



A photo of the Bucco brothers with their mother, Rosie, during Christmas in the late 1980s. From left, Jim, Anthony, and John. MARY FRANK/STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER



A bowl of Grandma Rosie's Meatball Stew. MARY FRANK/STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER

COUSINS

Continued from Page B1

past, each other and their followers. They also connect to the community by cooking for free at fundraisers for local civic groups.

There are four cousins descended from three Bucco brothers — the children of Grandma Rosie and Grandpa Mike, and all are good cooks in their own right.

Lisa Bucco Picinich, 49, of Montville and her sister, St. Lifer, 47, are the daughters of the late Jimmy.

Jennifer Bucco Glick, 37, of Dumont is the daughter of Johnny.

Jill Bucco Rines, 35, who grew up in New Jersey but now blogs from her home in Tennessee, is the daughter of Anthony. Rines' participation is particularly special.

"Being part of Cousins in the Kitchen makes me feel like I get to be with my family in some way even though I don't get to see them as much as I would like," she said. "Growing up, all the girls were close. I always looked up to Lisa and Diana and just about idolized Jen."

No matter how much the three cousins in the kitchen reminisced that Thursday morning, they never lost track of the simmering stew — the center of attention. Picinich talked and cut potatoes to put in the gravy while St. Lifer mixed meat with parmesan, pars-

ley, eggs, garlic, bread and other ingredients.

The kitchen was far from quiet as Glick fried the meatballs, Frank Sinatra crooned from an "Italian Classics" CD, and the cousins, snacking on fresh, imported parmesan cheese and pignoli nuts, laughed and laughed.

While their devotion to Old World cooking inspired them to blog, the four also are devoted to real-world cooking. They are, after all, busy. Among them, they have nine children, ages 1 through 28, and four jobs. St. Lifer is a writer and life coach, Glick a teacher, Rines a radio deejay, and Picinich director of operations for an executive suite building.

So the four find themselves taking on challenges from the past and present.

Reproducing some of Grandma Rosie's dishes is a challenge from the past since she didn't write down her recipes.

"We never measured anything, anyway," Glick said. "No one around us ever cooked in that way. It was all about taste."

"On Easter our Grandma Rosie used to make the pizzagaina, the Italian pie," Picinich said. "It has 30 or so eggs."

"We call it a heart attack in a pan," St. Lifer joked.

"There's all kinds of cold cuts in it," Picinich explained. "You have ham. You have salami. You have 'gabagool.'"

Gabagool is Neapolitan dialect for capicola. The pie was a dish so large and

heavy, St. Lifer recalled, it took two people to get it out of the oven.

"Grandma would make it on Holy Thursday," Picinich said. "When I first got married, I used to live upstairs from my grandmother. We would smell this wonderful smell. But we couldn't eat meat on Good Friday so we had to wait until the Saturday before Easter to enjoy it. When Grandma died, nobody knew how to make the pizzagaina."

Like their ancestors, the cousins go as far as to buy certain ingredients at certain Italian specialty shops. Favorites are Corrado's Market in Fairfield and Sergio & Co. in Denver.

However, the cousins, in concession to reality, also cut some corners.

In a January blog post, Picinich served up her recipe for quick-fix sausage and peppers, and Glick confesses — "My mother would kill me. I said it out loud." — to using Bertolla's garlic and oil marinara out of a jar, but only as a base for her gravies.

"Seriously, after work I've got about an hour for dinner," Picinich said, "and that includes prep, cooking and feeding."

The cousins don't restrict themselves to Italian dishes, either.

Part of their mission is to share family stories in order to encourage their followers to reconnect with their own pasts. In addition to sharing their recipes, they create recipes upon request. On their blog they also accept recipes — from Korean to Irish — for everyone to try and share.

"People are connecting to us not just on the food level," St. Lifer said, "but on a bonding level."

They needn't go farther than their own homes to connect with other cultures. Though they want to demonstrate what's positive about Italian families for the world and their own children, each is happily married to a non-Italian.

Feeding the community

One of the cousins' first forays into community fundraising was making zeppoles last September at an Uncle Sam's Avenger's Motorcycle Club pasta dinner benefiting the Wounded Warrior Project. They cooked and served at the Parsippany District 5 Firehouse. Calandra's Restaurants donated 30 pounds of dough for the occasion.

"Powder was flying," St.

Lifer said. "We'd come out with the zeppoles with white all over us."

"Confectioners sugar everywhere!" Picinich said.

There were two best parts to the experience. First, the zeppoles made an additional couple hundred dollars for the cause. Second, the smell of the doughy pastries transported them to the days of Grandpa Mike, who stood 6 feet 4 inches tall, used to take all of them to the Feast of San Gennaro in Fairview. They thrilled to see him as one of the dozen men who carried the statue of San Gennaro through the streets.

"To do that was quite an honor," St. Lifer said.

Afterward, he bought them all bags of zeppoles. They remember shaking their bags to make sure the fried dough was covered in sugar.

The cousins also made 350 lemon ricotta cookies for a "Dine for Parsippany" flood relief dinner at Gourmet Café in Parsippany, and 500 chocolate awareness ribbon lollipops for the Clara Maass Medical Center Foundation.

In January they created specialty cards featuring their original recipe for huge hero sandwiches to be distributed at Ladies Night Out, an event supporting Jeremy's Heroes, which raises money to create sports opportunities for children in need. The non-profit was created in memory of Glick's brother-in-law, Jeremy Glick, who died on Flight 93, which crashed in Shanksville, Pa., on Sept. 11.

Her brother-in-law, a judo champion, had aspired to the Olympics.

Cooking for fundraisers is natural for Cousins in the Kitchen, according to Glick.

"Italians help through food," she said. "When someone passes away, what do they do? They come over and they feed you."

Though the cousins welcome the possibility of expanding their reach, including a food show, they say their efforts always will be about the love at the heart of "la famiglia." Their inspiration forever will remain the good-natured fighting over the elbow of the Italian bread, and remembering driving Grandma Rosie to Fiore's in Hoboken to get the mozzarella and the salami.

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Jill Bucco Rines, 35, who grew up in New Jersey but now blogs from her home in Tennessee, is the daughter of Anthony Bucco. PHOT COURTESY OF JILL BUCCO RINES

GRANDMA ROSIE'S MEATBALL STEW

STEW:

- 1 clove of garlic, finely chopped
- 1 large yellow onion, thinly sliced
- 3 28-ounce cans of tomato sauce (recommend: San Marzano tomatoes)
- 2 potatoes, cut into bite-sized pieces
- 1 15-ounce can of Del Monte peas
- 1 cup parmesan cheese
- Extra-virgin olive oil
- » In a large pot, drizzle 2 teaspoons of olive oil and heat on medium/high. Add chopped garlic and sliced onion. Sauté until onions are translucent.
- » Add the tomatoes to the onion and garlic mixture. Once the mixture is heated, about 10 minutes, add the potatoes and cover pot with a lid
- » Lower heat to medium and simmer until potatoes are almost cooked through, about 30 minutes. While that is cooking, make the meatballs.
- » Once the potatoes are almost cooked through, add the meatballs. Lower heat to medium low, cover and simmer for 1 hour.
- » Add peas at the last minute just to heat through.
- » Top with parmesan cheese and serve with crusty bread. Serves four.

MEATBALLS:

- 2 pounds ground meat (beef, turkey, pork or a combo of each)
- ½ large yellow onion, finely diced
- 1 clove garlic, finely chopped
- 2 tablespoons parsley
- 1 cup white bread torn by hand into bite-sized pieces (Italian breadcrumbs may be substituted)
- ½ cup parmesan cheese
- 2 eggs
- 2 teaspoons oregano
- 2 teaspoons salt
- 1 tablespoon black pepper
- » Combine above ingredients in a bowl until mixed together. Roll into 2-ounce balls (a little less than the size of your palm).
- » Place the meatballs in a skillet with two tablespoons olive oil over medium heat and sauté until golden brown on all sides. Do not worry about cooking the meatballs all the way through; they will finish cooking in the sauce. Put aside on a paper towel-lined plate to drain.

Learn more

To read stories, find recipes to try, share a recipe, or ask for one, reach out to Cousins in the Kitchen on:

» Their blog, <http://cousins-in-the-kitchen.blogspot.com/>

» Facebook page, www.facebook.com/CousinsInTheKitchen

» YouTube channel, www.youtube.com/user/CousinsInTheKitchen?feature=watch

Cousins' cooking tips

» To preserve parsley: Wrap the parsley in a damp paper towel, place it in a plastic bag, and put it in the refrigerator, storing it as flat as possible. It'll last at least another week.

» To make moist meatballs: Don't roll the balls too tightly. The extra air will help keep them tender and light.

» To make breading meats, poultry, fish, and vegetables easier and neater: Use a set of three interlocking coating trays with accompanying tongs for grasping and dipping.

» To avoid tearing while slicing onion: Wear sunglasses.



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Diana Bucco St. Lifer stirs the stew while the meatballs cook in the frying pan in her Boonton Township home. MARY FRANK/STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER