



# *Visions of* A PALACE

Behind the glitz and glamour of the magnificent Palazzo Parisio, lie the vision and hard work of a mother and daughter team. SANDRA AQUILINA meets *Christiane Ramsay Scicluna*, Baroness of Tabria, and her daughter *Justine Pergola* and chats about working together, running a palace and being 'ic-Cisk's' granddaughter ►



The tall ancient trees are rustling in the garden of Palazzo Parisio. Their huge trunks immovable, their branches swaying, it seems almost as if the entire garden were stirring. Behind them, stands the palace, its balcony overlooking the walled garden, the church spire clearly visible behind it. The church clock strikes two, the peals of the bells echoing in the large beautiful rooms, wide corridors and marble staircases of the palace.

From the family carriage at the entrance to the Italian-style gardens, and from the dazzling glamour of the mirrored ballroom to the Pompeian dining room, Palazzo Parisio, built in the 18<sup>th</sup> century by the Portuguese grandmaster Manoel de Vilhena, seems to possess something of the quality of fairytale. Compared to a miniature Versailles for its opulence, the palace was converted to magnificence by the Marquis Giuseppe Scicluna, who dreamt of a splendid winter palace to alternate with his summer house on Dragonara Point in St Julians.

Nearly a century later, it was the Marquis' great granddaughter, the Baroness of Tabria, Christiane Ramsay Scicluna who transformed the old and dusty house into a whimsical palazzo with a pronounced touch of femininity. Undeterred by the scope and magnitude of the project, Baroness Scicluna – also known as Muffy – plunged into the restoration, which went from repairing ceilings to dressing up the palace with new silk curtains imported from the European capitals, handpicking ornaments and drapes inspired by her travels and endowing the palace with enough glamour and taste to make her great grandfather proud.

“Those were exciting times,” says the Baroness, when I meet her and her daughter Justine Pergola at the palace one late summer afternoon. “But I had a mission to accomplish.” Outside, the light is waning and we are sitting in a hushed corner in one of the Palace's anterooms, a beautiful and comfortable salon suffused with a warm glow. Sitting in the cosy atmosphere of comfort and understated luxury, mother and daughter on either side of me, with the palace's echoing hallways and sun and moon motifs, I can't help feeling that this is really a fairytale palace.

The revamping project took eight years – almost as long as the amount of time it took Marquis Scicluna to convert the original house – which he had acquired from the Sicilian Parisio family – into the sumptuous palazzo it became. Unfortunately the Marquis died shortly after completing his ambitious conversion project and the house remained closed and undisturbed for a long time. Until, one day, the Baroness reopened the heavy wooden doors to let in fresh air, light and a new life, following Axel Munthe's words, “I want my house open to the sun and wind and the voice of the sea. Like a Greek temple, and light, light, light, everywhere!”

Nowadays the Palace is run by the Baroness and her daughter Justine, who joined her mother in Malta on this incredible journey. “It started off very passionately,” says Muffy, sitting back chattily.

“We do everything together,” says a young and beautiful Justine. Like her mother, she speaks English with a foreign accent and switches easily to Italian. “We have different roles but we always end up overlapping quite a lot.” Her mother smiles. “I lean on her a lot,” she says. “She has young fresh ideas...” “And it's also about moral support,” says Justine. “In two, you feel stronger. *L'unione fa la forza.*”

There is a peculiar understanding between the two, the exuberant Baroness softening completely when her daughter speaks. “Justine's more focused,” she says. “She has quite a calming effect on me. If it were up to me, I just wouldn't stop”

“We're totally different,” says her daughter. “but we complement each other very well.”

“Justine sometimes feels overwhelmed by my very bubbly presence, she says that I take up too much space, that I like to play the star,” the Baroness explains to me. “But of course she doesn't realize that, one day, she will be the star.”

Having been “conceived in Capri” and brought up in Paris, Baroness Ramsay Scicluna feels more at home on the continent than in Malta, she says. Her father being an English naval officer, most of her childhood memories are linked with travels with her mother as they followed her father around – scenes from aboard passenger ships, beautiful ladies decked out in evening dresses, even “the most beautiful white Persian cat” on board a ship crossing the ocean from Italy to Sri Lanka – are merged into one single childhood memory. Eventually, after an education in France, she was sent to boarding school in the UK and then to finishing school in Florence. “But those were other times,” she says with a hint of melancholy.

“After that my father decided that I should work.” So she became an *hôtesse de France*. “That sounds terrible today but at the time young girls wished to become hostesses.” The job was varied and involved representing anything from chocolate to excavating machines at the national and international fairs. “Rolls Royce in London was my claim to fame,” she says as she recalls the exciting flair of the 60s.

She then went to work for Alitalia in Paris as a VIP hostess, when the company was at its beginnings and where she hosted celebrities such as Alain Delon and Maria Callas. It was at around this time that she was swept off her feet by a handsome Italian dancer, Umberto Pergola, who was a big star on Italian television at the time.

“My parents were less than enthusiastic but I did it my way,” says the Baroness. Eventually she married Umberto and, “after much drama,” she moved to Italy. She was 27 years old; three years later, Justine Pergola was born.

“I was born in Rome,” says Justine. “And lived there for the first 12 years of my life.” Eventually, following the family tradition, she was sent to boarding school in the UK, followed by a working experience at the Hilton in Rome, where she also worked with the famous Michelin star chef Heinz Beck, whom she would love to host as guest chef at the palazzo's Luna di Sera ▶



fine dining restaurant. The fascinating world of hotels led Justine to study International Hospitality at a Hotel Management School in Lausanne, Switzerland. Like her mother, Justine has travelled widely and “feels at home” wherever she goes.

Together, the mother-daughter team is the driving force and vision behind Palazzo Parisio, dreaming up ideas and events, overlooking quality, handpicking items, welcoming guests and supervising to the slightest detail. The Palazzo has grown into a thriving business, with the Baroness recently forming her own catering company, Palazzo Events. The venue also boasts the Luna Collection, which includes Caffe Luna, the daytime restaurant; Luna di Sera, for evening fine dining and

Luna Lounge, a cocktail bar. Currently the beautiful old palace attracts 21,000 visitors a year but it is the meetings, weddings, events and banquets which raise its profile as well as bringing in the revenue.

“It’s a full-time job which carries a lot of responsibility,” says the Baroness. “We’ve come a long way and grown very fast. We’ve been through a lot here – we’ve cried, we’ve worried, we’ve laughed, we’ve had emotional ups and downs. We have now become true businesswomen with a clear vision of where we are going – but we are also emotional and tend to easily get attached to the people who are part of our team. Over the years we’d had to learn to toughen up in order to put our business on the rails.”

The vision – says the Baroness – is no less than to bring true luxury to Malta through Palazzo Parisio as a venue for events, banquets and weddings. “But we are still far from where we want to be,” says Justine. “We want to bring our business to an international level, to offer our clients the best in hospitality and service, putting Malta on the international map, which it so deserves. Whoever leaves Palazzo Parisio must feel – special. Every one of our guests is a celebrity to us and we honour their custom everyday.”

And the two women work solid hours to ensure that their business reaches the standards they have set for it. On the day of our meeting, their luggage lies unpacked at our feet – they have just returned from a fair in Milan where – among other things – they were also searching for items for their Boutique and getting it ready for the Christmas season.

A little corner with pretty objects ranging from diaries to earrings, the little boutique gift shop is a treasure trove of trivia. “It’s all useless, whimsical stuff – it’s a little like *the taverna of Ali Baba*, Ali Baba’s Cave,” says Justine. Selected entirely on the subjective basis of whether they like a particular item, the boutique is not run exclusively on commercial lines. “If we like it, we’ll put it in,” says the Baroness with admirable clarity. “We

handpick the items and have just included a new addition to the shop, the Campo Marzio corner, a brand which represents colour, joy, fun and creativity and which specializes in leather gifts and pens to suit all pockets.” Justine smiles at her mother and shrugs her shoulders mildly. “And I can always wear it myself if we don’t sell it,” she says, as she shows me a pair of chandelier-type earrings.

Afternoon tea at the Palace is as good as the Ritz in London, the Baroness assures me. “We wanted to bring this tradition back to Malta and to do it properly. Living in a Mediterranean country it is a difficult tradition to preserve. But what a delightful tradition – and what a treat to be able to experience this still today.” ►



And with two houses adjoining the Palazzo, mother and daughter are constantly on the premises, adding a personal touch to their events and experiences. "This place has given us a purpose – and something to worry about," says Muffy. "I'm not too good at ladies' lunches and social events, I'd much rather be here – people expect to see us, it's important that we're around." Justine agrees – she too has given up a lot for the Palazzo.

"No two weddings at Palazzo Parisio are the same and a lot of detail and time goes into their planning," says Justine. "We are constantly on call, *casa bottega, si dice*."

"We enjoy organising events more than we enjoy going to them," she says. The two are currently busily planning their New Year's Eve event; this year, the theme will be gold and they will be hosting 160 guests to a superb dinner with entertainment. "So ladies, bring out the sequins and stilettos!" Although their New Year's party is their current focus, Muffy and Justine are already planning their next event and, inspired by their recent trip to Venice, a Masquerade Venetian ball is on the cards for spring. "This palace would be a beautiful venue for the ball and we are hoping that it will become an annual international event."

The palace decidedly offers infinite potential, not only for its magnificent rooms but also for its garden, the only garden not found in Italy to be listed with *Grandi Giardini Italiani*. Lovingly overseen by the Baroness, this includes around 60 species of bougainvillea as well as a large number of indigenous plants. "I always think that you should use what grows better in Malta rather than aiming for exotic plants," she says.

And there are other plans in the pipeline too, such as the restoration of the house's extensive wine cellar and Justine's personal project and dream

– the setting up of a boutique hotel. "The site is magical and yet again accentuates the whimsical and fairytale quality. The hotel completes the circle of our love of hospitality." She seems reluctant to give away more details – so as not to disturb the spirits, "*per scaramanzia*," she says. "Although this future project may feel ambitious at this time I believe in it deeply. After all, as Eleanor Roosevelt said: 'The future belongs to those who believe in the beauty of their dreams.'"

Does all this weight of heritage and ancestry sometimes get too heavy? "The past is a pleasure, but it's also a burden," says the Baroness, "because we – Justine and I – feel the responsibility to keep it going keenly. I think you can only possess what you inherit when you have worked on it," she says, paraphrasing Goethe. "Work on what you have inherited from your fathers that you may possess it."

In their case, it turns out, the inheritance – at least the moral one – seems to have come from the mothers as it was the women in the family who have always been the strongest and the most adventurous and entrepreneurial. "Our ancestors were the great women," says the Baroness. "I am sure we got this from them."

Both her grandmothers, her mother and her aunt were – and are – exceptional women, she says. Her mother's death represented the lowest point of her life. "Without my mother I feel I've lost my backbone," she says quietly. "If you'd known my mother... it was a great loss..."

On the other hand, her daughter represents the greatest satisfaction of her life. "To see my daughter grow into a lovely young woman is a great satisfaction. To see that she is a good person in every way..." The Baroness looks at her daughter, her expression soft. "I couldn't wish for more." **C**