic Syrian menu. “It is so nice when people come and say, ‘Your food tastes like my mother’s.’”



There’s falafil, kibbee and hummus; grape leaves and spinach pie; yakni, which is green beans and lamb in tomato sauce, and kufta-on-the-rod, which is charbroiled ground lamb; and “shungleesh salad,” made with fresh parsley, tomatoes, onions and shungleesh, a type of Middle Eastern cheese that is more commonly spelled “shanklish.” Wash it all down with Syrian tea flavored with – what, exactly? “Herbs” is all Maria will say.

Middle Eastern food is catching on nationwide, especially among vegetarians and other healthy eaters, Maria says, but it was never a hard sell for her. “People here in New Castle were raised on Arabic and Italian food. They are used to it, and this made it easy to be in New Castle.” In a nod to the city’s dual cuisines, however, she includes a few Italian dishes, like eggplant parmesan and tiramisu, on the menu.

Don’t let Alcham’s inauspicious appearance put you off. It occupies a storefront a few doors from Shop ‘n Save, in a suburban strip mall with a turquoise roof. Whenever you go, Maria likely will be there; just making all those individual baklavas must take hours. “My husband says, ‘Remember when you used to cook just for me?’” she reports with a laugh. Audrey, Fran and I say: Tough luck, buddy; she’s ours.

Alcham Middle East Restaurant, 2038 West State Street, 724-654-7500



THE PREMIER PLACE FOR PIZZA

If Fran hadn’t told me about Augustine’s, I would have driven right past it. Nothing about its plain brown, windowless exterior attracts attention.

But New Castle natives know that this is the place for pizza. They pull up in front, dash inside, grab their order – Augustine’s is take-out only – and hurry home to enjoy it. Being a non-resident, I had to eat my pizza in the car, and I recommend that you do the same, for there is nothing better than a slice of Augustine’s two minutes out of the oven.

Frank Augustine is as old as the business – 50. His grandfather, grandmother, father and mother -- a car salesman, a cook, a truck driver and a bookkeeper, respectively – decided to keep their day jobs but work for themselves on the side. Years ago there was a restaurant, but now Augustine’s focuses on take-out pizza, plus a few sandwiches and pastas. Frank still uses the original recipes; his son, daughter and cousins work in the business; and his mother, now 77, still does the books.

Fortunately, Audrey and Fran had explained New Castle’s pizza customs to me. If you want mozzarella cheese around here, you have to ask for it. Otherwise, you get what Augustine’s calls “plain” and other establishments call “homestyle” or “traditional”: a piece of medium-thick pizza with a crisp bottom, topped with tomato sauce and grated romano or parmesan cheese. There’s also “poorman’s” pizza, without tomato sauce, and “pizza greens,” made with spinach. Augustine’s pizza greens come as a wedge with crusts on the top and bottom; elsewhere, it may be rolled up or open face.

Augustine’s menu also includes Syrian bread: flat, round, 12 inches across, similar to but puffier than pita bread. It’s delicious toasted. There’s also homemade wedding soup, meatballs and spaghetti sauce.

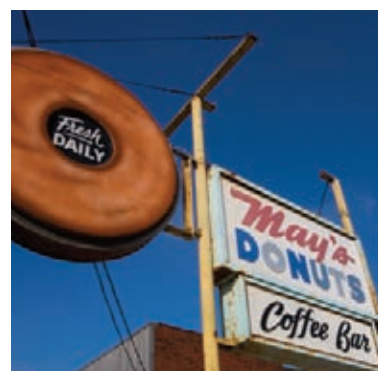
Frozen pizza is available – in fact, it’s a major part of Augustine’s business, supplied to supermarkets, convenience stores and the like. I took one home, and it pleased my children. But I was still smitten by the memory of the just-baked slices I’d gobbled down behind the wheel.

Augustine’s Italian Village, 833 East Lutton Street, 724-652-5504

DONUT HEAVEN

May’s Donuts has been in business since 1941, and looks like it. The place is small, with two tables and a nine-seat counter, and it’s smoky, since both customers and employees feel free to light up. Patches in the worn-out linoleum reveal wooden floorboards. One morning not long ago, four elderly men sat together smoking, drinking coffee, talking football and eating the only thing there is to eat: donuts.

But while there is just one item, there is variety. Every day, May’s makes 35 kinds: jelly-filled, cinnamon-dusted, glazed twists and more. My favorite is a puffy, chocolate-frosted one with chocolate filling, topped off with a rosette of whipped cream.



“Most are still scratch recipes,” says owner David May, whose parents founded the business. He started helping out when he was 12, icing donuts and packing orders, and has run the place since about 1970.

May’s seems to enjoy the same kind of loyalty as Coney Island and the Ladies of the Dukes. “We’re always busy around the holidays, because people who have moved away come back,” May says. “People come from Florida and buy dozens of donuts.”

Real donut lovers come early in the day, says Elaine Porterfield, who’s worked at May’s for 11 years: “The best time to get here is 5:30 in the morning, when they’re hot.”

May’s Donuts, 1225 East Washington Street, 724-654-4141

BREAD, BISCOTTI AND THE “BUBBLE”

DeRosa Bakery no longer belongs to the descendants of the two Italian immigrant brothers who started it 63 years ago, but it is owned by a family friend who uses all the old recipes.

Bill Donaldson’s mother was a friend of the daughter of one of the founders – got that? He has run the place for the past three years, making the bakery’s number-one seller, open-hearth bread, as the founders did, in a 12-by-12-foot oven with rotating shelves.

The same bread dough is used to make pizza. One day not long ago, five pizza varieties were available by the slice,



along with the “bubble” – a round pan layered with chunks of dough, tomato sauce, romano cheese, crushed red pepper and mild banana peppers that, when heated at home, is a sort of pizzafied pull-apart bread. My children enjoyed Bill’s hobo bread, which is baked in a coffee can and comes out looking like a chef’s toque standing tall.

Italian cookies include sfogliatelle, 15 layers of flaky crust with cream cheese, and lemon-flavored wedding cookies, iced in any color a bride desires. Black pepper and red pepper biscotti just about bit my tongue off, but “Old Italian people like to dip them in coffee,” Bill says.

DeRosa Bakery, 819 Junior High Street, 724-654-9321

IF YOU’RE GOING ...

Find out more about New Castle and environs from the Lawrence County Tourist Promotion Agency, 888-284-7599, www.VisitLawrenceCounty.com.

They can tell you about the Warner Brothers’ first silent-movie theater, which opened in 1907 and now is being refurbished as a part of a downtown entertainment complex, and explain how this small town came to be the “Fireworks Capital of America.” You also might want to drive through the nearby Amish country or, if the weather permits, take a walking tour of the century-old mansions built by the tin mill tycoons and their pals; contact the Lawrence County Historical Society, 724-658-4022, <http://www.lawrencechs.com>.



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