

Yonkers, New York: the Caffé Puglie

By Leslie (Salvatore) Edwards

Many immigrants from Corato settled in Yonkers, New York in the Nodine Hill and Park Hill neighborhoods. They established a variety of services that catered to the needs of the Italian families living there including dress and shoemakers, carpenters, insurance brokers, doctors, barbers, and funeral parlors, as well as retail enterprises like produce markets, ice and coal delivery, butcher shops, and bakeries. Italian language newspapers like *Corriere degli Italiani* (founded by Joseph Gervasio about 1930) featured news about birth, marriages, deaths, club meetings and social events. There were Italian social clubs like Club Pugliese, and others including the Palenese Club, the Columbus Society, the Lega Operai Society, the Sts. Cosimo e Damiano Society, the Villa Volturmo Social Club, and the Stiglianese Society that represented the villages from which the Italians emigrated. St. Anthony's Church on Willow Street (1900) and Mount Carmel Church (1913) were early parishes that served the Italian American community in Yonkers.



1957 Sanborn Fire Insurance Map of Yonkers, showing the location of the cafe



But it was the pasticceria, Caffé Puglie, located at 51 Park Hill Avenue (corner of Waverly), that was the real heart of the community. It was established by Giuseppe “Joseph” Tarricone who was born in Corato in 1890 and arrived in New York City on December 23, 1920. By 1925, he had established a pastry shop in Manhattan at 353 8th Avenue (corner of West 28th Street) with Michel Ruggiero called “Tarricone and Ruggiero.” In 1934, Joseph and his son Anthony (who immigrated in 1931) relocated to Yonkers and opened Caffé Puglie. One year later, Joseph’s daughter Nicoletta joined them from Italy.

In 1935, Caffé Puglie began a radio advertising campaign that drew in customers from Westchester and Rockland Counties, as well as New York City. For decades, they ran an ongoing newspaper advertisement on the weddings page and ran display ads for holidays and special occasions.



The interior of Caffé Puglie in 1938

Caffé Puglie served as a gathering place for Italian Americans, especially those from Puglia and specifically from Corato, who would gather for coffee and pastries, talk of politics, and share stories from home. Men gathered outside to talk (while the women sat in Columbus Park across the street) or they could be seen playing cards in the park or down the street playing bocce. In a 1980 interview for *The Herald Statesman*, owner Tony Tarricone said “This is like an Italian village. Everybody knows everybody . . . even the wiseguys.”



In the 1950s, Joseph Tarricone retired and Tony took over with two partners, Leonard Di Zanni and Leonard Musci.

In 1959, they remodeled the building and modernized the interior. The photo on the left was taken in 1954 and shows the building with the apartments above it that were removed in 1959.



The four pastry chefs in 1959. From left: Michael Franco, Salvatore Sampogna, Nicholas Marziliano, John DePolito



Tony Tarricone, 1962



Joe Tarricone, 1977

The pasticceria was known for its stunning wedding cakes, Italian wedding cookies, and miniature pastries, and offered the full spectrum of Italian baked goods, emphasizing Barese specialties including biscotti, pignoli, fogliatelli, cannoli, and savory taralli. Espresso was served in small cups and had “the jolt of Vesuvius.” The bakers also made ornately decorated Easter eggs which would fill the front window alongside the wedding cakes. In 1979, Tony made a 20-pound, three-foot tall chocolate Easter bunny for a hospital fundraiser.

Customers purchased between 5-6,000 miniature pastries a week! In addition to their cafe and retail sales from the Park Hill store, Caffé Puglie had a successful business supplying pastries to upscale restaurants and tea rooms in the metropolitan area.

In the 1970s, Tony's son Joseph, who studied baking at the Culinary Institute of America in Hyde Park, joined the business and made a name for himself as a confectioner and baker. In 1981, he earned the Westchester Marriott Hotel Marketing medal for baking a 300-pound cake replica of the Marriott's new 450-room hotel opening in Tarrytown. This was one of several awards he won for his decorating skills. He eventually succeeded his father in the management of Caffé Puglie, becoming the third generation of Tarricones to do so.

Politicians always made an obligatory visit to the Park Hill neighborhood, with a stop at the pastry shop, usually on Sunday mornings. In a 1978 article in the *New York Times*, Congressman Bruce Caputo remarked that “you chat with the owner, Tony Tarricone, with the pastry chef whom everybody calls Cheech, and with the regulars, Bluejay and Rooster. You have coffee, pastries, maybe a little *aqua minerale*. You ask about the soccer leagues and clubs, and you've done your duty. But more than that, as far as I'm concerned, you get some wisdom.”

The “wisdom” Caputo referred to could be a political strategy meeting discussed over espresso or more importantly, the opinions of the old men who sat in the rear of Caffé Puglie to talk of how it was 50 years ago. “It is wisdom in the sense that the cafe and the Park Hill section of Yonkers . . . give the younger politicians an understanding of their beginnings.”

Even after he retired, Tony Tarricone came by the shop regularly which meant there was always a Tarricone around to supervise the baking and preparation of 17 kinds of Italian pastry and 20 different kinds of miniature pastries, all of which were displayed in a 12-foot refrigerated pastry case just inside the door. A second case was filled with the ice creams and Italian ices made there. Any visit to the Caffé featured fresh, just baked pastries, and the coffee, either espresso or cappuccino, was made thick and hot. There was barely room for the four tables and twelve chairs inside but that didn't matter as most people bought their coffee and pastry at the counter and stood there to chat and eat.



Circa 1979

On Sunday mornings, families would go to Mt. Carmel Church and then walk down to Caffé Puglie for coffee and a box of pastries to take home. My aunt remembers that when she was a little girl, they would go every Sunday to visit her Grandmother Rinaldi on Oak Street. Their first stop was to Tarricone's (as my family called it) to buy cookies for grandma, and of course, pastries for themselves to take home. Everyone ordered their wedding cakes from Tarricone's and when my aunt was married, they delivered the cake to Tarrytown as a personal favor - my grandfather, Leonard Salvagione, was very close with, and related to, the Tarricones.

By the mid-1980s the old neighborhood was changing. In 1987, you could still find older women dressed in black and men gathering at the Caffé Puglie for steaming cups of espresso coffee. A steady stream of regulars dropped by daily to chat about their health, their friends, and the city's politics. Sometimes the conversations were in English, but often in Italian. However, while the Park Hill area still had a large Italian population, many of those who grew up in there had moved away. By the 1990s, longtime customers did not feel safe coming back to the old neighborhood and were afraid of being hurt or robbed. Finally, in 1995, Joseph Tarricone moved from Park Hill Avenue to a 2,500 square foot building on Midland Avenue.

Caffé Puglie occupied the building at 51 Park Hill Avenue for over 60 years. Gone now for decades, the memories of the pastries, the camaraderie with the paisano, and the Tarricones linger today.



The former Caffè Puglie in 1998

A sidebar story relates to another Coratino immigrant named Paolo Strippoli who was born in Corato in 1917 and apprenticed there in the village bakery. When he emigrated to New York state in 1934, he soon landed a job at Caffè Puglie. There, Strippoli learned from the *paisani* in the tradition of the old Italian *botteghe* and he rapidly advanced from apprentice to master, ready to strike out on his own. By the time he was 24 years old, Strippoli had saved enough money to open his own business with his wife, Filomena Quercia on Main Street in Poughkeepsie called Café Aurora. “Many of the things we do here, my father learned at Caffè Puglia,” his son Lou related. “Italian ices, molding Easter chocolates, making pastries and cookies from scratch. But the best example of the regional lineage is the *taralli*, a pretzel-like confection which is not sweet. They are such standard fare in Puglia that the old proverb goes, *Tutto finisce con taralli e vino* – “Everything finishes with *taralli* and wine” — because that is what they break out at the end of every social gathering.”

(Strippoli’s second wife was Philomena Miccoli, the daughter of Benedetta Salvagione and Charles Miccoli. Benedetta was my grandfather’s older sister, and in October 1920, he emigrated with the Miccolis from Corato, settling in Yonkers.)