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Twenty-six years after opening a restaurant, Peter Eliopoulos has built an entertainment empire

By ROSANNA CAIRA • Photographed by MARGARET MULLIGAN



# Life of the Party

Peter Eliopoulos has always loved a good party. As a teenager growing up in Toronto, he was uninspired by academic life. Having worked in his uncle's Greek restaurant after arriving with his family from Greece at the age of 12, he was more drawn to the energy of the social scene than school. Ever the entrepreneur, by his early teens Eliopoulos was running his own business, taking on paper routes for the *Toronto Star*, *The Globe and Mail* and the *Toronto Telegram*. With a flair for salesmanship, by 17 he was selling tickets to Hellenic Association dances, bringing together young adults to celebrate their Greek heritage and have a good time. It was the beginning of his love affair with party planning.





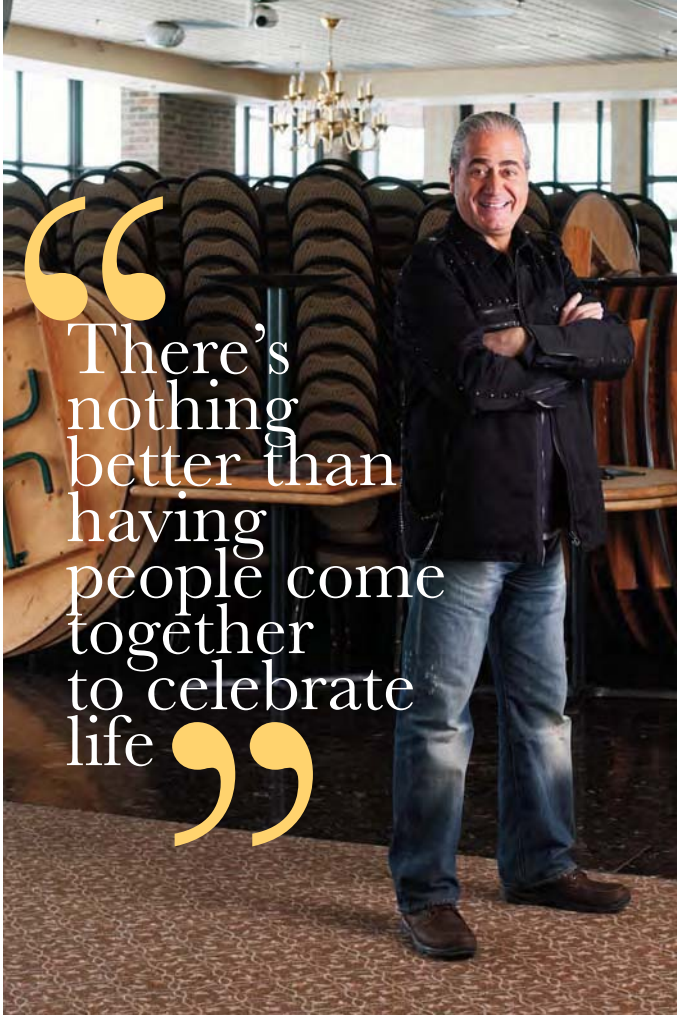
**THAT'S ENTERTAINMENT:** Among their varied business interests, Anna and Peter Eliopoulos, shown (above middle) in costume at the Venetian Ball, own and operate a trio of event venues including the Bellagio (above left), the ultra-modern Paramount in Woodbridge, Ont. (above right), and the Manor in King City, Ont. (left).

After begrudgingly completing a business program at Seneca College, Eliopoulos met and married his wife Anna. With her help he purchased and ran his first eatery, Paul's Fine Foods, a restaurant-cum-bakery located on the border of Toronto and York Region. Fuelled by a strong work ethic and a desire to succeed, they renamed it Peter and Paul's and it blossomed into a profitable business, eventually spawning successful catering and gift basket divisions. Twenty-six-years later, Eliopoulos heads an empire boasting nine different concepts grossing \$25 million in annual sales. During that time, he says his company has hosted over 66,000 parties for more than five million guests, with events ranging from black-tie galas to holiday parties, seminars and meetings.

Though he's worked hard to achieve a reputation for creative approaches to food (his company was the first to offer antipasto bars and dessert stations in banquets and catering), for Eliopoulos, being a successful caterer is about more than just good eats — it's about creating magical memories and a total experience. With boundless energy and charisma, people are drawn to him like a magnet. "I'm not in the food business," declares the 52-year-old father of three daughters — Katherine, Angela and Nicole. "I'm in the entertainment business. Anyone can cook food, but I put the whole thing together."

He's not kidding. His company, byPeterandPauls.com, is a one-stop event emporium. In addition to running two posh banquet halls, Paramount and Bellagio, Eliopoulos also owns The Manor in Kettleby, Ont.; Peter and Paul's Baskets and Gifts; Table Talk off-premise catering; S4 Show Solutions, providing creative ideas and DJ entertainment; Colleli Studios, offering on-site photography for any event; 326 Pump, a juice and energy bar located in Extreme Fitness; and Search Engine, the company's own advertising and design service.

The synergies created by having so many varied services under one umbrella make it convenient for guests to do business with the company. "It's one team, one vision and one success," says Eliopoulos. Though each division is run independently, they all feed off one another, a fact quickly evident when you walk through the doors of the company's head office in Vaughan. From the outside, the 23,000-sq. ft. structure looks like any commercial building dotting the Jane and Langstaff corridor. But upon entering the space, which also houses the showroom for the gift basket division, customers are bombarded by eye candy — stacks of baskets featuring the finest food products from around the world are crammed into every inch of space. It's here that staff busily prepare orders, including those from retail giants Canadian



“There’s nothing better than having people come together to celebrate life”

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Beyond the showroom, the main reception area gives customers a sampling of what the company offers. Sparkling taffeta tablecloths sit atop tables, highlighting different place settings that can be chosen by prospective brides, while a huge flat-screen TV belts out Michael Bublé concert footage, showcasing the company’s impressive high-tech gear. At the back of the building, millions of dollars worth of sophisticated audio-visual equipment is stored, used to stage elaborate affairs ranging from weddings to conferences.

Each of the company’s facilities is located close to its head office. Eliopoulos’ splashiest new venue is the ultra-modern Paramount, featuring five function rooms for wowing up to 1,650 guests. It’s equipped with live-eye cameras, image scanners and LCD monitors, as well as mammoth lighting systems. At 63,000 sq. ft. it’s the largest event venue in Woodbridge and one of the GTA’s biggest.

Also a stone’s throw from head office is Bellagio. Its Italianate decor serves up a more traditional banquet setting in three non-portioned rooms with seating for 800. And a few years ago, the company added additional banquet capacity when it assumed control of The Manor, a 34,000-sq. ft. facility housing three halls and accommodating up to 950 guests, set amongst the lush greenery of nearby King City’s Carrying Place Golf and Country Club.

While the banquet business represents a significant chunk of revenues, no one could have predicted the success of its gift basket division, run by Anna. It’s hard to believe the \$5-million-

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a-year business, the biggest in Canada, grew from a small corner in the couple's original restaurant. "Customers used to ask us to package the Lindt chocolates we sold in our restaurant and it grew from there," she says. Today, Anna travels the world looking for fantastic food items and her daughter Katherine helps run the business (daughter Angela works as Eliopoulos' assistant, while youngest daughter Nicole attends Concordia University in Montreal).

Over the years the baskets division has evolved and its offerings have become more sophisticated. "We're unique because we offer reusable containers and themed products with logos," explains Anna. As a natural extension for its catering clients they also sell bonbonniere (mementos couples give to guests attending their wedding). "Over 1,000 brides have come through our venues so we thought why not service them as well?" This year, Anna plans to expand the business by creating promotional and closing gifts for companies such as condo developer Tridel, to give to occupants when they move into their new place.

Spending time with the dynamic trailblazer and his down-to-earth, charming wife, it's clear they feed off one another and their business is a labour of love. "I love what I do," says Eliopoulos. "I can't wait to get up at five in the morning and get into work. I'm here seven days a week," he says, his eyes twinkling with excitement.

With 60 full-time and 600 part-time employees, Eliopoulos instills in them a love of details, a passion for work and a sense of fun and adventure. "I'm amazed by the attention to detail," says George Tsioutsoulas, director of Communications. "In fact, the details have details," he quips.

Eliopoulos keeps staff motivated by creating zany contests and promotions. He launched a company-wide reality-show-style contest, which ran from November to January. Each division competed against one another with the winners taking \$15,000 in prize money. "For the past three months, we've been shooting videos of everything that goes on in the company," says Eliopoulos. "We want to see how staff is dressed, the cleanliness of the washrooms, how the building looks from the outside. We've had phenomenal feedback from them. It's all about motivation."

He also takes staff on cruises, trips to Greece and buys them unique gifts at Christmas. "This is one of the hardest businesses to run," he says. "But if you look after someone, they'll come back. It's always about service, service, service."

To ensure employees have the tools to succeed, training is a priority. "You can never have enough training for your staff," he says. The company recently hired an internal affairs manager, whose mandate is to produce training manuals and videos on a variety of aspects of banquet service.

Eliopoulos also understands the power of promotion. His company has hosted several wedding giveaways at the Toronto Bridal Show (valued between \$15,000 and \$30,000). It's also partnered with local radio station Z103 to promote Dream Wedding contests by providing the winning couple with an event venue courtesy of byPeterandPauls.com, and it has taken part in reality TV shows such as *I Do...Let's Eat* and *Adventures in Catering*.

When he's not coming up with new ideas for the business,

Eliopoulos gives back to the community. His company's annual Care for Kids Golf Classic at the Manor Carrying Place has raised more than \$800,000 for Toronto's Sick Kids' Hospital. In 2006, he and his wife chaired the Venetian Ball, and broke a record by raising more than \$500,000 for Villa Charities. And every year on Earth Day the entire company spends a day in the sun giving back to Mother Nature by planting trees and collecting litter.

At an age when many are contemplating early retirement, Eliopoulos is driven to spread his own gospel around the world. These days he goes back to Greece as often as possible, tending to his organic farm. He produces olive oil from his family's own olive groves, which he smartly markets as "My Mother's Olive Oil," and sells through the gift basket division.

But the project that has him most excited is the new exclusive village resort he's building in Greece, featuring a spa, golf

course and horse trails. Originally Eliopoulos set out to build St. Peter and Paul's church, which he did — it opened two years ago as fulfillment of a promise he made in the late 1980s when business was bad and he was going through personal challenges — but the resort project grew from that and took on a life of its own. He's hoping to create a destination where couples can get married like they used to 100 years ago, but with "a modern and exclusive touch." If he succeeds, he'll replicate the idea in Canada and other countries.

But at the end of the day, it's all about passion and fun. "That was my motivation 26 years ago when I started and that's what keeps me going," says Eliopoulos. "There's nothing better than having people come together to celebrate life. As creative director, it's important for me to keep pushing the boundaries of convention. That's how you make discoveries, by going off the main road, by trying the untried." □

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