



MICHELINA DISIBIO is the quintessential Italian grandmother who loves to cook and feed people. But unlike other grandmothers, she's open for business.

Michelina's Ristorante Costa Campagna opened in 1985 in a north Phoenix strip mall. DiSibio named her restaurant after the "coast country," near her birthplace of Gesualdo, Italy, just south of Naples.

She has a passion for cooking fresh fish, and her signature dish is Oysters Michelina, with spinach, garlic, cheese and shrimp cream sauce. But she's no slouch with meaty entrées, such as veal chops, *osso buco* or Old World pasta staples.

Her restaurant is truly a family affair: Both of her sons, Tom and Joe, work with her, and any number of her six grandkids (ages 1 to 16) are often there as well.

What's your secret to staying in business so long?

Do it myself. I like everything to be perfect. People come and look for my car: "Is Michelina here? If she's not here, we're leaving."

But you must train other people.

I train people, and when they get good, they leave. So I might as well do it myself.

I hear you have a wonderful garden. What do you grow?

Tomatoes, eggplant, peppers, basil – lots of basil and spices, like oregano, rosemary, and all that stuff I use [at the restaurant].

My garden struggles. What are a couple of your best gardening tips?

You have to take care of it every day. You have to be there and make sure it has enough water, because Arizona is hot. You need a lot of water. My garden should be in a magazine. It's my passion. And cooking.

What did you learn from your upbringing on a farm?

I learned about eating good. All of the vegetables, we grew. We didn't buy anything. We made bread every day. My dad took me out of school in fifth grade and said, "You have to stay home and take care of your brother and sister, and cook and clean." My mom, she showed me the basics – how to make the sauce and how to make the pasta by hand. We had pasta almost every day.

Do you still eat pasta every day?

I eat pasta three to four times a week. I have to have my pasta.

MICHELINA DISIBIO

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How do you stay so small?

I work in my garden three hours almost every day and then come here to work. And I watch babies.

What are your grandkids' favorite dishes?

One of my granddaughters loves poached salmon with lemon butter. Madalena loves chicken Parmesan. They all love pasta, and they all eat spicy.

Do you teach your grandkids how to cook?

Oh, yes. Sometimes I make the dough for pizza and I let them make their own pizza.

Are any of them as good of a cook as you?

No. That's why I do it myself. When I can't do it anymore, I won't do it anymore. Just retire, go live in Italy, the Amalfi Coast.

I'll come and visit.

Everybody says that.

— Interviewed by Geri Koepfel