

# Noe Landini

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## Acts of Ambition

Noe Landini's father crossed the Atlantic Ocean hundreds of times as a waiter with the Italian Line, working aboard ships that transported extravagantly-dressed passengers on the several-day journey from Genoa to New York City. For them, his hard work created exquisite dining experiences. And for him, it created ambition.

He wanted more than the life he had known growing up in a poor family in Tuscany, working as a waiter, bartender, and cook for famous vacationers like Fred Astaire and Charlie Chaplin. In the early 1970s, he decided to immigrate to America to get into the restaurant business, hoping one day to find a way to open his own restaurant. He made a fresh start in the United States, sending money home to his family in Italy but still scraping together the resources to launch Pelicano, an Italian restaurant in Alexandria, Virginia. Four years later, in 1979, he parted ways with his partner, relocated across the street, and joined forces with his youngest brother to open Landini Brothers.

Noe, born two years after that, took his first formal job at the family restaurant as a dishwasher at the age of fifteen. Now, decades later, he has become its CEO and Managing Director, chasing his own acts of ambition to transform his father's legacy into a collection of successful ventures across Northern Virginia and Washington, DC. "I love what I do—the challenge, the people, the clients, and my team of 250 dedicated employees across six different businesses," he says today. "I'm only as good as my people, and I have great people. I really cherish the time I have with them—the camaraderie and the fun of putting out a great product and generating revenue. I wasn't just born *into* this business—I was born to *be* in this business."

As a kid growing up in Northern Virginia, Noe loved riding his bike and hanging out with

friends. He played basketball, watched cartoons, and helped his mother by taking care of his younger brother and sister. From the age of six, his parents sent him to Italy to spend each summer with his paternal grandparents, where he learned Italian and cultivated sophisticated culinary tastes. "My siblings and I were not hot-dog-and-hamburger kids," he laughs. "My grandparents were huge influences in my life, from manners to speaking to cooking. The food at Landini Brothers is great, but my grandmother's cooking absolutely blew it out of the water. It was the best food, and it was surrounded by this sense of family since my uncles, aunts, and cousins would all have meals together. I loved those summers spent in their small town by the beach, where everyone knew everyone."



At home, Noe remembers the regimented schedule of chores that had to be done around the house. But most of all, he remembers vividly the times he would go see his father at the restaurant. "Watching

my father's work ethic was a defining influence in my childhood," he affirms. "At that time, it was overwhelming trying to understand how someone could work that much—often seven days a week. But as I got older, I learned to appreciate that hard work at anything is what ultimately makes you successful."

Noe's family had a distinctly "Do It Yourself" philosophy when it came to construction and maintenance, and Noe's earliest helping hand was lent laying tile or doing carpentry in the restaurant under the guidance of his uncle. "Instead of hiring contractors, we would build the bar ourselves, finish our own rooms, plumb our own bathrooms, and do our own kitchen," he recalls. "I learned a lot through those projects, well before I started helping out in the dining room or kitchen." He also learned a great deal from his father's employees, who exhibited unyielding

work ethic of their own and served as excellent role models. Through their guidance, he learned how to cook, bartend, and serve.

Outside of the restaurant, Noe's parents pushed him to do well academically, and he enjoyed playing baseball as a kid. In high school, he excelled at wrestling and enjoyed playing football with his friends. He always found ways to make money for comic books, baseball cards, clothes, and movie tickets, whether it was lifeguarding, shoveling sidewalks, or raking leaves for the neighbors. Then, at age fifteen, he formally stepped into the Landini Brothers world as a dishwasher, soon graduating to food prep and then to a job as a busboy. He worked every weekday after school except for days he had sports obligations, and through those formative years, Noe was struck by how many customers returned on a regular basis. Landini Brothers was beloved, garnering a loyal following of regulars, and Noe's father and uncle were so successful that they launched and sold two additional restaurants.

Upon graduating from high school, Noe went to New York City for the summer to work for Garage Management Corporation, a company with a Nissan dealership, retail stores, restaurants, real estate, and seventy garages in Manhattan. There, he shadowed his cousin, Gordon, in opening a restaurant on Bleecker Street and working in the dealership. "The experience was defining in giving me a sense of what it's like to be a businessman, dealing with people and applying strategy," Noe reflects. "Through high school, I had wanted to be a fighter pilot when I grew up. But that business experience, combined with the experience of watching my father excel as a restaurateur, catapulted me into a new mindset of what I wanted my professional future to look like."

For college, Noe enrolled at George Mason University and interned at the American Conservative Union for six months while still balancing his work as a manager at the restaurant. In 2000, Landini Brothers expanded from two dining rooms in a single building, to two buildings that housed five dining rooms and a new kitchen. In the process, Noe led a team in introducing a point-of-sales computer system to replace handwritten checks, helping the business through a successful expansion and modernization period.

Noe then spent two years interning with a government contractor in Crystal City, aiming to expand his professional repertoire as he was

promoted from manager to general manager at the restaurant. "Through high school, I never thought I wanted to go into the restaurant business because I had all the grunt jobs, washing dishes and busing tables," he reflects. "But as I excelled, I started making good money and realized I actually could make a living doing it. I could put gas in my car, buy what I wanted to buy, and take a girl out on a nice date. I was always the one to show up late to parties because of work, but I liked that feeling of being independent and successful."

Noe found that he loved the challenge of the Landini Brothers atmosphere, where he had assumed an administrative leadership and controller role that entailed payroll management, working with the bank, and interacting with clients on a professional level. His strong work ethic earned the respect of those around him, and he could see a future for himself at the restaurant. He became a homeowner in 2002, and things were going so well that he decided not to return to college the following semester so he could focus on work full-time.

Things shifted, however, when Noe and his uncle had differences of opinion that grew with time. Noe had a vision of improving the quality of the restaurant's offerings, growing their wine list and focusing on new recipe ideas sparked by his summers in Italy. His uncle had no interest in evolving the business and refused to embrace the young man's ambition—something Noe vows never to do as a leader. "When I see young people with that kind of ambition, I make sure to welcome and encourage it," he says. "When people care and want to do more, it goes a long way, and they need to know that their ideas matter."

Unable to get through to his uncle, Noe felt dulled and unchallenged at Landini Brothers, and though his father wanted him to stay, he decided he needed to make a change. He had always been interested in going to work at the Ritz Carlton, known as a hotel and restaurant with the best customer service in the business. In 2004, he managed to land a job as the food and beverage manager at the Tysons Corner Ritz Carlton, where he helped run the steakhouse, dining room, and lobby bar over the next year and a half. He also spent time working for the Ritz locations in Georgetown and Midtown, interfacing with countless people of incredible talent as he learned about the art and science of running a large company. "Working there, I felt that my ideas

were heard, appreciated, and executed,” he recounts. “I was part of an active executive management team, which was a refreshing step after my experience with my uncle, where I was expected to just run through a checklist without trying new things. It was a great experience, and I learned so much about the corporate world that I still use today.”

Noe’s father wasn’t very familiar with the Ritz prior to Noe’s decision to leave Landini’s, and at first was very concerned and doubtful. To help bridge the gap and calm the waters, Noe invited him to the hotel for dinner four months into his tenure there, tending to every detail to ensure his father had an excellent experience. He made sure the valet was on the lookout for his arrival and that he was promptly escorted to his table for wine service. “By the time I joined him in my suit and nametag, he was already blown away,” Noe remembers. “I said, ‘Welcome to the Ritz Carlton!’ It was the coolest thing ever, and I could tell he was finally proud of the decision I had made. That meant a lot.”

After a wonderful dinner together, Noe gave his father the keys to the presidential suite for the night. The next day, he returned to the restaurant and gushed to Noe’s uncle about how well he was doing, thanks to the very ambition that had been thwarted at Landini’s. “It took a lot of hard work to get to that point, putting in seventy-hour workweeks that included nights, weekends, and holidays,” he says. “But that was a benchmark moment for me that was so incredibly rewarding.”

A year later, Noe’s expertise caught the eye of a Ritz client who owned a company doing business in the Middle East. The client needed assistance with logistics and food distribution, so Noe agreed to take a meeting on his behalf with Sysco. One meeting led to another, and before he knew it, they had formed a company together. Noe left his job at the Ritz to focus on that company, traveling frequently to the Middle East with plans to build a food distribution center in Qatar.

With that, in 2005, Noe found himself brokering a massive distribution deal, coordinating with Sysco, Military Professional Resources Inc. (MPRI), and Bonar to design and build a center to help supply 5-star hotels as they grappled to keep up with the rapid development of Dubai and Doha. “You can’t run a top hotel if you can’t get fresh cream, chicken or butter,” Noe

explains. “Additionally, MPRI planned to use our distribution center as a hub to serve their East Africa Missions. It was a huge joint effort, and I was a kid in my twenties that literally stumbled into it.”

Working in that capacity, Noe also worked on brokering advertising deals for Ackerman McQueen and additional commodity deals that led him to the far reaches of multiple continents, selling copper from South Africa and the Congo to Korea, Turkey, Russia, Ukraine, and China. “Somehow I became a commodities broker,” he says. “I was having the time of my life, but when I was home one day in 2007 and decided to have lunch at Landini’s, my uncle told me he had decided to retire and sell the restaurant. He asked if I knew of any interested buyers. At first I thought of brokering a deal with one of my clients looking to invest in restaurants, but then it dawned on me—why don’t I buy it?”

Noe pitched the idea to his father, inviting him to stay on as his partner. His father, who was still a 50/50 owner, feared his uncle would never agree to it, but Noe personally offered to pay his uncle his half of the asking price—\$2.5 million. His uncle agreed as long as Noe could get the money to him in two weeks, so Noe started knocking on doors. “I thought it was half a million too much, but that didn’t matter to me,” he recounts. “I knew what I could do with the business, and I knew my father could be a part of it for the rest of his life. I took my ambition and idea to Peter Converse, a client and friend who worked at Virginia Commerce Bank, and he promised to get me a commitment within the two-week timeframe. He pulled through, so I was able to pull through, and a month later, we closed the deal.”

Since that milestone, Landini Brothers has had an annual growth rate of ten percent—an impressive track record fueled by Noe’s focus on event business, product consistency, and quality improvement. Meanwhile, he bought the neighboring iconic venues of Pop’s Ice Cream and Fish Market & Anchor Bar, refurbishing those projects room by room over a five-year period. In 2010, he built a Member’s Only Club, CXIII REX, that is now 350 members strong. “People thought I was crazy for doing that because I built it when the economy was bad, and without much precedent,” he recounts. But the concept thrived, garnering praise from the *Washington Post*, the *New York Times*, *Aficionado*, and *Robb Report*. He built

Washington, DC's Bar Deco in 2015, and Del Rey's Junction Bakery & Bistro in 2016.

"Through those other ventures, I wanted to expand, create, and experiment," he recounts. "Some I stumbled into, again, by accident, like Bar Deco. Others were inspired specifically by the needs of a neighborhood and the potential of a building, like when 1508 Mount Vernon Avenue seemed to be demanding a bakery. It took the help of great friends like Roy Ayers, who helped me get that lease, and Nathan Hatfield, who was willing to be a managing partner at the bakery with me."

Reflecting back, Noe's success is the constellation of so many bright stars who offered help along the way—people who began as clients but became good friends and mentors to him over time. Tony Makris, Mark Dycio, and Tyler Schropp all stick out as other successful individuals willing to coach Noe toward his own success. "Essentially, they taught me how to conduct myself, deal with banks and clients, and handle difficult situations," he says with gratitude. "You don't necessarily learn those things in school. I could always bounce ideas off of them, and they always gave me good advice."

He also has his mother to thank. Tough and entrepreneurial in her own way, she has always stood up fearlessly for the family. Compassionate and affectionate, she always pushed Noe to do better and works as his controller today. "I couldn't have anyone better in that position," he affirms. "My dad isn't a very meticulous person, but his work ethic is excellent so he makes up for it in other ways. My mom, on the other hand, is incredibly organized and neat. She's always been there through good times and bad, and I really trust her."

Today, Noe's success is measured not only in revenue and volume, but in the loyalty of his patrons, many of whom are second and third generation customers. "The restaurant business is a fiercely competitive market, and it's really unbelievable that we still have people who dine with us four or five times a week, and have been doing so for years," he remarks. This success is due in part to the caliber of his team—people Noe can trust to take responsibility and get things done.

Noe's father—still 50-percent owner and partner—is now happily retired, living in Florida and loving life. And Noe looks forward to the

future, hoping to make time to settle down and have children of his own. In advising young people entering the working world today, he underscores the importance of being humble. "Nobody owes you anything," he says. "No matter how smart you are or what school you graduated from, be ready to roll up your sleeves and work hard, because that's the only way you're going to move up and gain respect. Intelligence and education are obviously important, but hard work is the key to success."

Always pursuing his own acts of ambition, Noe believes in recognizing and supporting ambition in others, whether it's combatting illness through Chance for Life and the Multiple Sclerosis Society, or honoring wounded veterans through Luke's Wings. CXIIIEX has a wall of honor commemorating pioneering individuals and the causes they support, and Landini's organizes golf tournaments and other events that dedicate 100 percent of their proceeds to charity. Noe even makes a point to support the ambition he sees in his competitors, holding bid sessions and gatherings to support other restauranteurs in the area. "The more, the merrier," he says. "Competition is a good thing, and instead of adversaries, I look to others as partners and friends. We all want the same thing—successful careers, happy customers, and stronger communities where hard work and unleashed potential create a better world for all of us."

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