



The Deckchair Detective

Nurture that curiosity. It might grow into something special.
By Zora O'Neill; photographs by Amy Eckert

Where are the neighbors from? It's a little guessing game that's always fascinating in Astoria, a small corner of Queens. The rest of New York City's most diverse borough is a patchwork of enclaves—three square blocks of Colombians adjacent to five square blocks of Indians, like that all the way east to the border. But in Astoria, Greeks rub shoulders with Italians, Czechs, Egyptians, Tunisians, Croats, Brazilians, Albanians, Mexicans.

So, prizes to the keen eyes that pick out small clues in the backyard across from me. My roommate points: fig trees. And grape leaves are just starting to leaf out on gnarled vines sunk in half-barrels at the bottoms of posts. That means somewhere Mediterranean. A few weeks later, the other barrels full of plants begin to yield long, pointy, hot-looking chili peppers—that rules out Greek, probably.

Italian? I listen close for the intermittent syllables that well up to my deck. (Haphazardly strung fairy lights, droopy houseplants, Astroturf—these are the clues that would identify me as a post-hippie from New Mexico, spooked by the desert into skimping on water.) But I never hear enough to identify the language clearly.

Compared with the man down the block who sells me salt-packed anchovies and tells me my total is “tre cinquanta,” the cadence doesn't sound Italian. Croatian, then? But Croatians started coming to Astoria only recently, and these people, whose summer landscaping routine runs like clockwork and whose grape vines are as thick as my wrists, look like they've been here for decades.

As the summer passes, the vines wind up the poles and leaf out full, each further obscuring my neighbors from view, muffling their voices, enclosing them in their own particular Eden. A ripe chili flashes red through a gap in the grape leaves. The figs pull down their rubbery boughs. Guests chatter, and the smell of grilled meat fills the air. The deckchair detective is stymied.

But I do glimpse one last detail before the greenery seals them in. We're using the same charcoal in our barbecue grills: Royal Oak, the brand available everywhere in Astoria, the red bag with the label that reads, “This is the charcoal our ancestors used.”

Wherever they're from, I'm from there, too.

