



Maria Graziella DiFulco

May 12, 1937 - November 2, 2020

Maria Graziella (Fratantoni) DiFulco, a self-taught chef and baker who dazzled everyone for decades with her culinary talents but whose truest joy derived from time spent with her loved ones, died at her Wantage, N.J. home on Monday, November 2, 2020, surrounded by her loving family after a long and courageous battle with cancer. She was 83.

Graziella, as she was known, would tell anyone who would listen that her ultimate pleasure was being a Nonna to her four grandchildren. “I love my sons,” she would often say, “but the love I have for my grandchildren is different. It’s like an explosion in my heart. It is indescribable.”

She had profound love for each of her grandchildren. She bragged about them all the time: her granddaughter Olivia, who held a special place in her heart as her first grandchild and whose infectious good humor, unending smiles and unstinting work ethic mirrored her own; her grandson Michael, whom she admired for his quiet intelligence, caring nature and newfound curiosity about baking, which he leveraged to learn how to make Nonna’s famous tri-color cookies with her this past August; her grandson Hunter, for his natural athleticism, remarkable energy and uncanny abilities with machines of all types, and she marveled at his efforts, watching him from the deck of her home as he worked tirelessly on the family farm; and her granddaughter Sabrina, her little martidruzzu’ – the little hammer – who could

make Nonna giggle with her spirited and spunky personality, shy warmth, and hugs that were impossibly fierce from such a little bean of a girl.

Her love for her grandchildren and everyone else near and dear to her manifested itself in many ways, but it was best deployed in the kitchen. Equally adept at making savory dishes—lasagna, pizza, sfinciuni and arancini, to name a few—as she was at baking cookies and sweets, Graziella could fill a household with dizzying aromas that will forever linger in the sensory memories of the multitudes she fed over the years.

Her son Pete famously dubbed her Sunday sauce “Liquid Gold.” It would simmer for hours and develop an intense depth of flavor, along with a thin sheen of melted fats from beef, veal and pork. Those meats would be combined with a blend of herbs, spices, garlic, jarred tomatoes and the super-concentrated tomato paste she would smuggle in her suitcases past unsuspecting U.S. Customs officials after returning from frequent visits to her Sicilian homeland.

But all her efforts in the kitchen were just prelude to what really mattered: the company of her family and friends, all gathered at her table devouring course after delectable course until they practically pled for mercy. And that’s when she would unleash wave after wave of desserts: hand-formed cream puffs and cannoli and cheesecakes made with fresh ricotta, cookies of every shape, form and flavor, espresso and homemade limoncello and, then, when the meal was finally over, there were always, always, leftovers for everyone to enjoy for the next day (or two or three).

Graziella’s indomitable spirit and remarkable talent for cooking and entertaining was beautifully captured in a 2014 story for Inside Jersey magazine, “Nonna, the Chef and the Sicilian Way,” when she spent a glorious afternoon and evening with award-winning chef Joey Baldino, teaching him to

make her arancini.

Born in Santo Stefano di Camastra, on the northeast coast of Sicily on May 12, 1937, just minutes before her twin sister, Vincenza, Graziella studied ceramics as a young girl in addition to her regular classwork. Ceramics would become a family business, initially taught by her father, Pietro, to his brothers, and later perfected by future generations. The tradition survives to this day in her hometown, where ceramics remain the town's central industry.

Graziella moved to Palermo as a young adult to help her mother, Angela, run a small shop that sold groceries, liquor and kitchen supplies. But a greater adventure awaited her.

She was introduced to her future husband, Salvatore, in 1964, and they married that same year. After the newlyweds honeymooned in Rome, Salvatore returned to the United States, where he had been living for several years. The couple saved for their future together, and Graziella joined Salvatore when she moved to the United States and settled in New Jersey in early 1965. She was the first member of her family to emigrate from Sicily and paved the way for her parents and several siblings to join her in America in the late 1960s and 1970s.

Graziella and Salvatore settled in Garfield and she soon found work as a machine and line operator at Manner Handbags in Lodi. The couple's first child, Pasquale, was born days before the family's first Christmas in America.

A second son, Pietro (Pete), was born in 1972. After Manner Handbags closed, she joined Shulton, a cosmetics and perfume manufacturer in Clifton, where she worked for about ten years. In the 1990s, she took a job with Engineered Assemblies Corporation, a battery manufacturer in Teterboro,

retiring in 2004.

Although she had cooked plenty of meals over the years—often working eight- and ten-hour days in a hot, sweaty factory environment before coming home to prepare dinners for her family—she really took to the kitchen in retirement. She even sold cookies for a time (at cost, or frequently at a loss), but more often gave away the things she made so lovingly with her hands, time and talent.

“I made a lot of sacrifices and there were a lot of times that it wasn’t easy,” she would say in contemplative moments, “but I have been blessed and have had a beautiful life with a wonderful family.

“Especially,” she would add with a wink, “my amazing grandchildren.”

After being diagnosed with stage four lung cancer in February 2019 despite being a lifelong nonsmoker, she was determined to fight for as long as she could. She underwent lung surgery within a week of her diagnosis, and then withstood nearly a year of regular chemotherapy treatments. As the pandemic descended on the region in April 2020 and her treatments were suspended, she slipped into a coma one night and stopped breathing, but the fight in her never ceased. After being revived, she quickly recovered, celebrated Easter the following weekend, and a month later, she blew out the candles on an ice cream cake for her 83rd birthday. (Her family threw her a socially distant surprise party that day, fulfilling one of Graziella’s lifelong dreams to have a surprise party in her honor.)

She continued to see and speak with family and friends daily—sometimes via telephone and computer screens, sometimes in person while taking all necessary safety precautions—until her final days. Her vivaciousness, generosity, humor and kindness live forever in the hearts of all those she knew

and touched throughout her rich and celebrated life.

She is survived by her husband of 56 years, Salvatore; two sons, Pasquale of Cranford, and Peter and his wife, Karen, of Wayne; four grandchildren, Olivia, Michael, Hunter and Sabrina; her twin sister, Vincenza, of Pennsylvania; a sister, Rosaria, of Sicily; and many beloved in-laws, nieces, nephews and cousins. She was predeceased by a sister, Fedora, and two brothers, Rosario and Filippo.

Services were held privately. A celebration of Graziella's life will be scheduled at a later date.

Donations in Graziella's memory can be made to Karen Ann Quinlan Hospice by visiting <https://www.karenannquinlanhospice.org/donate-support/donationpage/> or calling 800-882-1117, or by mail, 99 Sparta Avenue, Newton, NJ 07860 or Memorial Sloan Kettering Cancer Center by visiting www.giving.mskcc.org or calling 866-815-9501 or by mail, P.O. Box 5028, Hagerstown, MD 21741-5028.

Tribute Wall



“ *Enchanted Cottage was purchased for the family of Maria Graziella DiFulco.* ”



November 04, 2020 at 03:32 PM



“ *Beautiful in Blue was purchased for the family of Maria Graziella DiFulco.* ”



November 04, 2020 at 01:33 PM



“ *Peace, Prayer Blessing Sympathy Basket was purchased for the family of Maria Graziella DiFulco.* ”



November 04, 2020 at 11:51 AM



“ *The Knight/DiVincent Family purchased the Enchanted Cottage for the family of Maria Graziella DiFulco.* ”



The Knight/DiVincent Family - November 04, 2020 at 11:03 AM



“ *Enchanted Cottage was purchased for the family of Maria Graziella DiFulco.*



November 04, 2020 at 09:31 AM



“ *Thank you MG for the years I learned to cook and laugh and enjoy a miller high life bottle in your Garfield home! Always you remain in my heart and prayers! Sicily in summer of 89 never to be forgotten!*

Laurie Collins - November 03, 2020 at 06:51 PM