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Going Brooklyn

By Susan Van Allen

I'm just hanging around, enjoying the spicy taste of a slice of Genoa salami, basking in the vibe of a cozy Italian grocery store. The owner is kind and welcoming to the stream of customers passing through. A woman pops in and asks: "Is the eggplant ready yet?" A handyman stops by to snatch up a special round bread made by a beloved local baker, a dad strolls in with a toddler and stocks up on spaghetti pie and meatballs to go.

From the back kitchen, a chef emerges with an impressive pan of porchetta that's just finished hours of slow roasting. The porchetta is crusty, stuffed with herbs and oranges, steaming forth an intoxicating aroma that conjures up memories of an Italian village. But I'm actually on Third Street in Bay Ridge, Brooklyn. Here's where Louis Coluccio Jr. has opened A.L.C. Italian Grocery Store, a place that celebrates his Italian ancestry, the new wave of Brooklyn food artisans, and simple, delicious flavors.

Louis's inspiration can be traced to Gioiosa Ianico, a seaside village in the region of Calabria. That's where his grandfather, Domenico, his uncle Rocco and his father, Louis Sr., emigrated from in the 1950s. They arrived in Brooklyn, joining a thriving Italian community. Though life was good, many sorely missed the flavors of "home"—things like prosciutto, panettone, and provolone. Their longings gave Domenico the idea to import Italian products, and by the early 1960s D.L. Coluccio and Sons was established. Today it's a beloved Brooklyn institution and a joy of a store to visit. Rocco Coluccio escorted me through the aisles stocked with high quality products—from pastas to olive oils, beans, and cans of Coluccio San Marzano tomatoes.

Louis Jr., born in 1981, has fond childhood memories of the business: "When I was growing up, my family lived over the store, in the same building with my grandparents and cousins," he says. "Everyone cooked, there was always a celebration."

Louis worked by his grandfather and father's side at D.L. Coluccio and Sons, and then in 2012, he saw a small former butcher shop for rent in his neighborhood. "There was something perfect about it," he says. "It was simple, the light was right...it reminded me of old time salumerias that are fading away in New York," he said.

It is now A.L.C. Italian Grocery Store. Louis's passion is evident in the unpretentious design, highlighting what's most important to him: a wall of family portraits, neat displays of a select line of Italian imports, and delicious foods produced by Brooklyn artisans—from Sfoglini pasta to Pat La Frieda meats. "I love supporting these locals," Louis says. "They are making amazing products that the neighborhood loves." Also what keeps customers coming back is the take-away selection of prepared foods—from spaghetti pie, to lasagna, meatballs, and eggplant tort. The store has become a kind of neighborhood kitchen. Customers also love the panini. "We do it Italian style, where less is more, using just basic quality ingredients and good crusty bread with a soft center to absorb the flavors," Louis said. This is a totally different concept from the classic American sandwich.

He tells me how he's seen Italian tourists come to New York, and on their list of things to do is to go to the Carnegie Deli that's world famous for its giant sandwiches. To Italians, the idea of piling five inches of meats and cheeses in between two slices of bread is an "Only in America" phenomenon. They take pictures of themselves trying to eat it, to send home to their friends.

A true panino is another thing entirely. The name comes from pane—bread, and a panino is a little, thick-crust roll. Panini became popular in Italy in the 1950s, when Milanese workers wanted a quick, easy lunch, using cured meats that wouldn't spoil. Though they may be grilled in a pan or put in a press to enhance their flavor, that's not "a must" when it comes to making them.

A.L.C. Italian Grocery Store's sandwiches are named after family members, such as the Valentina, inspired by a niece who loves olives. Here are a couple of recipes for the store's favorites, along with a simple spaghetti pie. They're quick, easy ways to add a delicious taste of Italy to your busy winter days. For more info: alcitaliangrocery.com, dcoluccioandsons.com.

Susan Van Allen is the author of *100 Places in Italy Every Woman Should Go* and the *Golden Days in Italy* blog. She travels frequently to Italy, the native land of her grandparents, and lives in Los Angeles. susanvanallen.com

Lucia

- 4 small ciabatta, or a loaf of crusty Italian bread cut into four 4-inch pieces
- 8 tablespoons black olive paste
- 4 slices Bel Paese cheese
- 8 slices Genoa salami
- 4 slices fresh mozzarella

- 1 cup arugula
- 4 tablespoons extra virgin olive oil

Brush each panino with two tablespoons of olive paste. Place one slice of Bel Paese, 2 slices of salami, and one slice of mozzarella on each panino, keeping the salami in the middle. Press the bread together and grill the panini over low heat or in a press until toasted. Add ¼ cup arugula and drizzle 1 tablespoon extra virgin olive oil on each panino. Serve warm.

Makes 4 panini.

Spaghetti Pie

- 2 pounds spaghetti
- 6 large eggs
- 3 cups grated Parmigiano Reggiano
- 2 to 4 tablespoons freshly grated black pepper, as desired
- Oil for the skillet

Cook the spaghetti in salted boiling water until al dente. Drain and cool. In a bowl, mix the cooked spaghetti with the eggs, cheese, and pepper. Coat a large non-stick skillet with oil and heat on a high flame, then add the spaghetti mixture, spreading it evenly to fill the pan. Cook until browned, not burned. Flip the spaghetti using a large dish and return it to the pan, browning the other side, about 5 minutes. Transfer to a platter or board and let it cool. Cut into 8 large pie shaped slices.

Makes 8 servings.

Roasted Vegetables and Ricotta Panino

- 4 cups of vegetable mix: zucchini, peppers and red onions, cut into finger sizes
- ¼ cup extra virgin olive oil
- Salt and pepper, to taste
- 1 cup balsamic vinegar
- 2 tablespoons honey
- ½ cup ricotta
- 4 small ciabatta, or a loaf of crusty Italian bread cut into four, 4-inch pieces

Preheat oven to 400°F. In a bowl, mix the cut vegetables with the extra virgin olive oil, salt and pepper. Transfer the mix to a roasting pan and cook on the top shelf of the oven for 15 to 20 minutes, turning two or three times.

Make a balsamic reduction by mixing the vinegar and honey in a small saucepan. Bring to a boil, then simmer for about 20 minutes, until the vinegar thickens and is reduced by about a half. Cool before using.

Spread two tablespoons of ricotta on each panino. Layer 1/4 of the roasted vegetable mix on top of each ricotta-coated panino. Drizzle the vegetables with one tablespoon balsamic reduction. Press bread together firmly. Serve warm or room temperature.

Makes 4 panino.