

LIFESTYLE

Who needs Soho House? This Italian social club hidden in L.A. is an absolute delight



Families clap during a game of musical chairs on the dance floor at the Garibaldi Society's La Famiglia Dinner. (Christina House / Los Angeles Times)

BY DEBORAH NETBURN | STAFF WRITER

Photography by CHRISTINA HOUSE

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Lauren Veca was worried about the meatballs.

The 62-year-old doula had insisted on making her mother's recipe for the Garibaldina Society's upcoming monthly pasta dinner, but now she was having second thoughts.

"You're having performance anxiety because of these meatballs," said the club's president, Nicole Infante, 48, a mother of two who never sits still.

"It's true," Veca said, sighing heavily. "And it's all because of my family."



Garibaldina Society members weigh meatballs on a small scale so that they are all just the right size. (Christina House / Los Angeles Times)



Lauren Veca, and Chris Pellegrino, right, make meatballs in the kitchen of L.A.'s oldest Italian Club, the Garibaldina Society. (Christina House / Los Angeles Times)

Infante took a sip from her cocktail.

“That’s what we do,” she said, surveying the club’s pink and red ballroom. “We’re healing our inner child at the Garibaldina.”

Housed in a low-slung brick building next to the Superior grocery store in Highland Park, the Garibaldina Society is the oldest Italian club in Los Angeles, and it’s currently in the midst of a renaissance.

Founded in 1877 as the [Società Garibaldina di Mutua Beneficenza](#), the club has historically been a place where older Italians and Italian Americans gather to dance, play bocce, cook, eat and celebrate their culture. But now the Garibaldina is welcoming a different membership — some of whom are Italian, many of whom are not.



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How to make friends in L.A.? Get brunch with strangers

March 30, 2023

“The club is being regenerated,” said Jim Richetts, 88, who served as president in 2016 and 2020. “And that’s because younger people are finding out about it, and we’re making an effort to let them know.”



Old photographs hang inside the Garibaldina Society. (Christina House / Los Angeles Times)



her on the dance floor at the Garibaldina Society in Los Angeles during a La Famiglia Dinner. (Christina House / Los Angeles Times)

Older Italian men still cook big pots of tomato sauce in the industrial-sized kitchen and the majority of the weekday bocce players are well over 80, but in the last year, Gen Xers and millennials hungry for community and nostalgic for the social organizations of their parents' and grandparents' eras are bringing a new energy to the club.

It helps that Infante, who once worked as the creative director of Frederick's of Hollywood, has curated a pitch-perfect retro-Italian presence for the club on its [Instagram page](#), bringing the space to the attention of fashion photographers, artisanal chefs and local concert promoters who have rented out its cavernous ballroom and cozy wood-paneled bar.

This spring the Garibaldina hosted a [queer line-dancing formal](#), and plans for wine tasting and nighttime bocce games on its two indoor courts are in the works. At the first kid-friendly La Famiglia Dinner in June (featuring a DJ, a photo booth and a surprise visit from a Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtle-costumed character), 170 people, from babies to 93-year-olds, showed up.



Chris MacKenzie holds his six-month-old baby Dottie at the Garibaldina Society in Los Angeles during a La Famiglia Dinner. (Christina House / Los Angeles Times)

But even as the generational makeup of the club changes, members both new and old

are determined to ensure the original spirit of the Garibaldina remains intact.

For the record:

9:14 a.m. June 14, 2023 *An earlier version of this article misspelled the last name of Brian Donahoe as Donahue. Also, Donahoe and José Tamayo are not married; they are partners.*

“It’s like a time capsule and all the young people know how special it is and respect it,” said José Tamayo, 32, who along with his partner, Brian Donahoe, became the first out gay couple in the Garibaldina’s history when they joined last year.

Carrie George, 69, whose grandfather was president of the Garibaldina in 1944 and 1945, said new members are bringing a welcome diversity to the club.

“Times are changing and so is the club,” she said. “Back in the old days, they were closed-minded about having other cultures there, but it’s so different now. The club is beginning to embrace cultural changes and how society is changing.”



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July 28, 2022

She credits Infante with honoring the club’s historic legacy and at the same time making it appealing and accessible to a broader range of people.

“She doesn’t erase what’s there, but she is bringing it to younger people,” George said. “And that’s what’s going to keep this club moving forward.”



, 85, center left, and Giovanni Battista Davi, 87, embrace while playing bocce ball at the Garibaldina Society. (Christina House / Los Angeles Times)

If these faux-marble walls could talk

Originally founded as a mutual-aid society for Italian immigrants, the Garibaldina started in what is now Chinatown and soon moved to Lincoln Heights along with much of L.A.'s Italian population at the time.

An outbreak of influenza in the 1930s wiped out the club's sick fund and sent it into bankruptcy, but the Garibaldina managed to hang around long enough to come roaring back to life in the 1960s when celebrities like Frank Sinatra and Dean Martin helped glamorize Italian American culture. (In fact, Martin's parents were members

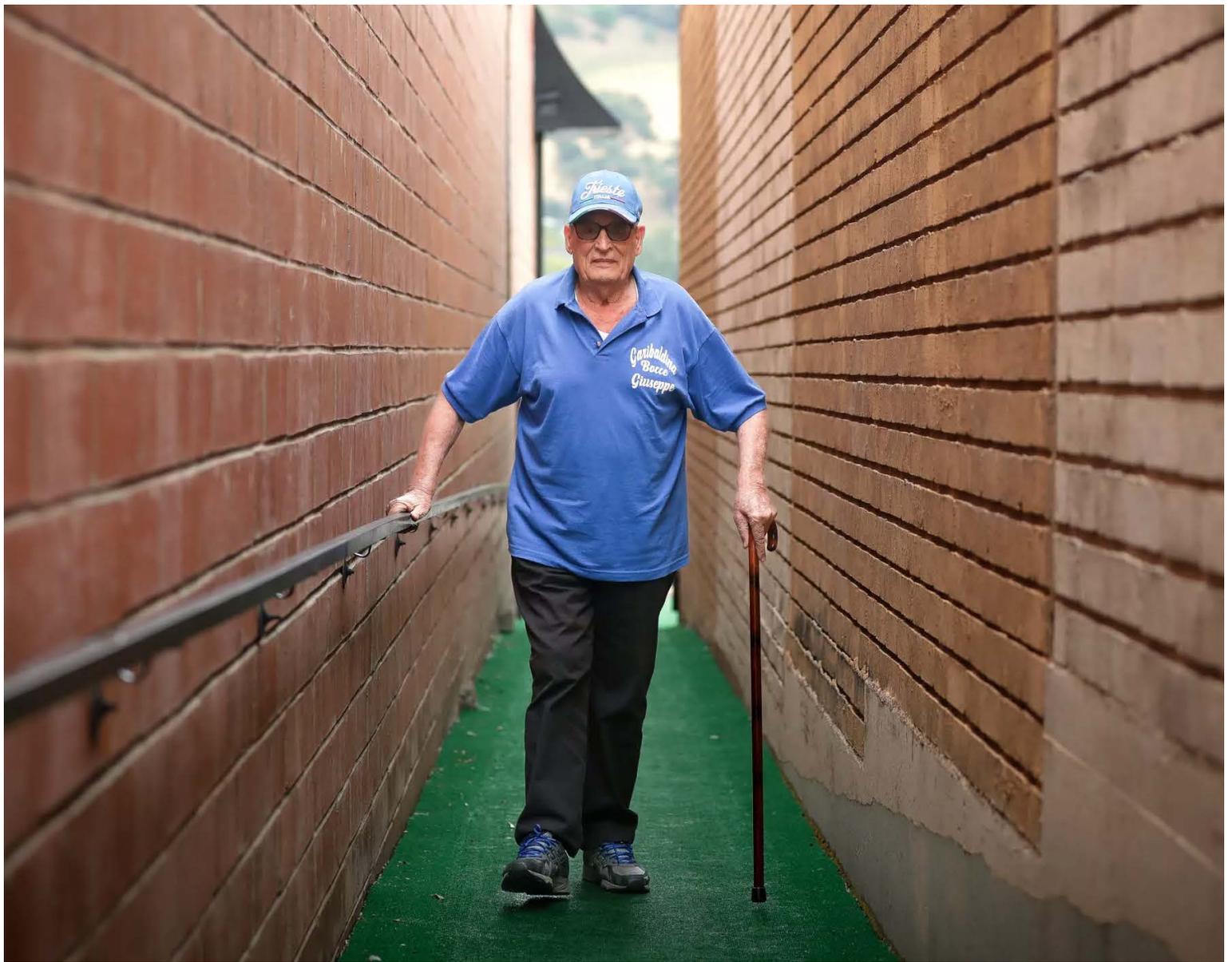
of the club.)

In 1966, the club's members pooled their money to buy a property in Highland Park. They broke ground in 1967, and the Garibaldina has remained in the same location ever since.

For decades, the club had a cap of 900 members and a waiting list of more than five years to get in. The monthly dinner dances were formal events where men wore tuxedos and women dressed in evening gowns and furs. Members — mostly the men — cooked all the food. George remembers attending events there as a child in patent leather shoes and gloves. But the membership began to decline in the 2010s as the old-timers died off. Their children, many of whom remembered the club as “a place for old people,” didn't want to join.



Giuseppe Del Rivo, 89, plays bocce ball at the Garibaldina Society. (Christina House / Los Angeles Times)



Al Rivo, 89, arrives at the Garibaldina Society in Los Angeles to play bocce ball. (Christina House / Los Angeles Times)

After a heated discussion, the Garibaldina opened membership up to non-Italians in 2017 to keep from closing entirely, but its numbers continued to dwindle, falling to less than 200 in 2021.

That's when Infante, who grew up in Queens, N.Y., first visited. She had read about the club in the Mt. Washington Homeowners Alliance newsletter and sent an email asking if she could come see it. On that initial visit she remembers walking into the empty lobby with its terrazzo floor, cream-colored faux marble wall and glass chandelier. The tangy scent of tomato sauce wafted through the air.

“I was like, ‘Oh my God, it’s my grandmother’s house,’” she said. “That’s exactly what

it felt like.”

Pizza is served at the Garibaldina Society in Los Angeles during a La Famiglia Dinner. (Christina House / Los Angeles Times)

The president welcomed her with a hug, and Infante knew she was home. She became a member that night, a council member one month later, and president a year and a half later.

Now, you can find Infante at the club every day while her kids are at school — folding napkins into fan shapes for the monthly dinner dances, moving tables for the pasta platter dinner, cleaning out storage areas, designing fliers, redecorating the ladies lounge and trying furiously to get functional Wi-Fi in the building.

“I prayed for the club that God would send the right person to lead it,” George said. “I tell Nicole that God sent her. She is an answer to my prayer.”

the Garibaldina Society Nicole Infante sets up for a Mother's Day event. (Christina House / Los Angeles Times)

The best deal in Los Angeles

The Garibaldina may be one of the last remaining deals in Los Angeles. There is a \$100 initiation fee and dues are \$60 a year. Although new members no longer need to be Italian, they do need to be sponsored by a current member and recommended by two other members to join.

As of now, membership gets you a personalized membership badge, a \$3 discount on the monthly Pasta Platter dinner (\$25 for nonmembers), and a \$10 discount for the monthly dinner dance (\$55 for nonmembers). Drinks in the carpeted, old-school bar

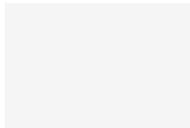
— Italian-themed, of course — are \$6 apiece for members and guests alike.

Infante dreams of a time when the club will host cooking classes and an Italian cinema series, when the bar will be open more than a couple of times a month — but the membership will have to grow first.

“Right now the promise is, ‘Come and be a part of keeping this legacy and this club alive,’” she said. “And a lot of young people get that, because they’ve seen so many important things disappear around them.”

Regulars know there are other benefits to membership too.

Show up to volunteer and Ignazio Vivirito, 83, who is always cooking something, might slip you a fresh-baked biscotti or a snack of bread and cheese on the sly. Maybe you’ll play a bocce game with someone 30 years older than you — or 30 years younger. If you’re lucky, you’ll learn a new line dance.



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Lonely in L.A., they put themselves out there and built meaningful friendships

Aug. 4, 2022

And once they’ve seen you a few times, the old-timers will invite you to sit with them, offer to box up your leftovers and make sure you got enough sauce.

Society of Los Angeles President Nicole Infante, right, and her sister Adrienne, left, carry giant boxes of pizza into the club during a La Famiglia Dinner. (Christir Times)

‘Every day there’s a bit of magic’

On a recent Thursday night, the club’s parking lot was almost at capacity.

More people showed up for the Pasta Platter dinner than had RSVP’d, so Infante was setting up tables on the fly — covering them with red-and-white checkered tablecloths and laying down a red paper placemat with scalloped edges at each seat.

Johnny North, a friend of Infante’s from college, asked where she was sitting.

“I don’t sit, I float,” she said.

Veca’s meatballs were a hit — tender and flavorful. By her seat was a framed [picture of her mother](#). “I was going to bring her ashes, but I thought that might be going too far,” she said.

Meatballs fresh out of the oven are photographed at the Garibaldina Society. (Christina House / Los Angeles Times)

Tamayo and Donahoe were out on the wooden dance floor, watching the older members do the [Elvira line dance](#) and trying their best to follow along.

Lissa Lebel, 61, who drove up from Long Beach, introduced several friends she had invited.

“I’m so tired of going to nice restaurants,” she said over a glass of red wine. “I just want to be where I’m comfortable. Who wouldn’t want to be here?”

FOOD

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Sept. 25, 2022

On the bocce court behind the dance floor, an impromptu game was getting heated. At the edge of the court, Vivirito and Aiden Arata, a new member in her early 30s, were hunched over a cellphone. He was showing her pictures of his grandson's first communion.

At the end of the evening, Veca, who has taken over the bar, offered small glasses of sambuca to those who weren't quite ready to call it a night.

Although she's been a member for only six months, Veca said the club already feels like family.

“Both my parents are gone, and all of my cooking, all of my Italian ancestry — I’m the holder of that now,” she said. “I want to keep it going, and for my son Luca too. And to be able to be with these people here, it’s just amazing.”

A few days later Infante was back at the club, setting up for the next event.

Vivirito asked if Veca was planning to come that day. He wanted to make pizza. Infante called to find out. “I’m in the car,” Veca said.

Sometimes Infante finds it hard to believe that this is her life.

“It’s like this is a weird middle-aged fairy tale I’m living,” she said. “Every day there’s a bit of magic.”



Deborah Netburn

Deborah Netburn covers faith, spirituality and joy for the Los Angeles Times. She started at The Times in 2006 and has worked across a wide range of sections including entertainment, home and garden, national news, technology and science.



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Christina House is a staff photojournalist with the Los Angeles Times. She officially joined the visual journalism team in 2017 after 10 years as a freelance photographer. House grew up in Long Beach and is a graduate of Cal State Fullerton. Her love for photography started when she visited the Philippines, her mother’s native country, at age 7. That unforgettable experience inspired her to pick up a camera. House won the 2023 Pulitzer Prize for Feature Photography and the 2022 Robert F. Kennedy Journalism Award for Domestic Photography for “Hollywood’s Finest,” an intimate look into the life of a pregnant 22-year-old woman living on the street. She received the 2021 Cliff Edom New America Award and was honored in the portrait series category for her work on “Game Changers: A Celebration of Women in Sports” from the 2021 National Press Photographers Assn.’s Best of Photojournalism awards.

