



In Good Taste

SHE GREW UP IN A VILLA ONCE OWNED BY JEAN PAUL GETTY AND, IN 2015, WAS MADE CEO OF THE LEGENDARY PELLICANO GROUP, PUTTING HER IN CHARGE OF SOME OF ITALY'S MOST IN-THE-KNOW A-LIST HOTELS. MORE THAN A BAR-SETTING HOTELIER, WHERE **MARIE-LOUISE SCIÒ** TRENDS, LESSER TRENDSETTERS FOLLOW

Words: **Scarlett Lesley**

“We’re in the business of emotions,” explains Marie-Louise Sciò, who is CEO of the vogueish, family-run Pellicano Hotel Group, operator of three of Italy’s most celebrated boutique hotels – La Posta Vecchia in Lazio, the Mezzatorre in Ischia and, perhaps most famously of all, Il Pellicano in Tuscany. “And, today, emotions are the real luxury. Everything that’s purchasable has already been purchased. What people want now is to feel something.”

Born to Italian property developer Roberto Sciò and American *Harper’s Bazaar* journalist Marie-Louise Brulatour Mills, Sciò grew up in Rome. Back then ‘home’ was La Posta Vecchia, a 17th-century palazzo with a private museum and coastal views of the Tyrrhenian Sea (once owned by Jean Paul Getty). Weekends and summers were spent at her father’s other hotel, the famed Il Pellicano, on the Tuscan coast, which the family had run since 1979.

“I grew up around beauty,” says Sciò. “My eye was shaped by my time in those two houses, as well as living in Rome.”

Il Pellicano didn’t accept children, at the time, so Sciò would hide in the bushes, absorbing the glamorous world of grown-ups. “Friday nights

were gala nights,” she says. “There would be a grand buffet, candles everywhere. The men would come in their Seersucker suits and the women in long, beautiful gowns – it was like watching a film. I think to look at that as a child, from the outside, was very formative for me.”

For as long as Sciò can remember, her definition of great hospitality has always been about feeling. “We’ve never been in the kind of luxury to revel in marble and gold... It was never about perfection; it was all about the personal element that you brought to it.”

A personal admission: the Sciòs are close family friends and this writer is lucky enough to have grown up spending time at both Il Pellicano and La Posta Vecchia. One of my fondest childhood memories draws from an evening spent at Il Pellicano during aperitivo hour, with Roberto and his daughter, which turned into a singalong to Paolo Conte’s *Via Con Me*.

Two decades later, I’m chatting to Roberto on the phone, who talks me through how he first stumbled across the property that would launch one of Italy’s, and the world’s, most celebrated boutique hotel groups.

In the 1960s, explains Roberto, Il Pellicano was owned by British adventurer Michael Graham, ▶



ROBERTO SCIO'S BIRTHDAY PARTY
AT LA POSTA VECCHIA IN 2016



THE BEACH CLUB AT HOTEL IL PELLICANO



RISTORANTE IL PELLICANO

who opened the hotel with his American partner, Patsy Daszal, having become smitten with the hidden-away cove.

“The first time I arrived there by car, I couldn’t believe that it was a hotel,” says Roberto. “There was nothing written outside. It was understated. It just looked like a big villa. I drove up to the entrance, and under the arch of the entrance stood Charlie Chaplin.”

The first of many visits, Roberto would become the first Italian shareholder in the hotel after purchasing one of the property’s smallest cottages. A few years later, Graham asked Roberto for help in selling Il Pellicano. “I had a nightmare one night,” remembers Roberto. “I thought, ‘If someone bought this place, they will ruin it’. So I went to Michael and I said ‘I have good news for you, I found a buyer...’”.

Roberto took charge in 1979, after a course in Advanced Management at New York’s prestigious Cornell University. The businessman’s personable approach to hospitality found favour among some of the world’s most esteemed members of society, whom Roberto namedrops as casually as one might comment on the weather. Grace Kelly, Marilyn Monroe, John Lennon – Roberto has hosted them all.

“It was an event any time Slim came to the hotel,” he says, referring to the renowned high-society photographer Slim Aarons, who used the hotel as his studio and playground. Indeed, Aaron’s images capture the spirit of Il Pellicano



AERIAL VIEW OF HOTEL IL PELLICANO

Grace Kelly, Marilyn Monroe, John Lennon, Sophia Loren – Roberto Sciò has hosted them all at his boutique hotels

so succinctly that, four decades on, Marie-Louise would decide to create a coffee table book dedicated to them.

The younger Sciò took over from her father as group CEO in 2015, having studied design and architecture at the Rhode Island School of



STEPHEN RINGER

Design, and having already been instrumental in overseeing a major interior overhaul of the hotels. Asked by her father to find a designer to update Il Pellicano in the early 2000s, Sciò interviewed a slew of high-profile names before realising that no one understood the hotel, and its history, better than her.

“I thought, ‘maybe I’ll f**k it up, but I won’t be so far from the truth of this place’. I grew up here. I know the DNA. It was about bringing forward what had always been there.”

Sciò started with a bathroom, then a bedroom, then became the group’s creative director. The pandemic presented the perfect time for Il Pellicano to enter the digital sphere via ISSIMO, a lifestyle and e-commerce brand overseen by Sciò, which serves as an online touchstone to the

hotel group, exposing the brand to a wider, and younger, audience.

Looking forward, Sciò insists her plans for the group will mirror her father’s original vision. “His philosophy was always about generosity, and allowing people the space to express themselves. Today, Il Pellicano is a reflection of my dad, but also of me and my taste.”

Humbly, Sciò describes the changes that she has made to the hotel as “small tweaks” and certainly doesn’t give herself enough credit for the role she’s played in promoting Il Pellicano to a new generation – including through lifestyle collaborations with the likes of Birkenstock, Matchesfashion and Aquazzura.

“When I took over, ‘luxury’ was pompous and serious – lots of beige,” she says. “I like to think that what I brought was a bit of light and joy and playfulness.”

At Il Pellicano, you’ll see these tasteful stamps everywhere: in the instantly recognisable yellow-and-white striped towels and umbrellas (a calling card that you’ll see on the social media feeds of tastemakers every summer), for example, or the Fornasetti wallpaper that lines the interior walls of the hotel’s flagship Michelin-starred restaurant.

Currently, Sciò is busy working on plans to expand the Pellicano Group across Italy, the company having raised €200 million of funding from asset management company, Aermont Capital, in June 2023. She teases that the first new property will open “somewhere” in Tuscany, but won’t say where exactly. She does, however, hint that the group has acquired a property with a lot of history, somewhere in need of a “little TLC”.

“When a company expands, it tends to do the same thing over and over,” says Sciò. “That’s exactly what we won’t be doing. We’re doing the opposite, which is capitalising on the identity and uniqueness of each new property and allowing it to express itself in its own way. We’re aiming to create experiences deeply rooted in Italian culture. What will be consistent is the service, the level of care, and the attention to detail.”

Over the phone, Roberto had compared the role of a good hotelier to the conductor of an orchestra. Now under the stewardship of his forward-looking maestro of a daughter, the Pellicano Group may be embracing the modern world, but it continues to sing from the same hymn sheet Roberto cultivated half a century ago. “Luxury is a balance of skills and good taste and precise choices and meticulous attention to detail,” he says. “I am so very happy to see this philosophy, this kind of harmony, maintained by my Marie-Louise.” ■

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