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San Marco Society women share culinary tradition at annual Italian food festival

By Ron Devlin
Reading Eagle

In a kitchen redolent with the aroma of garlic, olive oil and rosemary, Francesca Vallonio dips a ladle into a cauldron of rich, red tomato sauce.

For much of the 52 years since she migrated to Temple from Le Marche region of central Italy, Vallonio has been a fixture in the kitchen of the San Marco Society.

As a child, she romped among elderly Italian women making pasta at the club, which is a bastion of Italian culture in Temple.

As an adult, particularly in the last 25 or so years, Vallonio has been part of a generation of women who inherited the culinary mantle rooted in a mountainous farming region overlooking the Adriatic Sea.

"We're cooking the way our mothers and grandmothers did in Italy," she said. "We've kept that part of our culture and brought it here."

That culinary heritage forms the basis of the annual San Marco Italian Food Festival, set for Aug. 7 and 8 on the club's grounds in Temple.

For weeks, a cadre of women who trace their roots to the Le Marche or Abruzzi regions of Italy have been making pasta, lasagna, stuffed olives and meatballs in the kitchen of the club off Kutztown Road on Commerce Street.

"We're ready to go," announced Francesca, who insists everything is made from scratch.

John Rozzi, San Marco president, said there would be no food festival were it not for the dedication of the women in the kitchen.

Their strict adherence to recipes passed down through generations, he said, gives the food an authenticity rarely found in America's fast food culture.

"They cook as if they were cooking for their families," said Rozzi. "They take the same care and have the same passion as they do when they're cooking at home."

Nurturing their culture

In the aftermath of World War I, scores of Italians migrated to Berks County from mountain villages near the city of Ascoli Piceno.

They came to work at Temple Iron Foundry, the Reading Railroad and Temple's mushroom houses.

Settling largely in Temple, they nurtured a culture that mirrored the traditions of their homeland.

In 1933, as if to ward off the onslaught of the Great Depression, a group of 55 immigrants banded together to form an Italian fraternal organization.

In homage to a mountain peak that towered above their villages, they named it the San Marco Society.

"The club became a place where they could celebrate their traditions," said Rozzi, a Temple contractor who was born in Italy.



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Msgr. E. Michael Camilli, the club's chaplain, credits Temple's Italian culture with planting the seed for his vocation. When he was ordained 50 years ago in Rome, his thoughts were of growing up in Temple.

"I thought of my dear father and mother, my family and our close-knit Italian community that was so much attached to our San Marco Club," Camilli wrote in a recent newsletter.

As his parents were eking out a living in their own mushroom plant in the 1950s, Camilli studied in Rome. As fate would have it, he would serve in the Diocese of Ascoli Piceno under the tutelage of Msgr. Paulo Rozzi - John Rozzi's uncle.

Camilli, Allentown diocesan Secretariat for Catholic Life and Evangelization, recently returned to Italy and celebrated Mass in the Shrine of St. Emidio, the Third Century martyr and patron saint of Ascoli Piceno.

Again, his thoughts were of Temple.

"Every Sunday, we would go to San Marco - the men would play bocce, the women chatted and the kids played," he recalls. "It was the center of our lives."

A family affair

Lucia "Lucy" Pellegrini has spent so much time in San Marco's kitchen, she's begun calling it home.

"This is our second home," declared Pellegrini, 77. "It's like family here."

Much as they would at home, the women of San Marco make food for the festival from scratch - 132 trays of lasagna, 7,000 meatballs, 6,800 stuffed Ascolani olives and 300 gallons of sauce.

"We use fresh herbs and make our own pasta and dough," Francesca Vallanio said. "Everything is made right here in the kitchen."

Cooking, confesses 73-year-old Maria Cognetti, is hard work.

Her specialty is gnocchi, a doughy, dumpling-like dish. Cooking it, she's reminded of her hometown in Italy's Abruzzi region. She sees her mother in the kitchen of their home in Teramo, from which she emigrated in the 1970s.

"You have to like to cook," Cognetti said. "You have to like to work."

Louise Durinzi, 78, who's been making pizza for more than 60 years, said the food ties the generations together.

"One person has an idea from their village, another person has an idea from their village," said Durinzi. "You put it all together, and you have something special."

After a hard night of cooking, women who've known each other for most of their lives take time to chat over a cup of espresso.

They talk of the old country, their families and food.

Rita Gaspari, 77, whose father was one of the club's charter members, relishes the fellowship of working with women she's known for most of her life.

"We enjoy being together," she said. "It's a family situation."

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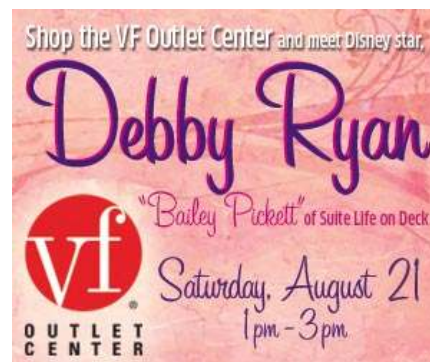
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