

# A night in Chicago with Walgreens CEO Stefano Pessina

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Stefano Pessina

**Stefano Pessina**, executive vice chairman and **CEO of Walgreen Boots Alliance**, slipped in quietly last night to the library of the University Club, where some 200 Chicago business executives and Italophiles gathered to fete him.

There had been a buzz in the room as guests anticipated his arrival.

“He’s the highest-ranking Italian executive we’ve ever had in Chicago. And he owns Walgreens,” **Charles Bernardini**, a partner at law firm Nixon Peabody, told a group mingling before dinner.

The private event was organized by the **Italian American Chamber of Commerce Midwest** in Chicago and also recognized **Ornella Barra**, executive vice president and chief executive of global wholesale and international retail of Walgreens Boots Alliance.

Even in this room of big names and low-cut gowns, it was hard to miss Barra and Pessina, who also are a couple. He wore an elegant tux and was noticeable for that wispy white hair. She was all elegance in a shimmery black Armani dress.

Wherever the two stopped, a line of guests gathered to shake hands and exchange pleasantries.

I talked to Pessina, who said this wasn’t his first visit to Chicago by any means.

“I’m here every other week for work,” he said.

Pessina became the largest individual shareholder of Walgreens in 2012 and then moved in to the executive vice chairman and CEO positions in 2015.

His private plane uses Chicago Executive Airport north of O'Hare, which is a short drive to Walgreens' headquarters in Deerfield.

Good thing. He says when he's in town, he spends most of his time in the office. He puts his head down at night at a hotel in Wheeling. And he only visits Chicago now and again for dinner.

"I don't like to be in traffic," Pessina acknowledged.

Barra flies into town, too, enough so that she can talk about a subject familiar to anyone who lives here.

"I love Chicago, except for the weather," she told me during our brief visit.

After a cocktail hour in the private club's library, guests moved to Cathedral Hall for speeches and a drawn-out dinner of lobster ravioli, Champagne grape sorbet, beef tenderloin with petite veggies and ganache lollipops and other treats for dessert. Various wines were served throughout the meal.

Pessina, referring to the United States, said, "You have the largest economy in the world, a true entrepreneurial spirit and a great can-do attitude. I had the feeling we could make things happen here."

His comments hit the right note for the Chicago crowd.

"(There's) a commitment that extends past the front counter of the store" and into the community, said **Kevin Flood**, CEO of consulting firm Astor, which is working with Walgreens on sustainability projects.

Other attendees were more curious about the billionaire who's led anything but a traditional life.

Pessina studied to be a nuclear engineer but later joined his family's Naples pharmaceutical wholesale company, Alliance UniChem Group. It merged with Boots Group in 2006 and then went private in a reported \$22 billion deal.

He has two grown children with his estranged wife. He and Barra have been together for more than 30 years, according to the European press.

"It sounds so Italian," said **Ted Tetzlaff**, who heads Tetzlaff Law Offices. He's a friend of **Fulvio Calcinardi**, executive director of Chicago's Italian chamber.

Other names in the crowd included Capri Capital Partners Chairman and CEO **Quintin Primo III** and his wife, **Diane Primo**, chairman of IntraLink Global marketing company; Deputy Mayor of Chicago **Steve Koch**; Evans Food Group Chairman **Alejandro Silva** and his wife, **Amelia**; KPMG Chicago Managing Partner **Pat Canning**; the Rev. **Michael Garanzini**, chancellor of Loyola University Chicago; and Italian Trade Commissioner **Matteo Piccariello**.

*Brigid Sweeney contributed to this story.*