

Mr. Espresso founder Carlo Di Ruocco has died

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Carlo Di Ruocco, who founded Mr. Espresso, stands in the Oakland coffee roaster in 2008. He died on Jan. 17, 2025.

Courtesy Mr. Espresso

Carlo Di Ruocco, the trailblazing founder of Mr. Espresso, one of the Bay Area's oldest and most influential coffee companies, died on Jan. 17. His family said he died at home in his sleep after several years of declining health. He was 90 years old.

Di Ruocco, a native of Italy, is credited as one of the pioneers of Italian espresso in America. When he started Mr. Espresso in the East Bay in 1978, it was among the first in the country to specialize in professional espresso equipment, and later, exclusively oak-wood roasted beans.

Di Ruocco introduced a more nuanced style of Italian espresso, roasted over slow-burning oak wood logs, that wasn't yet available in the United States, said Luigi Di Ruocco, Di Ruocco's youngest son. (The three Di Ruocco children, John, Laurence and Luigi, have long been involved in the business and will continue to operate it.) He also supplied espresso to pioneering Bay Area restaurants, including Berkeley's Chez Panisse and Oliveto in Oakland, just as they were redefining food in the region.

"They were rediscovering these ways of doing things at a higher level of quality," Luigi Di Ruocco said. "His contribution to the culinary world, during the time of revolution of California cuisine: He had the espresso category covered."



Di Ruocco with an espresso roaster in 1985. When he started the business, he sold and installed roasters on nights and weekends.

Courtesy Mr. Espresso

Di Ruocco was born on Nov. 3, 1934, in Salerno, in Southern Italy. His first job, as a teenager, was apprenticing at a local coffee roaster and learned how to wood-roast and blend beans. But he went on to work as an elevator mechanic and electrical engineer. He married his wife, Marie Françoise, in 1962. They lived in Paris before moving to the United States in 1967. They returned to Italy for several years, before eventually settling in the Bay Area in 1974.

Two years later, Di Ruocco's love for coffee would be reinvigorated by a chance encounter. On a family trip to Italy in 1976, an old friend offered him espresso machines that needed refurbishing. He brought them back to California and in 1978, founded Mr. Espresso in the garage of his Alameda home. He continued to work as an elevator mechanic to save money, and sold and installed imported espresso machines on nights and weekends. Unsatisfied with the quality of local coffee, he also started roasting small batches of coffee beans in his backyard.

"Coffee that was served in Bay Area cafes looked like dirty water," Di Ruocco said in an award acceptance speech in 2015. "Also, in the Bay Area, at that time there were few espresso machines installed and no mechanics to fix them. Soon the idea of selling espresso machines from my garage grew more and more."

Mr. Espresso eventually outgrew the family garage and moved into an Oakland warehouse. In 1981, the business started roasted coffee traditionally, using the wood-roasting methods Di Ruocco had learned as a teenager.

At the time, most American coffee drinkers assumed that espresso could only be a dark roast, Luigi Di Ruocco said.

In Italy, "the style of roast was more a medium-dark roast. It had intensity of flavor but also complexity and nuance," he said. "He introduced more of an authentic, Italian espresso to the market here at a time people were still just figuring it out."



The Di Ruocco family, from left to right: Laura Zambrano, John Di Ruocco, founder Carlo Di Ruocco, Marie Françoise Di Ruocco, Luigi Di Ruocco and Alex Zambrano.

Courtesy Mr. Espresso

Di Ruocco earned international acclaim. In 2009, he received an honorary knighthood from the Italian government for championing Italian espresso in the U.S. In 2015, the Specialty Coffee Association of America honored Di Ruocco with the Alfred Peet Passionate Cup Award, a lifetime achievement award named after the founder of Peet's Coffee.

"It took a big commitment, lots of persistence, and sometimes courage to pursue my American dream, and today I am realizing this most beautiful dream has come true," he said in his acceptance speech.

Mr. Espresso remained staunchly rooted in tradition, even as third wave coffee and buzzy new cafes took over the Bay Area. Di Ruocco was unconcerned with trends, his son said.

"My father always remained focused on what got him here and what he knew," he said. "The art of Italian espresso was always first and foremost."

He even discouraged his children from opening a coffee shop, worried the daily operations would distract from the core of the business. They ultimately opened an airy cafe in downtown Oakland in 2023, one of the Chronicle's picks for the Bay Area's best coffee shops. At the opening, he said it was "beautiful," his son recalled.

The second-generation owners plan to continue their father’s singular vision.

“What he created has the ability to stand the test of time, which is the most important thing,” Luigi Di Ruocco said. “It’s defined by our heritage and our story and the way we do things. Hopefully, what he created will long outlast him.”

Di Ruocco is survived by his wife, Marie Francoise; his children, Laurence, John and Luigi; and six grandchildren. In lieu of flowers, the family requests donations to [Food 4 Farmers](#), which supports coffee-farming families.

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Elena Kadvany
Food Reporter

Elena Kadvany has been a reporter on the Chronicle’s Food & Wine team since 2021. She covers the ins and outs of the Bay Area food industry, from breaking news about the latest restaurant openings to investigative stories into wage theft and workers’ rights. In 2024, her food writing portfolio won second place in the Society for Features Journalism Excellence-in-Features awards. Previously, she covered restaurants and education for the Palo Alto Weekly; her work has also been published in Bon Appetit and the Guardian, and her reporting has been recognized by the California News Publishers Association.

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