

Piccola Roma reopens with same chefs, new owners

By [KATIE ARCIERI, Staff Writer](#)

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Nearly a year after a well-known Italian restaurant on Main Street closed, the establishment has reopened under the same name.



Paul W. Gillespie — The Capital **TOP:** At the newly reopened Piccola Roma on Main Street, Sooze and Patrick Flanagan of Crownsville speak with Maureen Lucas, owner of the restaurant.

BOTTOM: Piccola Roma owners Maureen Lucas and her husband, Marc, are served by chef Jose Ayala in their recently re-opened restaurant.

Piccola Roma is now being run by Maureen and Marc Lucas, the couple who bought the restaurant's building and own the State House Inn.

Maureen Lucas said she has hired back chefs Jose Ayala and his brother Ulices, opened for lunch, lowered pasta prices to about \$16, introduced new chicken dishes and changed Piccola's bruschetta to one topped with tomatoes.

So far, Piccola Roma has seen a steady turnout, she said.

"All we did was turn the key one day and people kept coming in," she said.

Piccola Roma closed on New Year's Eve, ending an era for an establishment that helped make Annapolis known as a dining hub. It had a reputation for "knowing what they are doing, serious dining and not wearing shorts," said Marty Katz, editor of Zagat Survey for Baltimore and Washington restaurants.

He also said the reopening of the restaurant is a "big vote of confidence" for Main Street as a dining destination, he said.

"Places like Joss, Osteria, and even Cafe Normandie are important for drawing people all year, not just summer time tourism," he said.

And because the landlords are running the restaurant, Piccola Roma won't have to worry about rent payments - which means the "pressure on them to make a profit is relaxed," Katz said.

Maureen Lucas said she and her husband were charging \$9,000 a month including electricity and taxes.

The reopening of Piccola delighted other owners of Main Street restaurants including Cafe Normandie and Osteria.

"Their name is already known and people come to town looking for it," said Suzanne Evennou, general manager of Cafe Normandie.

Added Arturo Ottaviano, owner of Osteria 177 on Main St., "she did the right move," he said. "I'd rather see a restaurant than an empty storefront."

Piccola Roma can be traced back to 1990 when the original owners opened the restaurant at the 200 Main St. building, said Del. Ron George, R-Arnold, who formerly owned the building that also houses the State House Inn.

The restaurant was bought by the late Arturo Silvestrini and his wife Silvana in 1999, said Silvana Recine.

"In the heyday it was wonderful, it was just a joy to have it," she said. "They were flocking in. It was very popular."

George sold the building in 2007 to Marc Lucas, a Naval Academy math professor, for \$2.25 million.

Recine said she didn't receive enough help from the Lucases as the economy fell into recession. She said a dispute with them over who should pay for sewer repairs last year also hurt her business.

Maureen Lucas said Recine put a note on the door of Piccola Roma indicating that she was on vacation.

"It said 'back in two weeks' and two weeks went by," she said.

Days later, Lucas received notification from an attorney about Recine declaring bankruptcy, Lucas said. Needing to pay the bills, she and her husband decided to take on the restaurant themselves, Lucas said. The two also are the parents to five children John, 9, Max, 7, Sam, 5, Lauren, 3 and 6-month-old Marie-Alessandra.

Lucas said she can be found working in the restaurant every day and checking on customer's meals.

Though her children aren't working at the restaurant, at least one has already expressed interest, she said.

"My 9-year-old already told me he wants to be a busboy next summer," Lucas said.