

# People

## Handmade *heaven*

Marie DiCarlo wows Jimmy's customers, one meatball at a time

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Special Contributor

**D**on't try to tell Marie DiCarlo that spaghetti and meatballs are *not* an Italian dish.

She learned to make meatballs from her mother, Rosa Duca, who learned to make them from her mother, Maria Danna, a Sicilian native of — believe it or not — Corleone. They might have called it "meatballs and gravy," but it was the same thing.

Until a few years ago, only she knew the recipe for such succulent meatballs. And people know it now only because a customer forced her secret into the open.

Several years ago, Mrs. DiCarlo, 78, made the mistake of sending meatball sandwiches to the staff at Jimmy's, her family's grocery store in old East Dallas. Named for the family patriarch, the store is a fixture on the northwest corner of Bryan and Fitzhugh and has been in the DiCarlo family for 30 years.

It just so happened that on the day the sandwiches arrived, restaurateur Adelmo Banchetti was in the store. He tasted them and pleaded with her to sell them in the store. To test his assessment, she made a batch and put a container on the meat counter for people to taste.

"At first, I didn't think Adelmo knew what he was talking about," says Mrs. DiCarlo, pinching and rolling meatballs as she talks. "But I guess he did. We'd put out samples and they'd be gone in no time. We've been making them ever since, and people seem to like them."

Kerry Martin is among the many who offer testimony to Mr. Banchetti's faith in Mrs. DiCarlo's meatballs. When he wants to feed friends, he says, he shops for meatballs at Jimmy's.

"I'm not a very good cook, but I like to entertain," Mr. Martin says. "People think I've whipped up some Italian specialty — when all I've done is come here."

Before she started making them for the store, Mrs. DiCarlo had never used more than eight pounds of meat — and that was for family meals. Even then, she had no precise measures.

"I'd just add some of this and a little of that, and it all worked out," she says.

And now, a little of this, a little of that describes not only her culinary technique but also her staff and clientele.

The store's eclectic band of



Photos by ALLISON SMITH/Staff Photographer

Marie DiCarlo, 78, pinches off just the right amount for the meatballs she makes in the back of Jimmy's Food Store. She is the mother of Paul and Mike DiCarlo, who own Jimmy's.



"I still can't tell you the proportions," Ms. DiCarlo says of her meatballs, "I just know what the ingredients are. I never thought I'd be making them for a whole bunch of people."

customers includes homeless habitues who pop in for a sandwich and might stand shoulder-to-shoulder with an Armani-clad entrepreneur from Preston Hollow who buys sopressata and

provolone by the pound. Saturdays are a mob scene, Sundays only slightly less hectic.

On most days, it is not Mrs. DiCarlo but meat-market manager Jeff White who launches the

meatball-making project by assembling bread crumbs, Italian cheese, powdered garlic, sweet basil, parsley, salt and pepper. (Mrs. DiCarlo adds chopped green onions when she makes

them at home.)

When the dried ingredients are thoroughly mixed, Mr. White adds 18 eggs and mixes them in. Then comes 30 pounds of ground chuck. Once all the ingredients are thoroughly combined, the real meatball-making begins.

On a busy day, Mrs. DiCarlo works solo, pinching off just enough for each meatball. Her hands seem to know how much to take: Not too much, not too little. Everyone pitches in when they have a free moment.

Once made, the meatballs are lined up on an 18-by-30-inch baker's tray lined with butcher paper. Sixteen rows of eight across. Each 30-pound batch yields 256 meatballs, four to a pound. When the tray is filled, the meatballs are flash-frozen and stored in plastic freezer bags. Billed as "Mama's Meatballs," they sell for \$4.99 a pound.

Regardless of who actually makes them on a given day, everyone knows the real force behind them is Mama herself — Mrs. DiCarlo.

A tiny woman who uses a walker made necessary by a slow recovery from vascular surgery last year, she no longer works standing up. Instead, she sits atop two stacked milk crates. Macular degeneration has deprived her of her once-keen eyesight, so she can no longer see well enough to drive.

Still, her two sons who live here — Mike, 48, or Paul, 43 — see to it that she gets to the store when the meatball stock runs low. Mrs. DiCarlo has been known to put in 16-hour days, especially around Christmas, when the meatballs are in especially high demand.

"I used to make them for the kids all the time," she says, repeatedly pinching off just enough to make them with a consistently uniform circumference. "To tell you the truth, I still can't tell you proportions; I just know what the ingredients are. I never thought I would be making them for a whole bunch of people, so it didn't seem to matter."

It matters to Bob Hartman and his four children, who, on a recent Saturday, drove from their home in Lakewood to fetch their two dozen meatballs.

"We're having ravioli and meatballs for dinner, so my wife told me to come here to get meatballs," says Mr. Hartman, who's also taking home a pound of the store's Italian sausage.

"One pound of hot and one of mild," he says. "Gotta keep everybody happy."

Jimmy's has been keeping Mitch Breier happy for two years. He heard about the store from a friend. He came, he shopped and has found his way back ever since.

"I used to make my own [meatballs], but now I only buy them here. I figure, what's the point? I buy for myself or when I'm cooking for friends. The food here is so good, it's like a little oasis — but you can't tell too many people about it," he says with a worried expression, "or the prices will go up."