

[From the Burlington Free Press, May 10, 2013]

FRAGRANT MEMORIES OF BURLINGTON'S DEEP ITALIAN ROOTS

(By Melissa Pasanen)

John Varricchione, 66, has strong memories of growing up in the heart of Burlington's Little Italy, he said last Monday while he and his wife helped their friend Mary Anne Gucciardi make a batch of her famous meatballs in their Burlington kitchen. At one point, Varricchione donned an apron imprinted with the name of the Vermont Italian Club and three photos from the early 1900s of three families who were among the pillars of the community: the Eveltis, the Varricchiones and the Merolas.

His grandfather, Luigi Varricchione, originally came to Burlington in 1912 at the suggestion of the Merolas who preceded him and who hailed from the same town about an hour east of Naples back in Italy.

The family first lived on Cherry Street at the core of the Italian neighborhood, and Luigi Varricchione made wine in his basement like many of the area's Italian families. He was a member of the Vermont Italian Club in the 1930s when it was men-only, although the club hosted regular meals for everyone, charging 50 cents for men and a quarter for women and children. The club maintains the tradition with an annual fundraising dinner in late winter or early spring. (See vermontitalianclub.org for more information.)

Varricchione remembers back to when he was 9 or 10 "going to mass with my father at the old Cathedral of the Immaculate Conception" and then walking a block to where his grandmother lived on South Union Street with one of her sons after her husband passed away.

"There were grapevines growing up the wall and a garden in the back for herbs," Varricchione recalled. "Grandma would often be making pasta from scratch and it would be hanging all over on wooden drying racks or laid out on the bed on a clean sheet. She would serve me a bowl of pasta with sauce or a bowl of her greens and beans. On occasion," he added, "she'd pull out the anisette and little Johnny got to taste."

Both Varricchione and Gucciardi recalled the bustling Italian stores with cheeses and salamis hanging from the ceiling and shelves holding big jars of olives and boxes of torrone, Varricchione's favorite nougat candy.

"We'd go to the store for penny candy," said Varricchione. "There was Merola's and also Izzo's Market. Both stores were very generous in allowing people to buy on credit." The whole neighborhood was lost to urban renewal by the late 1960s, Varricchione explained sadly.

Looming large in his recollections was the image of the Italian mama "with plenty of love and food to share," Varricchione said. There were always many mouths to feed, he said with a chuckle: "There weren't too many small Italian families."

Varricchione's parents, Francesco and Simone (known as Si), raised their eight children at 85 Bank St. and then 78 Pine St. (now a law office).

"We would have crowds to eat," said Varricchione, recalling with relish how his mother browned pork chops and then slow-braised them in red sauce. Even though his mother, like Gucciardi's mother, was originally French-Canadian, she learned all the Italian recipes and became a true Italian mama and then nonna.

In a family history written by Varricchione's wife, Joanne, she describes the scene:

"Everyone managed to squeeze around the kitchen table while Nona [sic] stood watch

over the stove, stirring her delicious sauce. The menu seldom varied: spaghetti and meatballs, chicken or pork, salad, wine, garlic bread and ice cream. The laughter and commotion only added to the wonderful aromas and meals she prepared . . . Si seldom sat down and ate with the family; she preferred to make sure everyone had enough to eat. ('Does anyone need more sauce?' was the question she always asked.) 'No, Ma. Come and sit down.' 'I will in a minute.' It was a habit she never broke."

TRIBUTE TO MARY ANNE GUCCIARDI

Mr. LEAHY. Mr. President, Vermont is home to many treasures, from our natural beauties to our manufactured goods to our award-winning agricultural industry. It is also home to many spirited personalities, and today I would like to honor one of them: a good friend and talented cook, Mary Anne Gucciardi. Affectionately known as "Mama Gucc" to those who have had the good fortune of sitting at her dining room table, she makes newcomers feel like old friends. For more than two decades, she has opened her home to hundreds of University of Vermont sports teams, from skiing to soccer, hockey to basketball. Her menu includes classics like baked stuff mushrooms, chicken cacciatore, and of course meatballs and sauce. The mere mention of her name makes both coaches' and athletes' mouths water.

Mama Gucc grew up in Haverhill, Massachusetts, the daughter of an Italian-American father and a French-Canadian mother. It was her mother's Italian mother-in-law who served as the inspiration for Mama Gucc's gourmet Italian favorites. As the grandson of Italian immigrants myself, I have benefited from Mama Gucc's lavish feasts. She has made me feel right like I was right back in my own mother's kitchen. Mary Anne's heart is even bigger than her generous portions. She has not only cooked for hundreds of athletes, hosted distinguished guests such as bishops, senators and governors, but she has prepared countless charity dinners, raising over \$50,000 in scholarships in memory of a UVM student, Kevin Roberson, tragically killed in a car accident. Her love for cooking and for hosting has made "Mama Gucc" a surrogate mother for the lucky student-athletes to come through her door, making those students, sometimes hundreds of miles from their families, feel right at home. In 1999, The University of Vermont honored Mama Gucc and her husband by naming a new fitness facility the Richard and Mary Anne Gucciardi Recreation and Fitness Center, a tribute most rightfully deserved.

From every Vermonter who has indulged in Mama Gucc's famous cooking, and has been blessed with her warm hospitality and generous support, we thank Mary Anne Gucciardi for providing a home-away-from-home to all who have passed through her doors.

I ask unanimous consent that The Burlington Free Press article, "Celebrating the Italian Mama," be printed in the RECORD.

There being no objection, the material was ordered to be printed in the RECORD, as follows:

[From the Burlington Free Press, May 10, 2013]

"CELEBRATING THE ITALIAN MAMA"

Among iconic maternal figures, the Italian mama or nonna (grandmother) hovering over a fragrant pot of tomato sauce ranks high—and few bring the legend to life better than South Burlington's Mary Anne Gucciardi.

Recently in the Burlington kitchen of friends, Gucciardi, 80, known as Mama Gucc (pronounced "gooch"), arrived not only with ingredients to make her famous meatballs and sauce, but also containers of meatballs and sauce, Italian wedding soup and sausage Calabrese to give away.

"You get back what you give out," said the mother of four and grandmother of four with a smile and a shrug.

If that were literally the case, Gucciardi would be swimming in an ocean of herb-flecked tomato sauce with meatballs.

For more than two decades until just a few years ago, Gucciardi regularly cooked huge Italian feasts for a number of University of Vermont sports teams with the support of her husband and family. Her multi-course dinners—usually once a season for the ski, soccer, hockey and basketball teams—included a variety of home-cooked Italian classics like minestrone, baked stuffed mushrooms, chicken cacciatore, meatballs and sauce, and lasagna for as many as 40 team members.

"She opened up her home to us," said longtime UVM men's ice hockey coach, Mike Gilligan. "She just treated the kids and the coaches like they were her own family."

"Mama Gucc was just wonderful," agreed former men's basketball coach, Tom Brennan. "She took care of us before we got pretty," he joked, referring to the pre-championship-era of his team. "The food was always so lavish, from soup to nuts . . . You know these kids, they eat like horses. Everybody would eat until they couldn't stand up."

"She was always there for us," Brennan continued, recalling how Gucciardi accompanied the team to the 1993 funeral of their recently graduated teammate, Kevin Roberson, who had been tragically killed in a car accident. "It was so comforting to have her there and she brought a big pile of food."

In addition, the Gucciardi family held frequent dinner parties for distinguished guests including coaches, senators, governors, professors and bishops, and also cooked countless benefit dinners, which raised more than \$50,000 for a UVM scholarship fund in Roberson's name. In September 1999, UVM honored Gucciardi and her husband by naming a new 6,000-square-foot fitness facility the Richard and Mary Anne Gucciardi Recreation and Fitness Center.

It all began after Gucciardi met some student-athletes while helping with a Newman Catholic Center fundraiser, she explained while mixing together a double batch of meatballs. ("I never make a single batch," she said.) During winter break, when athletes often had to stay on campus to train, she said, "they were away from home, looking for a good meal. There was a lot of joy in seeing them enjoy the food."

Gucciardi also shared a more personal motivation to give back after her youngest son, now 50, survived a very serious car accident when he was 3½. The family was in the process of moving to Burlington where her husband had landed a job with General Electric.

For six weeks, Gucciardi slept by her son's bedside in the hospital and prayed daily in the chapel at UVM. The local Italian community warmly welcomed them, she recalled, and offered support. "I just always said I would give back for what was given to us," she said.

FAMILY RECIPES

Scraping the fat and caramelized bits from a pan of roasted Italian sausage into her sauce pot, Gucciardi explained that she has taken family recipes and "made them my own over the years."

She grew up in Haverhill, Mass., with an Italian-American father and a French-Canadian mother, but her mother learned to cook Italian from her mother-in-law, Gucciardi's paternal grandmother, "a great cook," Gucciardi said.

After frying the onions and garlic in the sausage fat ("You just get such flavor from that," she explained), Gucciardi added tomato paste and canned Italian tomatoes along with a little water and generous amounts of dried parsley and basil, which would come fresh from her garden in the summer, she said.

"I never measure anything," she added apologetically.

Luckily for her fans, Gucciardi taught a series of cooking classes in the mid-'80s for which she had to write down her recipes. It was in that class that Gucciardi met John Varricchione, in whose Burlington kitchen she was cooking last week.

Varricchione, 66, a retired teacher and football coach at Rice Memorial High School, grew up in the center of Burlington's Italian community where, just like in Gucciardi's family, his paternal grandmother taught his French-Canadian mother to cook family favorites.

"But I never got my grandmother's recipes," he said with regret.

Last week, Varricchione and his wife, Joanne, helped Gucciardi form meatballs while her sauce simmered on the stove. The Varricchiones' 3-year-old grandson, Carlo Pizzagalli, popped in and out of the kitchen to visit with his grandparents and "Mama Goose," as he called her.

The cooks used a small ice cream scoop to measure out each meatball, a tool Gucciardi said she adopted years ago when student-athletes helped her to produce meatballs for fundraising dinners during which they would feed more than 800. "I had it down to a science," she said proudly.

Gucciardi watched her helpers with a kind but careful eye. "If they have any cracks in them, I reject them," she said, explaining that they would fall apart in the sauce.

As they worked, the scent of meatballs and simmering sauce filled the kitchen. "I can smell those meatballs cooking," said Gucciardi happily.

"That's always a good thing," agreed Varricchione.

The first batch of meatballs emerged from the oven, brown and sizzling, and the second batch went in. Gucciardi stirred a generous pinch of sugar into her sauce to balance the acidity of the tomatoes.

When the meatballs had cooled a little, Carlo tasted one and gave his full approval, followed by a big hug for the cook.

The next generation had fallen in love with the cooking of Mama Gucc.

MEMORIAL DAY

Mr. McCONNELL. Mr. President, Monday, May 27, is Memorial Day—the day Americans set aside to honor the brave men and women in uniform who have made the greatest possible sacrifice for their country.

Memorial Day was informally begun by MG John A. Logan, the head of an organization of Union Army Civil War veterans, in 1868. It is believed Major General Logan chose a date in late May because flowers would be in bloom all over the country. He asked the Nation to decorate the graves of the war dead with flowers.

Mr. President, 1.1 million Americans have died defending the country in our Nation's wars. Freedom as we know it—here at home and around the world—would not exist without their heroism.

The Commonwealth of Kentucky has played a vital role in this Nation's defense during our history. I am honored to represent Kentuckians in the Armed Forces, including those stationed at Fort Knox, Fort Campbell, the Blue Grass Army Depot, and members of the Reserves and Kentucky National Guard.

At Fort Knox, the Memorial Day ceremony this year will continue a tradition of honoring the memory of one particular fallen soldier. This year, that soldier is PFC David P. Nash of Daviess County, KY.

While serving in Vietnam on December 29, 1968, 20-year-old Private First Class Nash valiantly rolled on top of an exploding grenade to save the lives of three other soldiers. We must not forget the deeds of Private First Class Nash, or the many other men and women in uniform who gave their lives in service.

Memorial Day is a day to honor their memories, and to let their loved ones know our country has not forgotten them. I know my fellow Kentuckians agree that we are honored to fly the flag which these brave heroes sought to protect.

Ms. MURKOWSKI. Mr. President, I rise to recognize the importance of Memorial Day, a day that means so much to me, the Nation, and those I represent in Alaska. For many Alaskans, Memorial Day means the unofficial beginning of summer, sunlight, and enjoying the great outdoors.

But let us never forget the deep, true meaning of Memorial Day. It is about taking time to pay respect, and appreciating the sacrifices of men and women who have defended the rights and privileges we enjoy today. On this solemn day in which Americans unite to remember our Nation's fallen, we also pray for our military personnel and their families, our veterans, and all who have lost loved ones.

For over two centuries, brave men and women have laid down their lives in defense of our great Nation. These heroes have made the ultimate sacrifice so we may uphold the ideals we all cherish. Ordinary men and women of extraordinary courage have, since our earliest days, answered the call of duty with valor and unwavering devotion. America's sons and daughters have served with honor and distinction, securing our liberties and laying a foundation for lasting peace.

Memorial Day officially began nearly 100 years before Alaskan statehood, but even in our territorial days we had Alaskans who fought on our own soil against foreign enemies—one of the few States that can say such a thing. It is because of those early successes—and the success of Alaskans from then to those deployed today—that we salute our flag.

Although we may not be able to fully measure the cost of our heroes' sacrifice, we can commit ourselves to preserving their memory. So on Memorial Day 2013, I ask that we honor our fallen heroes, comfort the loved ones of those we lost, and carry on our lives in a manner that is worthy of their sacrifice. May God continue to bless our great Nation.

Mr. CARDIN. Mr. President, as Memorial Day 2013 approaches, as our fellow Americans are making plans to have cookouts, enjoy the outdoors, and spend precious time with their loved ones, I believe we should remember that the reason we are able to enjoy these moments is because of the military servicemembers who have given "the last full measure of devotion" in the service of our great Nation. From the American Revolution to the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, brave young men and women have always answered the call to fight for our country and for our freedom. They have made many sacrifices, and as we remember in particular those who have fallen, I am inspired by their courage and dedication to freedom. The death of each one of these service men and women represents not only a tragic loss to their loved ones, but to their community and to the country.

This Memorial Day should be observed as a time for all Americans to reconnect with our history and core values by honoring those who gave their lives for the ideals we cherish. In addition to remembering the servicemembers who have fought and died in our Nation's wars, I believe that we must also take care of the servicemembers and veterans who are still with us. There are, regrettably, serious issues that still need to be addressed with regard to our military and veteran communities. Active-Duty military and veteran suicides are at record rates, Veterans Administration disability claims continue to be severely delayed, programs that assist discharged servicemembers transition to civilian life are still inadequate, and many of our servicemembers and veterans still lack the healthcare they need—and are entitled to—after a decade of war. I believe that we in the Congress must do everything we can do to remedy these problems. As George Washington famously said "The willingness with which our young people are likely to serve in any war, no matter how justified, shall be directly proportional to how they perceive veterans of early wars were treated and appreciated by our Nation." I believe this statement has added weight and meaning and truth with our