A taste of Italy: Pizza and Cristina Fontanelli

By Bea Smith
Staff Writer

More than 100 senior citizens of Union were injected with more than a little culture and a whole lot of entertainment Friday afternoon at the Senior Center.

A pizza party, arranged by the very busy Phyllis Monguso, who is supervisor of senior citizens activities at the Union Senior Center, and sponsored by former mayor Anthony Russo, was intertwined with the appearance of an internationally famous classical singer and recording artist, Cristina Fontanelli.

The award-winning Fontanelli, who had been invited to sing before an American president, senators, governors and mayors throughout her career, and who also has appeared in theaters throughout the world, turned her entire attention to an appreciative audience of Union senior citizens.

She greeted everyone warmly, mentioned the many countries, including China, for the first time, which are on her schedule, then announced, with pride, "And here I am in Union Center, Union, New Jersey." With her bright engaging smile and her beautiful voice, utilizing a background of music from her own CD tapes, Fontanelli managed to leave no one out as she offered portions of familiar arias, Broadway tunes, country and western and well-known American, Italian, Spanish and Jewish jewels.

Everyone swayed to her rendition in Italian of 'That's Amore,' then sang with her enthusiastically when she reversed the song to English. Some members in the audience even threw kisses her way when she began singing "I remember singing in Washington, D.C. Imagine," Fontanelli exclaimed, "an Italian girl from Brooklyn — where I lived at that time — singing for President George W. Bush from Texas."

Soon, she was singing "an Italian girl's version of 'Crazy,'" in such a tremendously beautiful voice that no doubt gave the late Patsy Klein some real competition. And the audience seemed to put aside its vision of Liza Minnelli, when Fontanelli brought forth her astounding rendition of "Cabaret."

Fontanelli's busy schedule includes her fifth annual appearance at Feinstein's at the Regency in New York City, Oct. 17; a National Italian American Foundation Gala at the Hilton Hotel in Washington, D.C., Oct. 28 and 29; an eighth annual "Christmas in Italy" concert at the Danny Kaye Playhouse at Hunter College, New York, Nov. 27; the seventh annual "Christmas in Italy" concert in the Merkin Concert Hall at the Kaufman Center, New York City; her first annual "Christmas in Italy" concert at the Warner Grand Theater, Los Angeles, Calif.

While everyone, including Russo, the former mayor Michael Bono, and Monguso, applauded the artist, Fontanelli turned around, placed her hands together and said, "I applaud all of you today — because you are here just to see my show at the Union Senior Center."