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HEADLINE: Well, the Ices Are Still Italian;
 Immigration Patterns Shift, Altering the Old Neighborhood

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BODY:

What Sal Calabrese has always loved about Bensonhurst, Brooklyn, the city's largest Italian neighborhood, is that it provides the intimacies of a village.

"If I walk out," he said, "I will say hello to 15 or 20 people and they to me. 'Hi, Sal. How are you? How's your father?' Like the old days. We're from different places in Italy, but we live in the same town." But these days, Mr. Calabrese worries that Bensonhurst may soon lose the congenial feeling that comes from a place of common habits and pleasures.

Bensonhurst is losing its Italians. According to the 2000 **census**, the number of residents of Italian descent is down to 59,112, little more than half that of two decades ago, and the departed Italians have been replaced by Chinese and Russian families.

Mr. Calabrese volunteers that he is part of that movement. His parents still live in the neighborhood and he runs a thriving real estate agency there, but three years ago he moved to Bedminster, N.J., to a 34-acre farm where he breeds Arabian horses.

Italian-Americans, who have given New York City much of its charm in emblems as telltale as Fiorello La Guardia and fuhgeddaboutit, are declining sharply in numbers in all the boroughs except Staten Island. Many New Yorkers worry not only that they will lose the Italian neighborhoods but that the Italian influence on the city's personality will fade away.

The **census** shows that the number of New Yorkers of Italian descent has fallen below 700,000, compared with more

than one million in 1980 and 839,000 in 1990.

Despite the reputation of immigrant groups for die-hard allegiance to old neighborhoods, what is happening, sociologists say, is the continuation of a trend that has been going on for several decades now: the children who grew up in the working-class and middle-class homes of immigrant neighborhoods are, like Mr. Calabrese, now professionals, managers and business people who want suburban homes with backyards of grass, not concrete.

In Bensonhurst, the Italian-American residents, who once passed houses on to their own relatives or those of their neighbors, are selling them to the highest bidders: Chinese moving up from nearby Sunset Park and Russians moving up from Brighton Beach.

And so they are adapting. Mr. Calabrese employs five Chinese-speaking and six Russian-speaking brokers among his staff of 40. Salvatore Alba, whose bakery has drawn long lines for its cannoli and cheesecake since his Sicilian parents opened it in 1932, has hired a Chinese-American woman to sell Italian ices.

"I figure if they can't speak English, we'll get someone to speak to them in Chinese," Mr. Alba said of his newer customers.

Still, there are many New Yorkers who lament the impact that the decline in Italians could have on the city's character. In politics, for example, Italian enclaves have been a seedbed for some of the city's most prominent leaders, lately with names like Giuliani, Cuomo, Ferraro and Vallone.

But Richard Alba, a distinguished professor of sociology at the State University at Albany, predicts that Italian politicians will become less common in the five boroughs.

Professor Alba thinks it is telling that Andrew M. Cuomo did so poorly in his Democratic primary campaign for governor. He pointed out that with Italians increasingly assimilated and dispersed and more often voting on issues than on ethnicity, Mr. Cuomo was unable to ignite a collective ethnic outpouring.

There is, however, a wide difference of opinion on whether a shrinking Italian population will change the city's characteristic New Yorkness, Italians having left such a strong imprint on the city's dialect and gestures, its food and music (think the "New York, New York" anthem sung by that Italian fellow who grew up just across the Hudson River), and such stereotypical New York attitudes as a wariness of authority.

But the writer Gay Talese is not lamenting some of that passing because many of the signature images of Italians hark back to a time when Italians, in the public eye, represented the urban underclass.

"It's not just coming to the port city and finding an address convenient to the job," Mr. Talese said. "They're carrying their brains with them to places far from where they work. They're more mobile because America is mobile."

Still, Mr. Talese, 70, the author of a memoir and chronicle of Italian immigration, "Unto the Sons" (Alfred A. Knopf, 1992), volunteers that he still retains much of what he called the Italian "village mentality." Although he lives in a Manhattan town house, is married to Nan A. Talese, a prominent book editor, and is a regular at Elaine's, he visits his 95-year-old mother twice a week in his hometown, Ocean City, N.J., and takes her to a small restaurant and then a casino so she can play the slot machines that give her pleasure.

"I'm still a hometown, small-town guy" he said.

Bensonhurst is a vintage Italian neighborhood, a place of tidy two-family brick homes adorned with Madonnas in the front yard and American flags snapping over the front doors. Its commercial spine, 18th Avenue, is chock-full of pork and pasta stores and the Italian colors of green, white and red.

Along with Bay Ridge, it was the setting of much of "Saturday Night Fever," a valentine to the 70's social styles of young Italians. It also won unwanted national attention when a black teenager, Yusuf K. Hawkins, was murdered by a group of local youths in 1991.

It has a long way to go before it becomes what Jerome Krase, a sociology professor at Brooklyn College, calls an "ethnic theme park" like Little Italy, where few Italians actually reside. But its fate seems unavoidable. Its Italians are moving to New Jersey or Long Island or across the Verrazano-Narrows Bridge to Staten Island.

On 18th Avenue, the site of the annual Feast of Santa Rosalia, men still sip espresso in cafes, but there are fewer men and fewer cafes, and older people have to walk farther for the Italian products they need.

Chinese novelty stores and beauty parlors are replacing the cafes. Along the side streets, Chinese, who relish the neighborhood's orderliness, the schools with seasoned teachers and the easy subway ride to Chinatown, are buying up the two-family homes for \$400,000 and more.

Aldo Studio, the neighborhood's wedding photographer, famed for its collection of backdrops like a waterfall, a grand piano and a white Rolls-Royce, now displays a large photograph of a Chinese bride and groom standing in front of a maroon Harley-Davidson. Churches that were once heavily Italian are now offering Masses in Chinese.

In this ferment, many Italians have lost their "comfort zone," said Jerry Chiappetta, 52, executive director of the Italian-American Coalition of Organizations, who has lived in Bensonhurst for 40 years.

"When you have an influx of people who don't share similar traditions, it's not a question of disliking them, it's just there is less in common," he said. "And if you're on the border of should I move or not, it's one more reason to move."

Mr. Calabrese takes it all in stride, as another turn of the American immigration wheel.

"You go back to the early 1900's, Italians were moving near the Bowery and you'd have two or three families sharing a two-bedroom apartment in order to buy a house," he said. "Chinese are doing the same. They're no different than our people."

There have been few tensions, Italians and Chinese in the neighborhood said. "Italian people are friendly, easy to talk to," said Lisa Pan, a Chinese woman who works at her family-owned business, Wei's Gift Shop, which draws Italian youngsters who prize its "Yu-Gi-Oh!" Japanese trading cards.

Jeiyng Franco, a Chinese woman, who has taught physics in the neighborhood at Lafayette High School since 1984, has seen the proportion of Italian students dwindle. "I don't think Italian people have any resentment toward the Chinese," she said. "The Chinese are hard-working. They never bother their neighbors."

Mr. Calabrese said that 15 years ago when the Chinese began to move in, there were complaints from Italian residents. But with the realization that the Chinese were creating few problems, all that is left is rueful resignation.

"The feast of Santa Rosalia is still going on, but how much longer?" Mr. Calabrese said. "If you asked me 15 years ago, I would have said it was going on forever. Now I don't know, and that makes me sad because I am Italian."
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GRAPHIC: Photos: The annual Feast of Santa Rosalia in Bensonhurst, Brooklyn, draws an ethnically diverse crowd now. Although the neighborhood is still heavily Italian, it is fast becoming less so. The display at SAS Italian Records, left, contrasts with the front window of a Chinese travel agency. (Richard Perry/The New York Times); (Photographs by Fred R. Conrad/The New York Times)(pg. B1); Salvatore Alba hired a Chinese woman at his bakery

to help his newer customers, many of whom do not speak English (or Italian). (Fred R. Conrad/The New York Times)(pg. B8)

Chart: "KEEPING TRACK -- New Yorkers Of Italian Descent"

Percentage of New York City residents who listed Italian as part of their ancestry in the U.S. **census.**

1980: 14.22%

1990: 11.45

2000: 8.65

(Source: **Census** Bureau)(pg. B8)

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