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Italy's man in Philly promoted to Caribbean

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Philadelphia's lone European diplomat is leaving, after making a mark on the city's academic, business, and professional communities — unusual after four years in a job whose public duties include signing visas and hosting parties.

But Consul General Andrea Canepari was drafted to do more — to build new contacts between Italian Americans and today's Italians, far beyond fading memories of immigrant Nonna's Sunday dinners. Now, he has been promoted to serve as Italy's ambassador to a string of Caribbean countries. He is moving his family from South Philadelphia to Santo Domingo, capital of the Dominican Republic. His replacement hasn't been announced.



Andrea Canepari

In his soft-spoken way, Canepari has been fond of reminding Philadelphians how their Washington representatives three years ago persuaded Italy not to close his office (as Israel and Canada shut their Philadelphia outposts) — on condition that he and the locals, in a Philly-based zone stretching from New Jersey to North Carolina, prove the post useful in addressing Italy's slow growth and feared isolation by expanding trade and investment links, cultural and personal ties.

“He's been fantastic,” says Steve Klasko, president and CEO of Thomas Jefferson University and Jefferson Health System. “So much of business gets down to individuals. Here's a guy a block and a half from my office, who knows the companies in Philadelphia and the companies in Italy, and he's always trying to do Match.com for Jefferson, Penn, Temple, Drexel, and the companies here and there. He's always finding someone we can do something with.”

This week, Jefferson plans to complete a partnership with Universita Cattolica del Sacro Cuore in Rome. It was Canepari, alongside scholars such as Ignazio Marino, a Jefferson transplant surgeon and former mayor of Rome, who “assisted in putting together the Italy-USA exchange of scientists and scholars that led us to Cattolica,” Klasko added.

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“I've lived in 10 nations. He is the best consul I've ever worked with,” Luca Mignini, president of Campbell Soup's Global Biscuits and Snacks division, told me. “Andrea

has been a breath of fresh air. He has leveraged the Italian American community for this work.”

“Most people think of Italy with food and wine,” Canepari told me. “And of course our wine is important — trust me, I am a certified sommelier [he also holds a master’s from Penn Law]. But they are surprised to learn that industrial machinery is the top Italian export to this region.” He would take Americans to see Italian-designed cars at Philadelphia’s Simeone Foundation Automotive Museum, or sample wines and small plates on refinery developer Phil Rinaldi’s yacht, using the dramatic backdrops to promote trans-Atlantic referrals.

Canepari induced business leaders to form Ciao Philadelphia!, a foundation to make permanent his campaign to coordinate dozens of Italian-themed music, design, art, food, literary, and speaker programs each fall; Il Convivio, a group of academics that has helped add Italian classes to Philadelphia schools such as Meredith Elementary and St. Monica; and a CEO business leaders’ council linking colleges and corporations in both countries.

“He understands that this is about more than laying a wreath at the Columbus monument once a year,” said Joseph Jacovini, cochairman at Dilworth Paxson LLP. “We don’t want to lose the history. But we have to get the young people interested. Andrea understands. After solidifying the future of that consulate, he went on to elevate its meaning.”

“Many of our grandparents came to this country [from rural areas] with a lot of values but not much culture,” said Antonio Giordano, director of the Sbarro Institute for Cancer Research and Molecular Medicine at Temple University, where Canepari helped set up a master’s program in “bioinnovation,” in cooperation with three Italian companies.

“He’s been able to convince people at these universities that Italy today is a modern country with a lot of potential, not only in education, not only in business, but also in international impact — that Italian creativity,” all while spreading the good word about Philadelphia, Giordano added.

“Andrea is more than a diplomat. I call him an engineer,” said Joseph Gonnella, head of the Research and Medical Education Center at Jefferson. “He has been key on convincing President Klasko that getting closer to Italy is the right thing.”

Canepari drafted well-connected Philadelphians including Joe Del Raso, senior partner at Pepper Hamilton and past chairman of the National Italian American Foundation, to assemble the CEO council. He asked John Leone, owner of Bonney Forge in Mount Union, Pa., to tell the CEOs how he bought an Italian metalworking company and built trust with its skilled workforce. Del Raso has been spreading the word about more recent trans-Atlantic dealmakers, including Vernon Hill, the Moorestown- and London-based banker, and his designer wife, Shirley, who recapitalized Venice’s ancient Seguso glassworks.

When Fedegari Technologies, the Italy-based medical-sterilizer maker, picked Rowan University’s tech park to develop testing for its new lab in Sellersville, “it was Consul Canepari who established this relationship,” Shreekanth Mandayam, Rowan’s vice president for research and head of its South Jersey Technology Park, said at the opening of the Sellersville lab in 2015. Canepari has since set up “several Italian [pro] soccer clubs” to negotiate the use of Rowan’s sprawling soccer complex as “their American home,” said Rowan president Ali A. Houshmand.

Philly Pops president Frank Giordano praised Canepari for applying and paying to join the Union League, not expecting to be comped. “That’s unlike any other consul,” Giordano said. “He wanted to be a part of what’s happening in Philadelphia. Not just to attend dinners and host cocktail parties, but to show the consulate has a purpose here.”

Read more by [Joseph N. DiStefano](#)

Published: May 28, 2017 — 3:01 AM EDT

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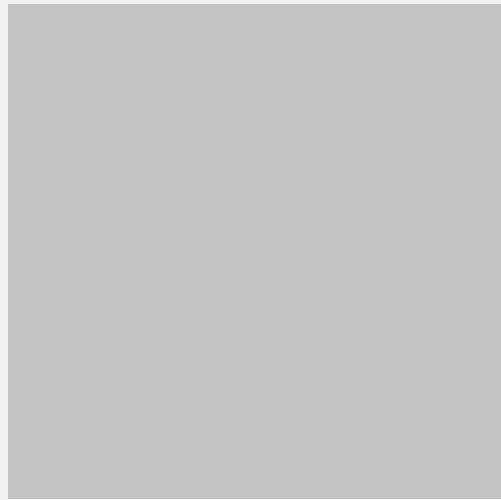
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