

POINT OF

VISTA

As she contemplates ceding control of the family business to another generation, Bianca Passera, President of Lario Hotels, sits down with SPACE on the roof terrace of their latest opening in Puglia, to reflect on her family's long legacy in hospitality and the exhilarating direction taken with the new 5-star luxury brand, Vista.

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Over to the left, emblazoned against a flawless cobalt sky, seemingly so close you could almost reach out and touch it, is the gleaming white outline of the perfectly imperfect walls of Ostuni's historic centre. Perched spectacularly on its hill, like icing on a cake, it could be somewhere dreamed up by George R.R. Martin for House of The Dragon. To the right side, stretching for miles through the piercing Puglian sunshine towards a distant glimmering sea is a vast carpet of green; the ancient Piana degli Ulivi Monumentali – the plain of monumental olives – the largest concentration of millennial olive trees in the Mediterranean, some of them 3000 years old.

As Bianca Passera settles into her seat on this exquisitely conceived roof terrace atop her latest hotel opening, Vista Ostuni, from where both of these stunning perspectives are absorbed simultaneously, it's abundantly clear how well chosen was the name of her new company – Vista. The view (vista, of course, in Italian) is beyond breathtaking.

A sprightly, self-effacing, urbane woman with a disarmingly easy manner, Bianca has hospitality coursing through her veins. As part of the third generation of a family of hoteliers stretching back over 100 years, she has been immersed in the hotel business and the business of hotels from birth.

In 2018, together with her nephew Luigi Passera, they debuted Vista, a 5-star luxury



brand, in their long-established base of Como at the Southern end of the celebrated lake; though in many respects the first real Vista where a discernible brand identity was unveiled was Vista Verona, the subsequent opening in a 19th century Verona palazzo. With just 16 suites, the subtly opulent boutique property incorporating the prototype Vista roof terrace embedded into Verona's tight-knit network of tiled rooftops, unfolded like a showreel of Italian design supremacy.

closed in 1968, is a further ratcheting up of Vista's bold assault on the top table of Italian luxury hospitality. With an elegant restyling of its imposing ecclesiastical framework, this reimagining of a crumbling ruin on the edge of a southern Italian hilltop town into one of the country's most acclaimed recent openings is a tour de force.

I begin by asking Bianca about this long legacy of hospitality around Como, "My family has been in hospitality since the beginning of the 20th Century, and it began with my grandparents who weren't originally from Como. They started with beverages, actually, on the ferries when lunch and dinner had become this really elegant thing, and at a certain point they began managing a hotel in Como. This was really the first step of the business."

That hotel, the San Gottardo, launched in 1926, having been closed for the last four decades, has just re-emerged in its centenary year as a Radisson. "After WWII, my father and his brother were introduced into the business, and in the 50s they bought Villa Flori on the west side of the lake just outside of the city, which became our flagship property, and later Albergo Terminus in the 80s."

Terminus is an imposing Liberty (Italian Art Nouveau) property on the lakefront in the centre of Como. The classically styled Villa Flori, meanwhile, was a wedding gift from the Marquis Raimondi in 1860 to his daughter and Giuseppe Garibaldi, the man who'd just united Italy, though that particular union didn't last beyond the next day after his new wife's ►

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infidelity was revealed right after the ceremony. While Villa Flori remains within the family, Terminus and the adjacent original Vista were recently acquired by Villa D'Este, perhaps the grandest of Lake Como's Grande Dames.

"So, along with the small Posta Design Hotel in the centre of Como (designed by the rationalist architect Terragni), which we like to think of as the best 3-star in Italy, this was our traditional business, and after my father it was my elder brother Antonello assuming control, who I helped with design and decoration, though I'd been pursuing another career path."

That career path in advertising took Bianca away to a life lived largely in New York and Milan though the untimely passing of her brother in 2013 not only brought her back into the family business, Lario Hotels, but now as its President. "I had a previous life. My life is clearly divided between before 2013 and after 2013. But in that year also, the fourth generation comes on board with Luigi, and he and I immediately enjoy a very positive alchemy, not least with a shared desire for innovation."

So after a century of steady development around Como, control falls unexpectedly into the hands of two family members who aren't simply assuming stewardship but suddenly assessing pastures new. How, I enquire, did the concept of a new hotel brand come about and was it deliberately conceived to be different? "Half and half. The concept was based around the fact that Como, in spite of its glamorous lake, didn't have any 5-star properties. In the beginning we wanted to enlarge Terminus, but as Luigi and I talked and talked, we concluded: Como is our city, it's beautiful, but it has no luxury, top quality offerings, so maybe there is a space. And finally – after yet more talking – we decided to go for it." The resultant 18-room Vista Lago di Como, the city's first 5-star property, housed in a building adjacent to Terminus, debuted in 2018 and, as Bianca pronounces with considerable understatement, "It worked."



At which juncture their alchemic quest for innovation buoyed by the success of Vista Lago di Como has Bianca and Luigi contemplating life beyond Como's city limits for the first time in the company's history, "At a certain point we became very much focused on the Vista development outside of Como and drawn to the potential of other historical cities with a lack of quality 5-star offerings," which ultimately results in the 2022 unveiling of Vista Verona.

Vista Ostuni was more a case of happenstance after Luigi and Bianca were invited to Puglia to assess an ultimately unfruitful management opportunity, "Though

when we were here, we had the possibility to see this building which, together with this place," gesturing towards Ostuni's cityscape, "and that place," waving an arm across the valley of monumental olives, "made this very attractive," adding in an almost conspiratorial tone, "but this building is very special."

Very special it undoubtedly is, and under the auspices of Milan-based architect Roberto Murgia it has been transformed into a very special hotel though I did wonder as to the extent of Bianca and Luigi's input. "We were very much involved in the project," Bianca confirms, "with the fabrics, the interior ▶





design, and everything." Como was the centre of the once-thriving silk industry and Bianca, a former director of the Como Silk Museum, is not only fully immersed into the world of fabrics in particular but clearly all aspects of design.

She talks enthusiastically and authoritatively about Brianza, the area between Como and Milan, where much of the artisanship that supports Milan's design pre-eminence is located, though pushes back against any suggestion that the Vista style is an extrapolation of this Lombardy design aesthetic. "I wouldn't say that the design is connected directly to Milano. It's more Italian design, for sure, with iconic pieces and elements that you will never find elsewhere. I don't want to make a design hotel; we want to make an evergreen style. So, iconic design that people can recognise, together with something more eclectic. Or in this case, in Puglia, for example, ceramics and local handcraft that conveys a sense of place. We are ambassadors, so I want you to see what we are!"

With the next Vista opening in Pisa in 2029, I'm keen to understand more about what to expect. "It's again a property from the 14th-15th Century, a Medici hospital, connected to Palazzo Trovatielli, an orphanage and foundlings hospital, all enclosing beautiful gardens and cloisters." It sounds exceptional, not least as it benefits from yet another truly spectacular location fronting directly onto the Piazza dei Miracoli, the UNESCO-listed square encompassing the cathedral and leaning tower, which the new hotel overlooks. Though as Bianca is quick to emphasise, "If this was a challenging restructuring process, then Pisa is double!"

At some point, I put to Bianca, if she'll leave oversight of Vista to Luigi, "Yes, I hope very soon! From one side I don't want to think about it because it makes me retired already. As far as I still have the passion to work with him, I will." And when pressed on timescale, "Well, I am able to reach Pisa. I can't think beyond that! What I can say is that I'm really happy that there's a fourth generation continuing to develop the business; that's very satisfying to me," before concluding wistfully, "It will be good; we'll be in good hands." 📍

