Newsday

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Preparing a FEAST

COOKING WITH THE 'NONNAS' FOR THE ST. ROCCO FESTIVAL B4

HOWARD SCHNAPP

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VIDEO: Beth Whitehouse makes meatballs with the 'Nonnas'

PHOTO BY HOWARD SCHNAPP

From left, Old Brookville's Josephine Capobianco, Glen Cove's Ann Martini and Glen Cove's Marina O'Neil prepare the meatballs before the Feast of St. Rocco in Glen Cove.

ROLL CALLING

Every year, the 'Nonnas' make meatballs and much more for the Feast of St. Rocco

BY BETH WHITEHOUSE
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The secret to a great Italian meatball might just be an Italian grandmother singing in her native tongue while she rolls the meat and places it on a tray of 48 to 54 meatballs headed for the oven.

For two days a week since the end of June — leading to the Feast of St. Rocco that kicks off Wednesday in Glen Cove — volunteers known as the "Nonnas," Italian for grandmothers, help prepare the food to sell at the five-day event they call "The Best Feast in the East."

Each day, more than a dozen women in their 70s and 80s, all members of the community's Church of St. Rocco, sit at long tables in the church's hall to assemble a different dish.

"Today is meatball day," says Lucille Johnson, 87, of Glen Cove, who has been volunteering at the feast for 35 years. The Nonnas will roll about 6,000 meatballs formed from between 800 to 900 pounds of beef. "After they're cooked,

ON THE COVER **Grace Morrocu, left, of Glen Head and Josephine Capobianco of Old Brookville prep the meatballs, which are made from 800 to 900 pounds of beef.**

The Feast of St. Rocco

WHEN | WHERE 6 to 10 p.m. Wednesday and Thursday, 6 to 11 p.m. Friday, 3 to 11 p.m. Saturday and 2 to 9 p.m. Sunday. Fireworks are at dusk (9 p.m.-ish) Saturday; St. Rocco procession through the streets of Glen Cove is after Sunday Mass, at the Church of St. Rocco, 18 Third St., Glen Cove.
COST Admission is free, food is a la carte, unlimited ride wristbands start at $31.95 when purchased online ($40 at the event)
INFO 516-676-2482; m.facebook.com/TheBestFeastInTheEast

The St. Rocco Nonnas' meatballs recipe

Be forewarned: This yields more than your average meal.

- *30 pounds ground beef
- *30 eggs
- *12 cups bread crumbs
- *6 cups Pecorino Romano
- *1 1/2 cup parsley
- *2 ounces salt
- *1/2 cup black pepper
- *1 1/4 cup garlic powder
- *1 cup fresh, chopped garlic
- *1 1/2 cup "old-fashion, fresh" ricotta cheese
- *1 quart tomato juice
- *1 cup olive oil

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Artur Gomes, former chef of Veranda in Glen Cove, manages the church's food preparation — which requires working for weeks on end — for the Feast of St. Rocco.

then we cool them off, we bag them 50 in a bag, tie them, and then they go in the freezer until the feast," Johnson explains.

Chairperson Angie Colangelo calls the event that's been going on for close to 50 years "a food fest." The day it opens each July, she says, "It takes off like a rocket. It just goes 'Boom!' " Long Islanders flock to the festival for authentic Italian sausage and peppers, chicken, eggplant and veal cutlet Parmesan, for eggplant rollatini, for cavatelli with broccoli rabe and sausage, for tripe, for meatballs, for rice balls the size of softballs. This year, the church is introducing ravioli and lasagna roll-ups, Colangelo says

In addition to the food, there are rides from Newton Shows, vendors, carnival games, fireworks and magic shows. After Sunday mass, the figure of St. Rocco, the patron saint of the sick who cared for people during the bubonic plague, is removed from his church niche and paraded through the streets.

The Nonnas say they volunteer to make the food to keep their Italian church alive economically.

"This is one of the biggest fundraisers we have. It keeps our church going for the year with expenses," says Johnson, whose grandfather helped start the church in 1936. "It's all about our Italian church. We don't want it to close."

The Nonnas are led by volunteer chef Artur Gomes, 70, the former chef-owner of the Veranda restaurant in Glen Cove, which is now closed. He manages the preparation of hundreds of trays of food that the Nonnas will then sell during the feast. By July 4, the Nonnas had also prepared 140 trays of eggplant and 900 rice balls.

On meatball day, the Nonnas sit before tubs filled with a mixture of beef with Italian-seasoned breadcrumbs, eggs, Pecorino Romano cheese, powdered and fresh garlic, parsley and more. "The thing is it's got to be really soft. If it's hard your meatballs are going to be hard," Johnson says of the mixture. Using ice cream scoops to keep the meatballs uniform, the Nonnas roll each meatball like a snowball, ensuring it becomes solid enough that it won't break apart in the oven or deep fryer. Sometimes, they chat in Italian.

Josephine Capobianco, 85, of Old Brookville is perhaps the Nonna most likely to break into song. She was born in Italy. "I came over here as a young bride," she says. Not all the Nonna volunteers are actually grandmothers, but Capobianco is. She has five children and 13 grandchildren and has volunteered at the feast for more than 30 years. In fact, she wrote her own tune in Italian about the festiveness of the event and about rolling the meatballs for the Feast of St. Rocco.

"La la la la la la," the Nonnas around her join in for the chorus as they roll meatball after meatball.

MORGAN CAMPBELL

The Feast of St. Rocco will feature carnival rides, games and, of course, plenty of food.