



**I**t was a busy night at La Veranda, an upscale Italian restaurant on Delaware Avenue. Diners, looking for a taste of Italy in the heart of Philadelphia, were digging into sumptuous dishes of pasta, seafood or veal chops. The joint was buzzing.

And then things got interesting.

A hit man carrying a sawed-off shotgun began to chase the restaurant's pizza maker through the dining area. Customers ducked under white linen-covered tables. Other members of the wait staff looked on incredulously.

This was 1992 and what was playing out was an attempted mob hit, one of several that had rocked the City of Brotherly Love during a turbulent period of underworld unrest.

Not everything, however, went as planned.

As the hapless Sicilian-born hit man—who later became a cooperating government witness—told a federal jury, someone had mistakenly put the wrong size shells in his shotgun. The lupara, the Sicilian Mafia's weapon of choice, misfired. The pizza maker got away and was next heard from in Italy.

Just another day in the Philadelphia branch of Cosa Nostra, a mob family that had clearly lost its way. Back in the 1990s, wanton violence, senseless shootings and disorganization were the marks of the local mob, arguably one of the most dysfunctional crime families in America.

Today, those blood-splattered years have given way to a more benign, low-key Mafia, one that still calls South Philadelphia home and that remains heavily involved in illegal sports betting, loan sharking and other traditional rackets. Murder is now a negotiating tool of last resort rather than a calling card.

And as always, good food and drink, the glue that holds the Italian-American social fabric together, is part of the underworld experience. Meals are a chance for mobsters to network, to socialize, to break bread rather than break knees.

Visitors looking for a "taste" of this dark side of Philadelphia can dine on delicious food served with

a dollop of mob folklore at several local bars and restaurants.

Former boss Angelo Bruno had a philosophy that served him well during a 21-year run as capo di tutti capi of Philadelphia. Bruno believed in operating in the shadows; he was more interested in making money than headlines. His murder in 1980 sent his once highly efficient and low profile organization careening out of control.

But for every hit, there seemed to be a half-dozen misses.

There's a corner tavern in the heart of South Philadelphia, the Bomb Bomb BBQ Grill and Italian Restaurant at 10th and Wolf streets that is testament to those misfires. Legend has it that in the 1930s, the owners of the tavern were not buying their booze from an "endorsed" distributor, so the joint was bombed. The owners refused to change over, and it was bombed again.

Eventually a deal was worked out, and the tavern was later renamed the Bomb Bomb to celebrate the "negotiations." Today's owners had nothing to do with those long ago events, but if you're looking for a good, home-style meal, great ribs, mouth-watering seafood dishes or just an excellent crab cake sandwich, this is where to head.

Cous' Little Italy, where Bruno had his last meal, no longer exists—it's now the site of several upscale townhouses—but many of the Italian restaurants along the Ninth Street Italian Market or Passyunk Avenue offer the same delectable food and neighborhood ambience as the one-time mob hangout.

Villa di Roma, on Ninth Street, may be one of the best. Ninth Street is also the home of Ralph's, one of the oldest Italian-American restaurants in the country.

Radicchio, a no-reservation BYOB at the corner of Fourth and Wood, is a favorite of one-time mob boss Joseph "Uncle Joe" Ligambi, who might very well be tucking into a great meal at a table near you. The branzino, filleted tableside, is the best in the city and may be the best on this side of the Atlantic.

Dante & Luigi's also serves up mob history. It has

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been a South Philadelphia landmark for generations. A great wine list and excellent pasta and seafood are the marks of this small, but comfortable, corner dining spot at 10th and Catharine.

Savor the experience over an order of spaghetti and clams, which is the meal Nicodemo S. Scarfo was eating on Halloween Night 1989.

Scarfo was the son of jailed mob boss Nicodemo D. "Little Nicky" Scarfo, a psychopathic murderer who took over after Philip "Chicken Man" Testa died when a nail bomb planted under his porch literally blew him through his front door.

The elder Scarfo had been jailed in 1987 and was trying to run the crime family from prison, using his son as his proxy. That night, a man wearing a Halloween mask and carrying a trick-or-treat bag walked up to the young Scarfo's table, pulled a nine millimeter machine pistol out of his bag and opened fire.

Scarfo was hit six times, but miraculously survived.

Finally, if you're willing to travel, there's a restaurant in nearby Collingswood, New Jersey, just a 15-minute ride on the PATCO high speed train line from Center City. Kitchen Consigliere Café serves up Italian "comfort food" according to former mob associate Angelo Lutz (original family name Luxzi), who holds court here every night and supplied the kitchen with his mother's and grandmother's recipes. The restaurant is designed in Mafia-esque style: the sconces on the lamps over each table are fake .45 pistols; Mafia films run in a loop on large screens televisions strategically located around the 93-seat restaurant; murals on the wall celebrate real and cinematic gangsters.

Lutz did eight years on a racketeering-gambling charge before coming home five years ago to this small restaurant that he has since expanded.

During his trial, he testified in his own defense, telling the jury "I'm a cook, not a crook." While the jury didn't accept that explanation, apparently times have changed.

