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### GETTING OUT: The Polk Street Stroll

I've been so content with the ambience of our Barbary Coast neighborhood since moving to San Francisco that I've hardly ventured outside its borders. But lately I'm discovering that there's life beyond the Embarcadero and North Beach. I'm not talking about Fillmore Street. With its high profile boutiques and restaurants and festival—Fillmore is almost an extension of the Barbary Coast. I'll ask instead, raise your hand if you've been to Polk Street lately. No? Come take the "Polk Street Stroll" with me.



Cathy Fiorello, resident The Gateway

SEARCH

My first impression as I walked Polk from Sacramento to Vallejo was, this is a neighborhood in the old-fashioned sense of the word, providing the everyday services its Russian Hill residents require. In this limited length of the street, I passed a shoe-repair and a dry-cleaning shop, a barber shop and hardware store, a bakery and florist, and fashions to fit the diverse ages and styles of the community.



Some areas appear to be newly gentrified, others still gritty, awaiting makeovers by imaginative entrepreneurs. I went back to Polk several times for this story, and each time I understood it better and appreciated it more. It reminded me of my first visit to North Beach: It was a gray day, which emphasized what I then thought was a drab ambience. I remember thinking, why is this neighborhood a legend? What am I missing? But, as I learned, its unique vibe draws you back time and time again until its warts begin to fade and you, too, see the gem that it is. That's where I am with Polk.

From talking to shopkeepers and sitting in cafes shamelessly eavesdropping on the conversations of locals, I learned that this is not a transient neighborhood. People have lived and worked here for years; they greet each other in the stores, the owners know their names. Having said that, I'm going to start my review of the shops with one that's been open a mere year and a half. But since I start all my visits to Polk with a stop at Lotta's Bakery, I'll risk sounding contradictory.

When you get off the One California bus, you'll be on Sacramento Street. Walk one block to Clay, cross over, and you're almost at Lotta's. You can't miss it—everything's coming up pink here: the hanging sign, the awning, the sidewalk sitting area. With a table or two outside and a few more inside, it's a good place for a morning or mid-afternoon break. Once inside, you'll be surrounded by display cases



Lotta's Bakery

so tempting, you'll need time to make your choice. Order coffee first, and sit

a while. Proprietor Earl Darny welcomes you for as long as you wish to linger. Darny, a native San Franciscan, does all the baking himself, featuring old-fashioned favorites like carrot cake, chocolate silk cake, his signature cheesecake, cupcakes, cookies, and much more.

Why would a man named Darny call his bakery "Lotta's"? He says he did it in homage to Lotta Crabtree, the legendary nineteenth century entertainer and philanthropist whose commemorative fountain still stands on Market Street. Did I forget to mention that the shop's full name is "Lotta's Bakery and Sweet Antiques"? A room in the back, run by Darny's partner, offers "collectibles—curiosities—clothing." Go for the cake.

#### **Belle Cose/Molte Cose**



*Belle Cose*

Two blocks past Lotta's, between Pacific and Broadway, on the same side of the street, are Belle Cose and Molte Cose, side-by-side, pseudo-vintage boutiques. Walking into Belle Cose is like entering a Victorian lady's boudoir. Silky lingerie, sheer shift dresses, strands of beads and colorful ribbons are draped over counters and antique dressers. But these are not true survivors of a gilded age—everything here, though vintage in style, is actually new. Moderately priced from \$10 to \$200, they are, indeed, "beautiful things."

Next door is Molte Cose, which translates to "many things," but here they are mostly for men. You'll find clothing and accessories by hip young designers at affordable prices. There's a section devoted to cool clothes for cool kids. If you have one, check it out. For nineteen years, the vivacious Teresa Nittolo, Brooklyn-born and now "the Pioneer of Polk," has presided over both these shops. She wears her vintage styles beautifully, from trailing scarf to flowing skirt. Friendly as well as fashionable, she is her own best advertisement for these charming shops.

#### **High-end Cris**

Just two or three stores further on, is Cris Consignment Shop. Even at first glance, this window tells a very different story from those of its neighbors. There's no vintage here, but beautiful things of totally different origin. Everything is resale, culled from the personal wardrobes of Bay



*Cris Consignment*

Area fashionistas. There are no company suppliers, no middlemen. Cris herself, a Frenchwoman of impeccable taste, passes on every piece that she accepts for consignment.

There are two rooms, both pristine and uncluttered. One room is strictly couture, with labels like Dior, Versace, Chanel, Gucci; shoes and handbags by Prada, Lanvin, Chloe. The other holds high-end department store merchandise, again in pristine condition. Considered the best resale shop in San Francisco for top design labels, Cris's prices are not moderate. But for top designer couture, they're still a bargain.

#### **Nick's Crispy Tacos**

Crossing Polk where it meets Vallejo and heading back towards Sacramento, you come to Nick's Crispy Tacos. In a town where taquerias are as ubiquitous as Starbucks, it's not easy for a Mexican fast food eatery to earn mentions in food columns in both glossies and tabloids, but Nick's has



*Nick's Crispy Tacos*

done just that. If you require a restaurant where the ambience is as pleasing as the food, this may not be the place for you. We're talking no-frills here—plastic tablecloths, self-service, loud music. However, if you can get beyond that, you, too, may put Nick's on your list of musts, like

the man I met on my first visit. He lived in San Francisco 10 years ago, he told me, and now returns regularly on business. "My first stop for lunch," he said, "is always Nick's."

My first crispy taco made me a believer, too. I ordered the "Camerones," with grilled prawns, pico de gallo, and guacamole. I order it every time. Other traditional fillings are also available—pulled pork, grilled chicken, fried fish. They all look good, and one day I hope to try one, if I can get past the shrimp. A full line of soft drinks is offered; the only alcoholic drink served at lunch is a margarita, for \$5.95. Tacos range in price from \$3.25 to \$4.95 (for the shrimp), unless you go on Taco Tuesdays, when tacos are \$2 (except for the shrimp). Don't get hooked on the shrimp.

#### **Cheese Plus**

On the corner of Polk and Pacific, is the neighborhood cheese shop, Cheese Plus. The community is justly proud of this high-profile shop that draws people from all over The City. It's not just cheese that they come for. In addition to refrigerator cases filled with world-class Blues and triple-cream Bries, its shelves and



*Cheese Plus*

counters overflow with California and European artisan delicacies: charcuterie, pastas, oils and vinegars and specialty condiments. Proprietor Ray Bair, formerly a director for Whole Foods Markets, travels Europe regularly to stock his shelves. The deli serves house-made sandwiches and salads. So you can make just one stop for everything you need for a picnic in the park or in your parlor, wine is also sold.

The store hosts seasonal tasting fairs that spill out onto the sidewalk. If you're really into cheese, you'll want to know more about the Cheese School of San Francisco, which is sponsored by Cheese Plus. Visit [www.cheeseschoolsf.com](http://www.cheeseschoolsf.com) for more information.

#### **One Half Store**

Leave time and energy to browse the hodgepodge of bargains in One Half, further along Polk. If you come here looking for something in particular, chances are you won't find it. On the other hand, this is definitely the place for finding something you never knew you needed. The merchandise is new and eclectic. You'll enjoy the hunt through teacups and vases and all manner of giftware, books and toys. You can have all this fun without emptying your wallet. Everything here is one half its original price, sometimes less. If you're lucky enough to wander in during sale days, everything is half the half price. Taking a wild guess, that would be a quarter. This is when I stock up on candles and greeting cards.

#### **Miller's East Coast Deli**



*One Half*

If you're a former New Yorker, loving San Francisco but longing for a pastrami-on-rye—the real thing!—you owe it to yourself to stop at Miller's East Coast Deli, between Clay and Washington. How authentic is Miller's? Step inside and breathe in that unmistakable Lower East Side vibe: the sandwiches crammed mile-high with corned beef, that distinct, almost-dry potato salad, the half-sour pickles with the snap heard across the room. Add to that the bare bones ambience and the painfully uncomfortable chairs, and the only thing missing from the eastern prototype is the sass and the attitude. A born and bred New Yorker can't get any closer to home.



*Miller's East Coast Deli*

When you exit Miller's, look across the street. Seeing pink? It's Lotta's Bakery, where you started this stroll. You've come full circle and you're just steps away from Clay Street and the bus that will take you home.

Be sure to visit Cathy's blog, [A Tale of Three Cities](#)



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## Comments

Mar 14, 2009, 09:07:15 [Linda](#) wrote:

*Thank you for your neighborhood research Cathy, I've always wanted to know what Polk Street has to offer other than the destination restaurants. It sounds like a good place for the pocket book too!*

Mar 18, 2009, 11:53:22 [Liz Doyle](#) wrote:

*Cathy I share your enthusiasum for Polk St. Being a senior with a senior bus pass costing all of \$10 a month, I cable car from California St. up the hill to Polk, walk the blocks to the North and catch the no. 12 bus back to Broadway and Embarcadero. "One Half" is a great favorite with me and I would like to add "Big Apple & Discount Store" on the corner of Clay and Polk and the "Douglas Brett Gallery" for uncommon sculpture. "Big Apple" appears to be a supermarket but if you turn to the right as you enter there is an interesting plant pot and stand section. Two doors from "One Half" is an excellent drapery and upholstery establishment called Russian Hill*