

SENIOR LIFESTYLES

Still cooking along – at nearly 107 years old!

By Mike Latona
Staff writer

ROCHESTER – Luigina Silvestrone cracks jokes almost as often as she smiles, which is quite a bit. Get her talking about the old country, and she'll fill up the better part of an afternoon with stories.

Except when she's cooking, that is. Then, the happy countenance is replaced by a furrowed brow as Silvestrone cuts up fruit and stirs sauce. Even at nearly 107 years of age, Silvestrone still patrols her kitchen with pride.

These days, that kitchen is located on the third floor of Kirkhaven, a downtown adult residence Silvestrone has called home since 1999. On a recent Thursday afternoon, Silvestrone prepared a lunch of *polenta* – a corn meal patty covered with sauce and cheese – with the help of her granddaughter, Paula.

"You gotta let (the sauce) cook another five minutes," Silvestrone instructed her granddaughter from her wheelchair.

"She's just in her glory when she's cooking; she gets so intense," remarked Paula Silvestrone, the executive director of AIDS Rochester.

When the meal was ready, grandmother and granddaughter each raised a glass. "A salute," Luigina said, her smile having returned. "A salute," Paula replied. "Buon appetito," Luigina added.

Cooking and baking on Tuesday and Thursday afternoons are a ritual for this pair. However, there's a much larger feast coming up: Silvestrone will celebrate her 107th birthday on Feb. 16, and several family members and friends are due to come in from all over the country.

Silvestrone will actually turn 107 on Feb. 21. Few people can claim to having lived that long; fewer still can say they've lived in three different centuries.

"God gave me the privilege of so many birthdays," she said.

Although she uses a wheelchair and walker, Silvestrone moves her arms and hands with good dexterity. Her agility was obvious as she spun her hands furiously to describe a pig that once broke into the family's wine supply back in Italy, and got so drunk it started rolling over.

Silvestrone has lost part of her hearing, but her mind is razor-sharp and her energy level is consistently high, according to her granddaughter. When told that she was to be the subject of a newspaper sto-



Andrea Dixon/Staff photographer

Luigina Silvestrone, who will be 107 on Feb. 21, talks with her granddaughter, Paula Silvestrone, while they make lunch together Feb. 7 at the Kirkhaven Adult Residence.

ry, Silvestrone told the reporter, in slightly broken English, "You better write a good thing for me!"

She was born in 1895 in the province of Aquila, Italy, when Grover Cleveland – yes, Grover Cleveland – was president of the United States. To this day, Silvestrone's childhood home is occupied by three generations of family members. They continue to operate a wine and olive-oil distributorship; in fact, Silvestrone routinely stomped grapes as a young woman. "My feet would get so red," she recalled.

Interestingly, Silvestrone was among the few family members who never drank wine herself. "Everybody else in the family gotta taste the wine and say 'good' or 'no good.' Everybody say 'good,'" she remarked with a laugh.

Silvestrone married her husband, Amante, in 1919. He came to the United States in 1920 and she joined him the following year, never to return to Italy. They settled in Niagara Falls, N.Y., and raised two children. Silvestrone recalls working in a laundry for 23 cents an hour, while

her husband earned 25 cents an hour as a janitor.

Paula Silvestrone said that during those many decades in Niagara Falls, her grandmother – who never learned to drive – was known as the matriarch of 23rd Street because she loved taking long walks around the neighborhood. At times, she would even cross the bridge into Canada to visit in-laws.

Silvestrone was a long-time parishioner of St. Joseph's Church in Niagara Falls, where she would attend Mass every Sun-

day as well as on several weekdays. Her favorite local restaurant was Como's – located less than a block from her house – where she celebrated her 100th birthday.

"Oh, I loved Niagara Falls. Everything nice – always clean, good people," she said.

Much of Silvestrone's time was spent cooking for family. "You'd eat three of her ravioli and you couldn't stand up," her granddaughter recalled. In addition, Silvestrone often had her food shipped to relatives in Italy, along with souvenirs from Niagara Falls.

She also took great pride in growing vegetables as well as a rose garden, and making family clothes. "You gotta work like a man if you want to eat," Silvestrone said, explaining her work ethic.

Amante Silvestrone died at age 92. His wife continued living in the family home alone; she remained there until 1997 – when she was 102.

She then moved to an adult residence in Niagara Falls, and came to Rochester two years later to live at Kirkhaven. Her room is adorned by many family pictures, as well as a message from Pope John Paul II on the occasion of her 101st birthday. Also on display is a framed copy of her immigration document from Ellis Island.

Silvestrone remains fairly active; she even threw out the first pitch at a Rochester Red Wings baseball game last summer. "She'll go out whenever someone takes her. She loves the stimulation," her granddaughter said.

Silvestrone has outlived both her children, Mario and Rina. She also has seven grandchildren, 11 great-grandchildren and five great-great-grandchildren.

She offered only a shrug when asked about her secret for longevity.

"I don't know, you gotta ask God," she replied.

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