

FROM PALACE TO BUSINESS 'WE'RE NOT TWO DUMB BLONDES'

Many of us have been to Palazzo Parisio to celebrate a wedding or 50, or more recently for the pleasure of lunch in the harmonious garden, yet we remain oblivious to the tremendous efforts being made to keep this building alive. Malta's loveliest private palace, built by a grandmaster, dressed in baroque splendour by a merchant prince and banker, and restored to its once-lost grandeur by his great-grandchildren, has a long history of private tragedy and personal triumph. It is now a fully-fledged business. TOWN meets CHRISTIANE RAMSAY SCICLUNA. Photography:



Palazzo Parisio was built in the 18th century by the Portuguese grandmaster Manoel de Vilhena, and later came into the possession of the Parisio family of corsairs, who had accumulated a tremendous fortune. Their 'house in town' was the eponymous palace in Merchants Street, which now houses the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. In its original construction, it resembled other grand country residences built by knights and grandmasters, and was austere, with simple lines.

In the late 19th century, the palace was acquired by the Marquis Giuseppe Scicluna, a banker, who put in train an extensive refurbishment programme

which saw the building remodelled in the baroque manner, though the heyday of baroque style was 300 years earlier. Between 1898 and 1906, 50 artisans from Malta and Italy worked on the realisation of Scicluna's dream of a splendid winter palace to alternate with his summer house on Dragonara Point in St Julian's. But nine months after moving in with his family, he died of a heart attack.

His widow moved out again soon afterwards, and the main palace rooms, except for that brief period, were never really lived in again. The heavy silk curtains and other drapes were packed away for decades, until they were sent to Italy around 25 years ago for cleaning and mending before



SHE INSISTS, LAUGHINGLY, THAT THE INTERVIEW BE TITLED 'WE'RE NOT TWO DUMB BLONDES. THAT THEY'RE BLONDE IS INDISPUTABLE. THAT THEY'RE FAR FROM DUMB IS BACKED UP BY THE EVIDENCE ALL AROUND.'

being hung again in preparation for opening the palace to visitors.

When Giuseppe Scicluna died, he left as his sole heir his six-year-old son, John, who went on to become known as Ic-Cisk, because of his bank's introduction of cheques to the islands. He in turn had two sons, who died childless, and two daughters, the late Corinne Ramsay Scicluna, 10th Baroness of Tabria, and Mignon Marshall. Corinne's daughter Christiane has been the driving force behind making the palace a viable and sustainable enterprise, a place that earns money rather than just siphoning it up, having begun work on the restoration project with her cousin Marcus Scicluna Marshall around 18 years ago.

"It's like running a ship, with continuous repair and maintenance," Christiane Ramsay Scicluna says. "There is no sign that it will all be over. One thing is fixed and another immediately calls for attention." It was force majeure that pushed the family into doing something about the situation. "It was either that, or allowing the palace to slowly disintegrate," she says. "We sat down and drew up a To Do list that was rather different to the norm - repair ballroom ceiling, stitch back the crumbling stucco, find out why dining-room ceiling is about to collapse, that sort of thing."

It was a mammoth undertaking, in terms of financial outlay and sheer hard work. Professor Camilleri Cauchi was called in with a restoration team. The palace was in a terrible state: there were gaping cracks in the ballroom ceiling, the upstairs landing had been propped up with timber since the 1960s, and one of the dining-room walls was caving in because a cracked water-tank had been leaking into it for years. >p42



CHRISTIANE RAMSAY SCICLUNA

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> "Even deciding where to begin was hugely difficult," Ramsay Scicluna says. "The ballroom ceiling gave us the most trouble, and the work has taken years. The intricate stucco detailing had to be stitched back with copper wire, bit by bit, like a huge piece of embroidery. Downstairs, all the stucco had been pushed off the walls and ceiling by damp. The cellar was wet, and damp was rising into the entrance hall."

Taking that cellar proved to be a Herculean task, because material and objects had accumulated there for a century, and there was little or no air. The process took months, the walls were scraped down, the damp was dealt with, and flooring was put in. The cellar is now used for commercial events and parties.

Besides the restoration work, there has been the development made necessary by the demands of catering and sanitation: large kitchens and lavatories, a goods lift, and all of it

without disturbing the original lay-out of the palace. With no subsidies or grants from the Malta government or the European Union, Palazzo Parisio's survival depends solely on the revenue raised by its commercial activities.

The first efforts at bringing in money to finance the restoration included guided tours. "We started by opening the palazzo to tourists," Ramsay Scicluna says. "I was still living in Italy at the time. My friend Sarah Grima helped organised it all and hosted the tours. Most times it was just me and Sarah, one on the till and the other showing people round. Then we began giving them a drink, then coffee and tea, then soup. And after that, I thought, why not serve simple meals? I began cooking and my friends started coming over for coffee, and for lunch."

Café Luna was born, starting out in this basic fashion and now one of the most glamorous lunch venues in Malta, with the sort of spectacular

setting that brooks no competition. It's not just the setting: Christiane Ramsay Scicluna is a stickler for detail and a perfectionist, and it shows. She is also much influenced by the Italian way of doing things: not the casual Italian way of a cheerful trattoria, but the entirely different world of northern Italian formality. People love it, and it is translating into increased revenue. She maintains that her actual inspiration is Parisian luxury. She was raised in that city, and soaked up the atmosphere. "Paris is the non plus ultra of hotel luxury," she says. "You just can't beat it. Parisian luxury is more luxurious than any other sort of luxury." She left Paris because she fell in love with an Italian. "He took me to Rome. That wasn't a bad choice either."

The palace and its gardens open to the public every day, all year round. Last year, there were 21,650 paying visitors, compared to just 1,850 in 1998. >p44

>Individual walk-in visitors represent 58 per cent overall in volume terms and 68 per cent of revenue. The remainder come through travel trade partners like tour operators, hotels and voucher schemes.

Some months ago, a decision was taken to open the restaurant for dinner. Some nights a week Café Luna puts on its evening clothes and becomes Luna di Sera, complete with an impossibly glamorous bar. It was a slow start, as the regulars saw it as more of a lunch-time place, but as the evenings grow warmer and Luna di Sera moves outdoors into the garden, it looks like there's going to be a battle for tables. There are few really smart places where you can dine outdoors, and this one is world-standard smart.

Café Luna served 28,300 covers last year - an average of 535 a week and business is still growing. Ramsay Scicluna laughs. "To think that we started out with me, cooking on two burners, and helped by my friend and assistant Irma - now we're a brigade of 14, and we're open from the morning right through to 6pm every day, and then again in the evening for dinner. Everything depends, really, on how much passion you put into it. I'm not the sort to give up, even though the set-backs and the discouragement have been considerable."

The real break came when the contract with a leading catering company, which leased Palazzo Parisio for weddings and other events, drew to a close. Christiane Ramsay Scicluna argued against renewing it, saying that this was an area of business which they should be moving into themselves.



The damage caused by the wear and tear of huge weddings was beginning to outweigh any revenue from leasing, and was in fact undermining the restoration efforts. She has since set up an events company which looks after this area of business, assisted by her daughter Justine Pergola, who has trained in hospitality in Lausanne. Ramsay Scicluna herself has a strong background in catering, and is far from the 'dilettante doing something with the family palace' that the occasional detractor makes her out to be. She insists, laughingly, that the interview be titled 'We're not two dumb blondes.' That they're blonde is indisputable. That they're far from dumb is backed up by the evidence all around.

The palace is being marketed - successfully - for much smaller weddings, usually with bride, groom

and guests all flying in from overseas and for sophisticated lunches, dinner and cocktail parties. As usual, Ramsay Scicluna's eye for detail is everywhere. Tables are beautifully dressed and the surroundings meticulously appointed. Even the uniforms of the serving-staff are a picture of restrained elegance. "Justine wants to go into special events," Ramsay Scicluna says, "tailor-making them even more minutely to client's requests. We might use the orangerie for receptions, for example."

Palazzo Parisio is now chosen for high-level meetings and corporate hospitality events by international blue chip companies, Maltese captains of industry, and the Malta Government. The sales team works in partnership with Maltese destination management companies and with the Malta Tourism Authority in securing overseas business

- hosting familiarisation trips, site inspections and journalists. There is a show room in the palace itself, where prospective clients can view different colour schemes and table set-ups.

Ramsay Scicluna travels often - but always by train, as she has a horror of planes - and brings back ideas for dishes and décor. She says she is "extremely lucky" to have an executive chef called Mario Pinelli, who is "young and charming, but tough". He is, she explains, somebody who has put the palace kitchens in order. "He is a great leader and strangely enough, we get on very well together because he listens to me. We decide on things together quite a lot. There is always something on the menu which is mine - things that people don't think of but which they love, like shepherd's pie." There are more plans in store: "I

would love to open a really good boutique hotel. It would be the natural conclusion to this. Perhaps even a spa. We've got the infrastructure for it, the kitchens, the restaurant...but as some Italians say, not every doughnut comes with a hole. For now, it remains a dream. Then I can retire and say that I achieved the impossible. This venture has been like climbing Everest, with so many obstacles." Along the way, Ramsay Scicluna says, she has felt often that people were working against her rather than helping her. "I don't know exactly why, but I had the feeling many times that even people I knew well didn't want me to succeed and hoped I would fail. I'm at an age now when I press on regardless of what people say. It's like water off a duck's back. As

Oscar Wilde said, 'Better to be talked about than not to be talked about.'

She says that her inspiration came from the women in her family. "They were more entrepreneurial, more driven, than the men. The palace itself is very feminine, in a way. A young man who came here on a site inspection for a destination management company told me recently: 'There's a very feminine allure here.' It's been very, very difficult, but now we are beginning to see results and I'm so glad we made that effort. The palace was going to sleep, falling apart. All that heritage and it was always closed. We've brought it back to life. It's wonderful to see people here, enjoying the garden, taking pleasure in eating and drinking. It was meant to be this way." ■



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