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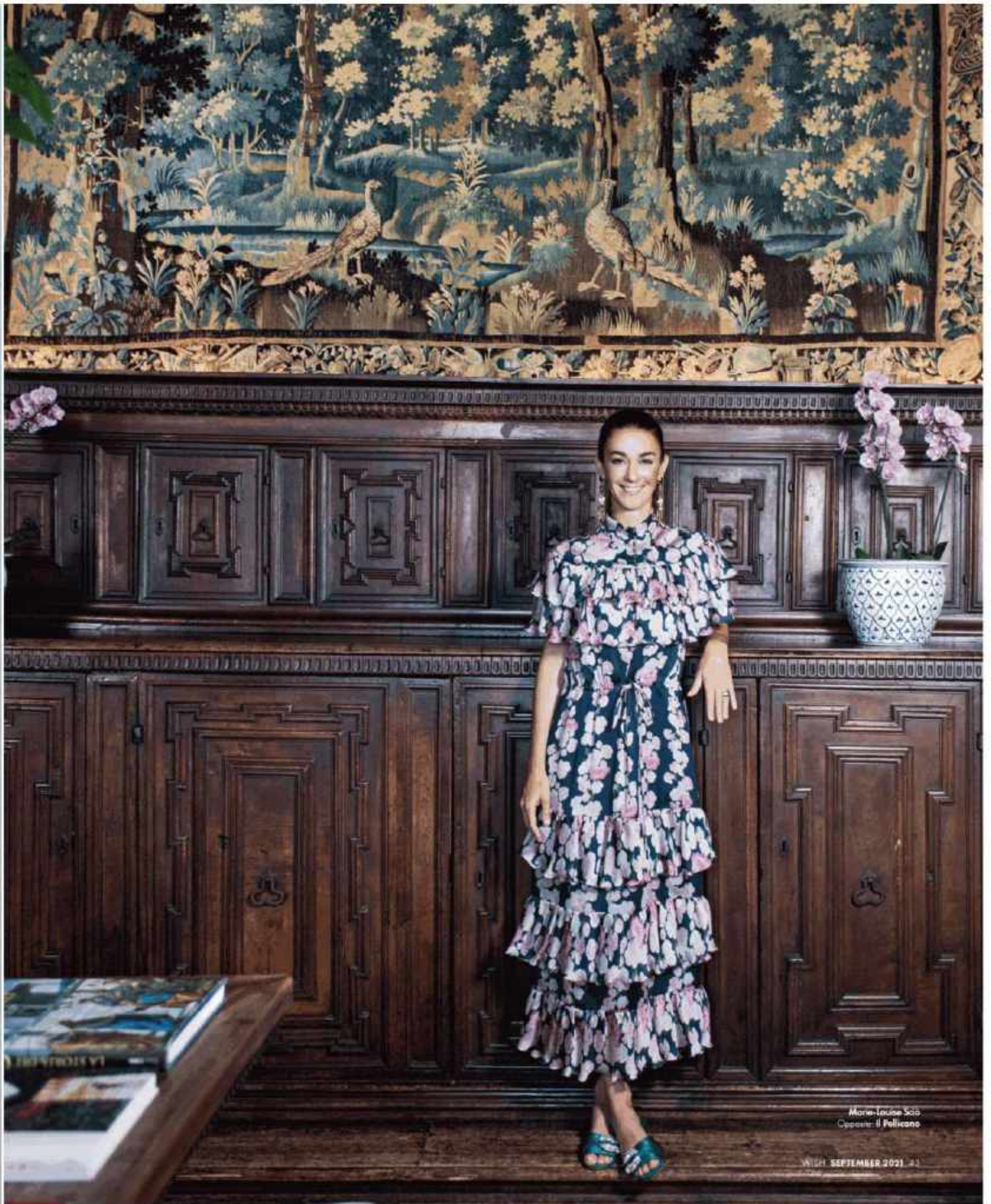
THE AUSTRALIAN*



A PIECE OF ITALY

Marie-Louise Sciò's luxury and lifestyle platform is bringing quality, beauty and exquisite design to an audience keen to share in the style her family's hotel properties are renowned for

STORY **JOSEPHINE MCKENNA** PORTRAIT **ROBERTA KRASNIG**



Maria-Louise Sola
Capriccio: Il Pellicano



Marie-Louise Sciò is reflecting on the essence of Italian style from an enviable location. She is sitting on a plush velvet sofa in the sumptuous living room of the 15th century Roman palazzo she calls home, surrounded by an eclectic mix of furnishings. Her apartment is discreetly located between the Castel Sant'Angelo, which was built above the 2000-year-old tomb of the Roman Emperor Hadrian on the Tiber River, and Piazza Navona, a Baroque showpiece with its own layered history just a 10-minute walk in the other direction.

Church bells ripple across the city in the late afternoon as Sciò shares a glass of wine, seated beneath her palazzo's original wood beam ceiling and reflects on the city's heritage.

"In Rome, we have the good fortune to interact with antiquity as if it was nothing; it is part of our day," she says. "I think that's why Italians have this innate eye, or innate sense of style, because when you grow up with proportions and colour and balance, they are really formative. Style comes very naturally to us."

Sciò is best-known in Italy and around the world for running her family's three luxury hotels – the legendary Il Pellicano at Porto Ercole, on the southern coast of Tuscany, La Posta Vecchia in Ladispoli, north of Rome, and the Mezzatorre Hotel & Thermal Spa on the island of Ischia. Since 2011, she has been the creative director and the CEO of the hotels and has a dream of opening others sometime in the future.

She moved into her elegant apartment in March last year, just three days before the Covid-19 pandemic forced the Italian government to impose its first national lockdown. The virus provoked an unprecedented health crisis across the country, cost more than 128,000 lives, and brought Italy's tourism and hospitality sector to a standstill – although the Sciò family hotels managed to open for last year's summer season.

"People in this business really do it for the passion, so everyone was really devastated," she recalls. "No one knew what was going to happen. It was awful for everyone psychologically."

Her Renaissance palazzo was a tranquil haven at the time, and it's easy to see why. The walls are painted in muted colours, there is plenty of space, and Sciò has decorated it effortlessly with a fusion of classic and modern designs. Antiques seem to merge with 20th century chairs by Hungarian designer Marcel Breuer and the Remadesio table in the dining room is surrounded by Italian designer Gio Ponti's 969 chairs.

In the living room, funky stools by Ettore Sottsass sit on a pastel-coloured geometric rug by Patricia Urquiola for CC-Tapis. Louis XVI chairs sit beside a shiny red lacquered cabinet on one side of the room and an ancestor stares out of a centuries-old portrait on the other side. "I wanted to create a dialogue between the past and today," Sciò says. "I love it here."

Sciò's creativity has not been confined within the walls of her elegant home. As the pandemic exploded around the world, she released an innovative luxury e-commerce and lifestyle platform to complement her hotel properties. Inspired by Italy's passion for style and design, the site is called ISSIMO, a suffix in the Italian language and a celebration of well-known superlatives such as "buonissimo" and "bellissimo".

With global travellers grounded and people forced to work from home, the launch of the new site seemed like a master-stroke, a timely way of reaching out to the family's loyal hotel patrons and also a tool for attracting a new kind of client virtually.

Sciò admits that the timing of the launch was something of a coincidence and contributed to its immediate success. "You know everyone wanted a piece of Italy," she says. "I mean Italy is such a strong brand and also everyone has a little piece of Italy in their heart. I think people really wanted that."

On the site, ISSIMO is described as "a love affair with Italian beauty". A range of products is presented in an engaging way across various categories that also challenge a few preconceptions about the limitations of online shopping.

"ISSIMO reflects our hotel philosophy, the style and the taste, and also that of the country. We try to bring as much quality in all those different areas," says Sciò. "I think it's about making beauty and simplicity accessible. I know that sounds like a contradiction because the hotels are really expensive, but I don't think luxury is about price point. It's about the experience of something and it's about what it communicates to you."

Bellissimo showcases artisanal homewares and Italian craftsmanship; Buonissimo presents culinary products and recipes; Chichissimo has a range of fashion and apparel



Coltissimo focuses on Italian culture and cultural collaboration; Fichissimo is a digital extension of Il Pellicano's souvenir shop and Italianissimo presents travel guides for Italy's 20 regions.

"It's not about trying to reinvent the wheel, it's just about giving access to really nice, simple, elegant, fun things without any arrogance whatsoever," Sciò says. "What we try to do at the hotels is make everyone welcome. I want people to feel like that with ISSIMO. That is why we have a massive price range that goes from €25 to whatever."

Wearing jewellery by Pomellato and Alberto Biani leopard print pants that are featured on her site, the willowy Sciò seems the perfect showcase for the products she wants to promote. In fact, she appears on the online platform modelling some of the fashion items that are for sale. Aspest, Borsalino, Ferragamo, Missoni and Pomellato are just some of the instantly recognisable labels that appear on the site, but Sciò has also developed her own ISSIMO label featuring fashion items – jackets, pants and pyjamas – as well as posters and food products.

Angela Biani, daughter of the designer Alberto Biani, said ISSIMO was a great way to highlight Italian creativity and to help the company reach more international clients.

"It's not only the idea of promoting an Italian lifestyle, including food, travel and fashion, through a selection of artisanal craftsmanship and contemporary design," she told WISH. "The added value is the personal eye and touch of Marie-Louise. You can really feel that the products have been selected with love and passion, something tied up with the idea of luxury but really hard to find somewhere else. Marie-Louise is the perfect mix of a love for classics with a glamorous twist."

Florence designer Barbara Casasola, who has her own ready-to-wear knitwear brand, is also enthusiastic about Sciò's approach. "ISSIMO is a return to quality, craft, subtlety, longevity and, above all, beauty," Casasola said. "It brings together the best of Italy."

The luxury platform certainly travels across all kinds of categories. There is designer glassware from Italesse, Villeroy & Boch dinnerware inspired by Neapolitan chilli peppers, and beauty products from Ischia

and Terre Dei Papi, which draws its ingredients from the hill towns where the popes once holidayed outside Rome. The site is also embellished with articles and features about some of the artisans and entrepreneurs whose products appear on ISSIMO, and other guests. Florence entrepreneur Betty Soldi shares her thoughts on calligraphy, while Livia Firth, the Italian-born designer and former wife of the Academy Award winning actor Colin Firth, writes about her love of Umbria.

Sciò has been surprised by the enthusiastic reaction to the platform, which seems to have been enhanced by Covid-19 lockdowns. Many of the customers, she says, have never stayed at her Italian hotels, and the site is still evolving, with new brands and new lines. While there are some foreign labels, she emphasises that the focus is unashamedly Italian.

"What is not Italian, we Italian-ify," she says. "I would say it's 98 per cent Italian."

A new tableware collection from Lisa Corti, inspired by the bougainvillea flowers at Hotel Il Pellicano, has recently been added to the collection and there are colourful designer lamps from Anna Ljart.

There is even a food selection. A "pizza box" promises all the ingredients you need and a recipe from the award-winning pizzaiolo Davide Civitiello. The popular Roman restaurant Roscioli has also assembled an "aperitivo box" that includes onions, olives and artichokes.

Sciò has defied the critics, who said the mix-and-match concept would never work. "When I started, I found myself surrounded by people saying, 'You're crazy. You know you can't buy capers and a gown.' Of course you can! I don't see it written anywhere that you can't do a platform with all of these, I don't believe there's a rule book."

Breaking the rules seems to come easily to Sciò, who studied architecture at the prestigious Rhode Island School of Design. She started her career at the Costas Group in New York, before returning to Italy to work with architect and interior designer Massimo Zompa, who is known for his collaborations with Karl Lagerfeld, Fendi and Valentino.

But in 2005 she began working at Il Pellicano as an architect and designer when her father, Roberto, asked her to restore some of the rooms. Soon she found herself renovating the entire property.

"I moved into the hotels by chance, because my father wanted to get back the money invested in my university," she says with a laugh. "He said 'Would you design the bathrooms?' I said 'Sure!' and then I told him he needed to reposition the hotels. I had no clue."

Over time her creative input evolved from redoing the hotel's interior design to a far more sweeping vision about what Il Pellicano could be. "I needed to connect all the dots and then I slowly, slowly got into absolutely everything. And that's what happens in life, I guess. It never goes according to your plan."

Her father fell in love with Il Pellicano in the 1960s when it was the residence of English aviator Michael Graham and the American socialite Patsy Daszel, who had built it as a private club. When he bought the hotel in 1970, it soon became an enduring symbol of La Dolce Vita and synonymous with Italian glamour. Wedged between the cliffs in a stunning location, it has been a popular draw for the Hollywood A-list, and counts Sophia Loren, Charlie Chaplin, Sting and Trudie Styler among its famous guests.

Roberto says it was a joy to see his daughter assume greater control of the business over the years and he is in awe of her initiative. "I have believed in her since she was a small child and I still do," he tells WISH. "Every other day I discover new things that she is doing that make me proud."

"I have always appreciated and admired beauty, all that is beautiful, the expression of beauty. But nothing is as beautiful as the relationship I have with my daughter."

One of their few disagreements was when Marie-Louise decided to feature Birkenstocks among her product lines, but eventually she won him over. "He said, are you crazy? Those ugly shoes?! Since then, he hasn't said any more. Now he's a Birkenstock wearer!"

As our interview draws to a close, spring is in the air. The vaccine rollout is paying dividends and the quarantine is about to be lifted for foreign tourists. Sciò has emerged from the pandemic recharged and is excited about an influx of bookings for the summer season and what lies ahead this year.

While she's not sure if her only son, Umberto, currently at university in London, will join the family business, she still has plenty of dreams of her own. She wants to add up to three hotels to the family empire and further expand ISSIMO to make it a "platform for everything Italian", the first port of call for planning a trip or buying a Christmas gift.

Her creativity certainly keeps her busy and she's the first to admit she can't get enough time for it.

"I don't sleep much but I have a lot of fun," she says. ☺

Above: ISSIMO wares
Opposite, clockwise
from top left: Sciò hotels
Mazzotorni, Il Pellicano
and La Posta Vecchia