

February 3, 2010

# The Bigger Little Italy

By JEFF VANDAM

THE other day in the Belmont section of the [Bronx](#), two women carrying shopping bags conversed excitedly as they ambled down Crescent Avenue. One wore black winter gear from head to toe; her companion had on jeans and stylish black boots. Something marked their conversation as unusual: half was in Italian and the other in Spanish. But they clearly understood each other.

So it is in Belmont, now and perhaps forever known as the Little Italy of the Bronx — or, to some, “the real Little Italy” — and the subject of longstanding lore. The neighborhood was the breeding ground for [Dion](#) and the Belmonts in the 1950s and the setting for [Chazz Palminteri](#)’s “Bronx Tale,” a childhood memoir that he has toured the country to perform. ([Robert De Niro](#)’s film version came out in 1993.)

To this day Arthur Avenue, Belmont’s main artery, remains a thriving marketplace of menuless trattorias and pork stores par excellence.

“On any Saturday or any holiday, any given weekend, you cannot walk,” said Ivine Galarza, the district manager of Community Board 6 for the last 15 years. “It is so congested. People come from all over — Jersey, [Connecticut](#) — to get their meats.”

But what is it like to live there?

Outside Arthur Avenue and its sister commercial strip, East 187th Street, the neighborhood’s Italian standbys become sparse; instead, there is Tu y Yo Unisex Salon and La Iglesia Que Se Va.

An influx of students from [Fordham University](#), just north of Belmont across Fordham Road, makes up a sizable part of the population, alongside communities of Albanian immigrants and Puerto Ricans. (The restaurant Rozafa on Crescent Avenue serves both chicken marsala and Albanian *speca te mbushur*, a type of stuffed pepper.)

Yet, far from a museum piece or a shopping mall, the area is a functioning community where people get along.

“A lot of people say, ‘Move!’ No. I like it here,” said Marie Riolo, 90, who moved to Belmont early in life and has lived in the same building since 1941. Now the secretary of the local community board and chairwoman of its senior citizen committee, Mrs. Riolo is friendly with the students in

her building on Lorillard Place and still visits all the same shops she has for years.

On the other end of the spectrum is Thomas Conroy, 21, a Fordham senior from Maryland who lives in a Hoffman Street apartment with five roommates, for which he pays about \$600 a month. After two years of frequenting local shops, he has learned to follow the local loyalty rules when it comes to meats and cheeses.

“You feel like you’re betraying them if you go somewhere else,” said Mr. Conroy, a devotee of Tino’s Delicatessen on Arthur Avenue. “It’s my ritual now; I go there once a week.”

## **WHAT YOU’LL FIND**

Roughly eight blocks long at its longest point and nine blocks wide at its widest, Belmont is hemmed in to the east by [Bronx Park](#). But on other flanks, it has seen enough shifting of boundaries over the last few decades that there is no longer any firm definition of where it ends and where the rest of the Bronx begins. The southern border is generally thought to be either 182nd or 183rd Street; the dividing line then snakes up Third Avenue, at some point turning north to hit Fordham Road, the clear northern boundary.

Outside of the area around 187th Street and Arthur Avenue, where a new business improvement district was recently approved, Belmont consists largely of two- and three-family houses, though apartment buildings appear here and there. Some homes are in pristine condition, decorated to the nines for whatever holiday is approaching. A few are boarded up or have sat empty since construction.

Busy Fordham Road winds west into Fordham Plaza, a frenetic shopping area with all the staple chain stores and also the neighborhood stop on the [Metro-North Railroad](#). There is talk in Belmont both for and against the idea of a new 13-story mixed-use building on Fordham Road; community hearings took place last week.

Belmont doesn’t contain an excess of green space, perhaps because Bronx Park is close by, but a small community garden called Belmont Little Farmers is in operation on Belmont Avenue. On East 188th Street, children swing to and fro at the [Ciccarone Playground](#), which had \$2.7 million in renovations in 2007.

Crime remains a concern. In 2009, the precinct that includes the neighborhood had 7 murders, 383 robberies and 362 felony assaults, according to the police CompStat system. A few well-publicized crimes last year did not help matters, including the early-morning murder last August of a former area lounge owner behind the Arthur Avenue Retail Market.

## **WHAT YOU’LL PAY**

Like many Bronx neighborhoods, Belmont has had its share of foreclosures and short sales in

recent years; the phenomenon has had the effect of dragging down prices.

“Right now nobody knows where the real estate market is,” said Pasquale Perretta, a former Fordham professor who owns a rental agency called Belmont Realty. “It’s still a very precarious situation. There is an abundance now, a glut of housing.”

Perhaps the best way to find property for sale is to wander the avenues and look for houses with for-sale signs attached. Few brokerages outside of rental agencies focus on the neighborhood, which makes Internet searches difficult; those with units on the market are typically based elsewhere in the Bronx or even farther afield.

Properties for purchase are by and large two- or three-family houses; if there is an apartment to be had, it is most likely for rent. In general, said Jennie Ng, broker and owner of ERA Champions Realty, single-family houses can be found starting in the \$200,000 range, and two-family semidetached houses sell for about \$400,000.

“The same two-family brick homes would have sold for \$440,000 or \$460,000 a year ago,” Ms. Ng said. Last year, she sold a single-family house on 183rd Street for \$220,000. Comparable-sales reports from recent months show the price per square foot in the neighborhood hovering around \$140.

The area also has a dose of “For Rent” signs, thanks in part to its still-growing student population. Two-bedroom apartments close to the Fordham campus generally cost about \$1,400 a month, less if they are below 187th Street. One-bedrooms can be found for around \$800.

A study released last March by the [Furman Center for Real Estate and Urban Policy](#) at [New York University](#) found that Belmont, coupled with the nearby neighborhood of Morrisania, had the city’s third-lowest homeownership rate. The study also found that the area’s median monthly rent, when combined with nearby East Tremont’s, was \$655, perhaps owing to the neighborhood’s supply of low-income housing.

## **WHAT TO DO**

If you’ve stocked up on all the soppressata, pecorino Romano and zeppole you can handle on Arthur Avenue, venture east toward Southern Boulevard, where the [Bronx Zoo](#), Bronx Park and, a bit farther north, the [New York Botanical Garden](#) all reside. Also northward, at [Fordham University](#), continuing education courses on offer include medieval studies and anthropology.

## **THE SCHOOLS**

Last year at Public School 32, the Belmont School, on East 183rd Street, 94.7 percent of students met standards in math, 77.1 percent in English. At Middle School 45, the Thomas C. Giordano School, on Lorillard Place, 61.6 percent met standards in English, 75.1 percent in math. SAT

averages at Belmont Preparatory High School on Fordham Road were 357 in reading, 357 in math and 360 in writing. The most recent statewide averages were 531, 563 and 535.

Among the private possibilities in Belmont are two Catholic schools: the all-girl Aquinas High School on East 182nd Street and St. Martin of Tours School for prekindergarten through Grade 8.

## **THE COMMUTE**

The nearest option for commuting into [Manhattan](#) is the Fordham Road Metro-North Railroad, near Third Avenue. The ride into Grand Central Terminal is about 20 minutes; one-way peak tickets are \$7; a monthly pass is \$164. The closest subway is the Fordham Road station on the B and D lines, about a 15-minute walk from the area.

## **THE HISTORY**

Belmont was once the province of the Lorillard family, for whom a street is named. After moving its tobacco operations to the Central Bronx from Lower Manhattan in the late 18th century, the family greatly expanded its property in the area, with its land known as the Belmont estate. But after the Lorillards decamped for [New Jersey](#) in 1870, the city acquired part of their land for Bronx Park; another section was divided into the streets that form Belmont today. (The Lorillards are still in business, as anyone who smokes Newports or Kents might tell you.)

*This article has been revised to reflect the following correction:*

### ***Correction: February 14, 2010***

*Because of an editing error, the “Living In” article last Sunday, about Belmont, the [Bronx](#), misstated the residency status of Puerto Rican residents of the area. Because Puerto Rico is a commonwealth of the United States, they are citizens — not immigrants.*