

Florida Italian restaurant to open in former Piñons Aspen space

[Erica Robbie, Aspen Daily News Staff Writer](#)

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Angelo Elia is bringing his rich Italian heritage, extensive wine collection and nearly a hundred pounds of fresh truffles to Aspen this summer.

The Florida restaurant owner plans to open Casa D'Angelo in early July in the downtown space known for more than 30 years as Piñons. Piñons owner Rob Mobilian announced last week that he sold the business after 33 years.

“For me, I’m focused on great service and food,” Elia said Tuesday. “That’s my goal: to give quality [food] to not just the tourists who visit, but also, I want to focus on the locals, because that will [allow us to] remain open all year-round.”

Elia, who owns a home in Snowmass Village and spends time in the area, described the concept as “Tuscan with a Southern Italian accent.”

A native of Salerno, Italy, Elia launched his first Casa D'Angelo in Fort Lauderdale — where he and his wife, Denise, currently reside — in 1997. Since then, Elia has opened another nine establishments: four namesake Italian restaurants, four pizza and tapas bars as well as a bakery.

“It’s just me and my wife,” Elia said. “Being in business for me for so many years ... we run the restaurant like a family.”

Casa D'Angelo Aspen will be the couple’s first venture outside South Florida and the Bahamas.

“I love Aspen, and I will not stop here,” Elia said. “There’s more in progress and more coming.” He hinted that a proper pizzeria may be down in the line “in the near future.”

For now, the couple is focusing on Casa D'Angelo and an extensive remodel of the existing space. Plans to fully gut the space are underway, he said Monday.

“It’s going to have a completely new look. Everything will be new,” Elia said, describing the aesthetic as “a nice, modern look with an Aspen accent.”

Changes in the works include an expanded patio, a wine room and a private area that can accommodate 16 to 18 guests. Elia is also thinking about building out an elegant private club in the subgrade space at some point.

Signature dishes will include homemade pasta — think pappardelle porcini and fettuccine with white truffles — as well as fresh fish and a signature veal chop.

“Whatever’s fresh, whatever’s in, I bring to the table,” Elia said. “I strive to be the best all the time. Sometimes in this business, it’s not easy to be [at] the top, but we’ve been doing this for [many] years.”

Erica Robbie is a contributing editor for the Aspen Daily News. She can be reached at erica@aspendailynews.com or on Twitter [@ericarobbie](https://twitter.com/ericarobbie).

Piñons bids farewell after 33-year-run in Aspen

[Erica Robbie, Aspen Daily News Staff Writer](#)

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Reflecting on more than three decades at the helm, Rob Mobilian feels proud — and at peace — parting with Piñons in part because of the legacy he cultivated at one of Aspen’s most celebrated restaurants.

On April 3, Piñons’ staff, some of whom have been with Mobilian and the restaurant since its earliest days, served their last Freddy salads and Dover soles while toasting to a successful 33-year-run. A Fort Lauderdale-based Italian restaurant by the name of Casa D’Angelo is slated to open in the downtown space late June.

“I feel like I’m going out on top,” Mobilian said in an interview Wednesday. “I was in there every day for 33 years and I worked my butt off, and I worked as hard as I could to deliver the best product I could every single night, which I feel I did.”

In a chance encounter of sorts, former Aspen fixture Fred Mayerson hired Mobilian, a Culinary Institute of America-trained chef, in January 1988 to help open the restaurant.

Aspen’s culinary scene at the time was nothing like it is today, he explained. But by February, Piñons was open for business.

With 66 seasons under his belt — not to mention an estimated 750,000 dinners served — to say that Mobilian has his share of stories from over the years would be a gross understatement.

Particularly in Piñons’ early days when Aspen was a Hollywood-haven, the restaurant’s guests included the likes of Michael Jordan, Donald Trump, O.J. Simpson, Jack Nicholson, Prince

Bandar, Arnold Schwarzenegger, Steven Spielberg, Sally Fields, Sidney Poitier and countless others.

But the best memories that Mobilian, who solely acquired the restaurant in 2001, will cherish are those involving his family — both with his wife and children as well as his staff.

For the Mobilian family, Piñons was home. Rob and Beth Mobilian's children, Zachary, now 27, and Isabella, who is 25, grew up in the restaurant.

“[Our] children were born and raised playing, eating and working at Piñons,” Beth said. “They, along with many of their friends, were bussers, runners and servers during high school and - college summers.”

And then there's waiter Tim Young, who has been with Mobilian since opening day in 1988. Or Kelly Sallee, Piñons' pastry chef of 29 years, and sommelier Tim Bean, who has worked at the restaurant for 26 years.

Asked what he will miss most about Piñons, Mobilian said Wednesday, “I'll miss the family, which is more my staff — like having a big family come in and just take care of people and getting excited about food and having customers leave happy and creating something special every night.”

Creating an inviting yet familial atmosphere — while serving consistently quality dishes — was among Piñons' key ingredients to its success.

“It felt like people's dining room in their house. They knew the staff, they were familiar with the food, the food was always so consistent and great ... and people just always felt comfortable there,” Mobilian said of his well-oiled machine. “It was nothing crazy, nothing super fancy and foofy, just great, quality food cooked perfectly.

The local community also has Mobilian to thank for paving the way for one of Aspen's greatest culinary offerings: the bar menu. In an effort to cater to locals, Mobilian created Piñons' bar menu — featuring a \$32 prix-fixe and other “incredibly affordable” items — sometime in the mid-1990s.

“Everyone went crazy ... all the locals came in; it was a total hit,” Mobilian recalled, noting that other Aspen restaurants quickly followed suit.

Another contribution to which the Mobilians are proud is helping co-found the Boogie's Bash alongside the Buddy Program, Beth Mobilian said.

Like Mobilian, Beth said she also will miss the camaraderie that comes with being part of a family-run restaurant like Piñons.

“It's a beautiful relationship between all of the restaurants, how they are friends and they help each other, and if you run out of something, you run down the alley and you get it from your

fellow restaurant,” Beth Mobilian said. “Even though we’re competitors, we are a community ... it’s really special to be a part of.”

Erica Robbie is a contributing editor for the Aspen Daily News. She can be reached at erica@aspendailynews.com or on Twitter [@ericarobbie](https://twitter.com/ericarobbie).