

First Saturday: Casa D'Angelo serves up authentic Italian cuisine in former Pinons location

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Celebrity chef Angelo Elia (right) and Casa D'Angelo executive chef Mark Connell beam over a plated dinner for two at Elia's first Aspen restaurant, which opened last week.

Jordan Curet/Special to the Aspen Daily News

A week into its tenure as an Aspen restaurant, Casa D'Angelo has a full bar, patio seating with a view of Aspen Mountain and a full wall of windows to give the perfect sunset dining experience.

Celebrity chef Angelo Elia — born in Salerno, Italy and now a long-time resident of Southern Florida and Snowmass — celebrated the grand opening of his first Aspen-based restaurant last Friday. Elia owns nine Italian restaurants across southern Florida and the Bahamas, and he said he is excited to bring his traditional, homemade flavors and fresh, local ingredients to Aspen.

“I’m in love with Snowmass and Aspen, so I feel like I’ll be here forever,” Elia said. “I don’t classify myself as a corporate person, I classify myself mostly as a restaurant owner but focused on individuals. We are an independent restaurant. We love what we do, we bring the best quality ever. I’m not satisfied with any second-day item.”

Elia imports many of his ingredients such as meat and seafood from out-of-area, but several of his dishes will also incorporate local ingredients. The Casa D'Angelo menu

includes 10 new items that are specific to Aspen, including an Aspen salad and a goat cheese sorbet. Quality is the most important thing, he said, and he likes to use local, fresh ingredients to provide a variety.

Casa D'Angelo opened for business July 30 and is working its way up to full capacity. Elia moved into the space vacated by Piñons, an Aspen staple that closed down in April after 33 years. While Elia did some remodeling to make the space his own, he kept on several Piñons staff members, so the restaurant will not feel so unfamiliar.

In addition to his culinary experience, Elia prides himself on his knowledge of wine, being a vineyard owner himself. Wine is also incorporated into his goals for his Aspen location.

“I’m very focused on great wine,” he said. “We have an unbelievable wine list already, but in about a year, two years, I want to make one of the best wine [lists] in Aspen. That’s my goal.”

Elia said that when patrons come to eat at his restaurant, he recommends a glass of wine and the veal chop, which is his favorite. While all of the dishes on the menu receive his feedback and most were created by him, Elia will entrust the cooking at the Aspen location to his in-house head chef, Mark Connell.

A native of Reno, Nevada, Connell studied culinary arts and pastry in Vail, Italy and Napa, California. He took his first executive chef job in Santa Fe, New Mexico, and made his way to Aspen to follow a dream of doing nothing but skiing and cooking. He met Elia on a whim through an advertisement and was hired on the spot.

“I’ve been working at a really high-end club for the last two years ... and I really miss cooking for the general public,” he said. “There’s something more about it. It’s harder, but I’m looking forward to sort of being in charge of a restaurant. I had an executive chef at my last job, so I didn’t get full control over the menu. So that’s one thing I’m

definitely looking forward to — being able to do that and being able to make my desserts, too, because we had a pastry chef and I didn't get to do desserts, and that's obviously something that I like to do."

Elia said that he also admires Connell's knowledge of Italian cuisine, a practice that Connell said he picked up while studying in Italy and still favors over other types of cooking. He joked that in past jobs, his menu sometimes featured too much Italian food, but now it seems it can't be Italian enough.

Connell is one of 40 team members who will work at Casa D'Angelo, and Elia said he hopes to expand to 50 employees when possible. Across all of his restaurants, he employs about 500 people, and he said he is proud of the fact that throughout the COVID-19 pandemic he did not lose a single one. Elia also hopes to open a second restaurant in Aspen someday — a fifth location of his Angelo Elia Pizza, Bar & Tapas restaurant.

Casa D'Angelo is located at 105 S. Mill Street and is open for dinner from 5 p.m. to 10 p.m. Sunday through Thursday, and until 11 p.m. on Fridays and Saturdays. Takeout is not available yet but will be an option in the coming weeks as the business settles in. Reservations are available by calling 970-920-2021. More information is available on the restaurant's website at casa-d-angelo.com and on Instagram @casa_dangelo.

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