

# History of Viva La Panza

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What started out in 1938 as a small gathering of Italian businessmen and the invitation of persons involved in politics has grown into a wonderful gala event for sixty-eight years. Recently, the Italian American Professional Businessmen's Club hosted its annual VIVA LA PANZA DINNER, at Todaro's Party Center in Akron.

As told by Bruce Romeo, one of the current event's committeepersons, and has attended the event since 1952. His now deceased father in law, Joseph Licitri, who owned the Belt Line Grocery Store on Grant Street in Akron, Ohio, was responsible for hosting the original dinner gathering in the rear of the old store. The store had a small kitchen, and the men feasted on a fine Italian dinner, including a delicacy food called "tripe". At that time the group of Italian businessmen wanted to show their appreciation to those persons who helped many of the Italian immigrants come to America to start a new life in the land of opportunity. The Italian community enlisted such men as lawyers, judges, and politicians who were well versed in the process needed to help individuals come to America, enable them with passports, and help find jobs for the heads of the households. Unfortunately, back in those days, many of the immigrants could not speak or write the English language. Therefore, they needed the help of professionals who were educated and knew the immigration process. One such individual of Italian heritage who made sure that the event was held each year was Richard Percoco. Mr. Percoco was active in the political areas of Akron, Ohio. He knew many of the Akron politicians and would seek their assistance to help Italian families bring their loved ones to America. In return, many of the Italian businessmen of Akron would gather votes for the men who were campaigning for a political office. This is why, even today, the Viva La Panza Dinner is held one week before the November elections. As evident at the event, local politicians are invited to dinner to pass their campaign material, and to get to know many of the people who attend the dinner.

During the early years of the event, after the party had grown, it was held at various places. But due to its immense popularity, the Italian American Professional & Businessmen's Club became the host of the event. It enlisted the banquet services of the well-known Todaro's Party Center in Akron. Since the 1990's, The Todaro's Party Center has been the site of the event, and has had an attendance of over 500 people. As witnessed by anyone who has attended the dinner, everyone has a good time over a fine dinner, a chance to meet the candidates, and enjoy listening to many old stories of the past. Of course, the delicacy food "tripe" is still part of the menu. More importantly, not only does the Italian Community get to meet the candidates for political offices, the proceeds from the event goes to fund scholarships that are given out each year to students of Italian heritage who qualify for higher learning. This year was another successful event.