

Centenarian's secret of long life

By ELLEN PRITSKER

He won't go to church, but he makes a biweekly pilgrimage on foot and via bus to a special Sicilian bakery where he purchases two weeks' supply of his favorite bread and some pastries.

Tony Mattorana of Park Ridge celebrates his 100th birthday on Oct. 20.

I am asked by the Square Spares Square Dance Club, whose members promenade and do-si-do several times each month at the Park Ridge Senior Center, to interview Mattorana. He square dances with the club regularly and is being honored at its Oct. 9 gathering for 35 years of unbroken devotion to this highly social and engaging dance form.

Mattorana greets me at the door of the tidy brick ranch on Cumberland Avenue where he has lived for the past 38 years. He is lively and articulate, and probably because of the dance connection, I comment on his footwear: unique, white-and-brown shoes that resemble spats.

"Oh, these are very expensive Italian shoes, but too heavy for dancing," he explains. I see that his dancing outfits, including a collection of colorful ties, are carefully laid out around the dining room table. Two fedoras and a beret also grace the impromptu "closet," and Mattorana laughs, explaining that displaying his clothes on the table is a benefit of living alone.

Greeting cards and pictures — signs of family connection — fill the living room. He has four daughters, two living in the northwest suburbs, eight grandchildren and eight great-



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Tony Mattorana, who celebrates his 100th birthday this month, do-si-does with the Square Spares Square Dance Club Sept. 11 at the Park Ridge Senior Center. He will be honored Oct. 9 for 35 years of devotion to the activity.

grandchildren. Bessie, his wife of 43 years, died in 1977 and he has lived alone ever since, buoyed by his memories.

Tony Mattorana was born in Palermo, a Sicilian city which he describes as a bustling place of

more than 100,000 residents. His parents and sisters preceded him to America by several years. But in 1920, Mattorana, already trained as a fine custom tailor, sailed across the Atlantic to join his family in Chicago. As his ship arrived in

New York Harbor on July 4, he believed the holiday fireworks were aimed at welcoming him to his new country.

Even during the Great Depression, Mattorana found work as a tailor. Private customers would pay him overtime — \$1 a week — for a handmade suit. He made an additional \$10 weekly working for another tailor shop.

Mattorana could make a suit from scratch, but his English was spotty. He took some classes, but didn't really speak with ease until after he married Bessie in 1934. She was American-born, a high school graduate, and he had only finished third grade in Sicily. In a perfect exchange, she taught him English and he taught her to cook, a skill which he practices now on his own.

One thing they did not share was square dancing. Bessie was a ballroom dancer, he explains, and did not like his dance of choice. But ballroom dancing was always too slow for him, and he told her, "Bessie, dance with your brother."

Over the years, he built a steady clientele for Anthony Custom Tailors at Central and Belmont in Chicago. He retired in 1984.

Today, cooking and eating are as important to Mattorana as dancing. I ask him the secret of his longevity (his dad died at 69, his mother at 86; he has outlived his younger sisters). Mattorana answers: "hard bread."

He does eat red meat, with the fat removed, and lots of fresh fruits and vegetables. He avoids alcohol, milk, eggs and butter, although he enjoys cheese. Tony seasons most things with fresh garlic and uses the finest available olive oil for everything. In fact, he

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recommends that if the olive oil you buy has air bubbles when it heats, "return it to the store."

I return our conversation to this soon-to-be-famous bread.

Mattorana eats almost a half-loaf every day. He buys it at Sicilian Bakery, 4632 N. Cumberland Ave., in Chicago. Baker Phil Rubino doesn't ship his breads anywhere, so customers from all over the Chicago area, as well as Wisconsin and Missouri, congregate at his shop. Sicilian Bakery has been in Rubino's family since 1958, and the 41-year-old Hoffman Estates resident bought it from his uncle 16

years ago, just about the time Mattorana started coming in. Rubino sells about 400 loaves a day of the crusty white bread, the shapes and sizes vary but the recipe and ingredients remain fixed — and secret.

"Tony is unbelievable," Rubino tells me. "He comes here, rain or shine, picks up seven to eight breads, plus 10 Inis — a Sicilian pastry filled with cannoli — and is on his way. Of course, I also eat the bread every day. I intend to live to be 100 like Tony."

Back to Mattorana's living room where we are winding up our interview. He says he is happy, not sad, to have outlived so many of his friends and relatives.



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Between dances, Mattorana stops to chat with the younger crowd of square dancers at the Park Ridge Senior Center. Ballroom dancing, he confessed, has always been too slow for him.

Laughter and staying happy are important, he counsels me. He also takes a Walgreens' brand multivitamin every day. But I'm still curious about "hard bread" as a secret to longevity. Mattorana stopped driving several years ago, and he gets a lift to square dancing. But how does he get to Sicilian Bakery?"

"I walk four blocks to the bus, then I get off and walk two blocks to the bakery, then I do the same thing to get home, carrying the bags of bread and Inis," he answers.

"Ah, Tony, is it the bread or the regular walking that keeps you so youthful?"

"It's the olive oil," he replies, smiling.