

## Ahead of Her Time: A West Village Icon

By Armanda Squadrilli

A couple of years ago, I was working on an apartment sale, when a beautiful, elegant woman blew into my office, sat down in front of me, and declared enthusiastically: "Armanda! Sono Vivian!"

It took a few moments to realize that Vivian was the daughter of Elsie Cardia, the former owner of The Beatrice Inn, who had been a great friend of my mother's when they were both alive and living in the West Village. I had known Elsie through my mother, and in a parallel universe, Vivian had known my mother through Elsie. Vivian and I struck up this inherited friendship and often share memories of each other's parent.

I knew Elsie to be a fixture in the Village, but wanted to know more about her, so I sat down with Vivian recently, to discover this lady's history.

The most fascinating thing I discovered about Elsie is that she grew up in Genova, but was born Elsie Garaventa in NYC, on Catherine Street, in 1927. Thus, when her parents went back to Italy from New York, during the depression, young Elsie grew up there as an American citizen. Returning to New York when she was 17, she lived with her Aunt and then was the one who "called up" her parents and siblings, being their official sponsor to emigrate to the U.S.

They lived at 48 Carmine and paid \$15 a month in rent, quite a lot of money at the time.

Ahead of her time already at 17, she entrepreneurially started working selling olive oil to restaurants and grocery stores,



Elsie Cardia, with daughter Vivian, outside the Beatrice Inn on West 12th Street, May 1980.

while going to night school to learn English. I thought this was extraordinary, given Italian cultural positions towards women. "No," said Vivian, "Everyone worked. Northern Italian culture was such that everyone worked. You worked and you saved. And then you bought property."

In the ensuing years, Elsie met and married—after a 4-week courtship—Ubaldo Cardia, a sailor in the Italian Navy who came to New York to consign a ship to the U.S. Navy. In the early 50s, Elsie, her parents, siblings and respective spouses, bought the building on Carmine, living there and leasing the commercial space.

In 1955, Elsie and Ubaldo bought the

Beatrice Inn from its original owners (who had had it since 1926) and in 1967, bought the whole building. The directive to "work, save, and buy" was being fulfilled.

Over the years, Elsie became deeply involved in New York's Italian community. The Beatrice Inn was a destination in the West Village, not just for the local clientele and visitors, but also as host for innumerable Italian-related activities, receptions, and functions. In fact, Elsie was given the title "Cavaliere," and then "Commendatore," by the Italian Government for her work in the community. She was also involved with the Casa Italiana Zerilli-Marimò, NYU's Italian House, where she – often with my mother – attended lectures and events related to Italian culture and community.

The Beatrice Inn, until it was sold in 2005 after Elsie's death, was a notable restaurant, but even more so, a meeting and gathering place where anyone would stop in for a visit: whether politicians or actors, who congregated regularly – including Mayor John Lindsay having his inauguration party there – or locals who would come in for a coffee or glass of wine.

In fact, that's how my mother, Renata, met Elsie – she was walking on 12th St., and as my sister is named Beatrice, my mother decided to go in to this eponymous locale, and see what it was all about. Elsie and Renata became fast friends from that day on.

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