

THE STORY - BACK TO PIEDMONT

THE MEMORIES OF THE GOOD LIFE TOOK US BACK TO VILLA LA MADONNA

Spring in Piedmont and the shifting greens of the vineyards dotting the Bormida valley glimmer against the silvery backdrop of a misty Italian sky. Right here, where time stands still and everything feels like it is meant to, Swedish sisters Annica and Marie Eklund have revived a dream at the Villa La Madonna estate. The sisters run the day-to-day business of their successful family company Bolon, which manufactures and exports exclusive designer flooring all over the world. But you do not need to listen to their story for long before realising the labour of love that drove them to spend all their free time away from the company to transform Villa La Madonna to the romantic boutique hotel that exquisitely decorates the rolling hills today. The tale begins on a South African train in 1995. Marie Eklund sits in one of the cabins. In another, sits a man who will, four years later, become her husband. After fate time and time again brought them together in the most unexpected places around the world, Marie and Björn were married at Björn's estate - Villa La Madonna - with the Bormida valley forming the backdrop. Over the next ten years, the vineyard flourished, and Villa La Madonna in its then guise as a simple, basic hotel was always full of enthusiastic guests. Everything has its time.

When Björn and Marie decided to go their separate ways in 2008, the property was sold and Marie moved back to Sweden, to focus her love and energy on the family company Bolon. Tough economic times followed in Italy, visitors to Villa La Madonna became ever fewer, and the former glory days seemed to be extending further away in the rear view mirror as the new owners failed to keep up with the necessary renovations. However, life in the Bolon factory's home town of Ulricehamn kept on at its own pace. When Björn passed away in 2014, Marie found out that Villa La Madonna was once again searching for new ownership. She felt a yearning to go back there. If for nothing else, for the sake of her children and to safeguard what their father had created in his 25 years at the vineyard. The tickets were booked, and Marie was soon breezing along the gravel roads that wind through the many small local villages she still recognised, this time with her sister Annica at her side. Returning to Piedmont was, in many ways, a return to her home. The people who had been in Marie's life back in that other time were still there, as were the winding grapevines, the wonderful Piedmontese food and the gentle peaks on the horizon. The comfort and peace of mind born of their return sowed the seed of an idea in the sisters. To restore and refine the vineyard and help it find its way back to what it once was, fulfilling the potential of what it could become.

With a keen respect for the estate's history given their relationship to the place, and with an understanding of the feelings that belong there, the sisters have revitalised Villa La Madonna into a luxury bohemian dream and fully-fledged boutique hotel. A mammoth venture that has proved to be both exhilarating and challenging in equal measures. In spring 2016, chests bursting with pride, they welcomed their first guests to the new jewel of the family. "This is a dream come true in so many ways. I would never have even dared to fantasise about running a vineyard if it weren't for the fact that this place, these people and the history we share creates such a wonderful sense of security to lean back on. Coming here is like coming home for me and my family and I truly believe that this feeling is conveyed to our guests," says Marie.

The effortlessly familiar and all-encompassing aesthetic considerations in everything they do has been the Bolon sister's calling card over the years. A quality that will hopefully mean that every guest feels especially welcome to their hotel, which is distinctly characterised by the genuine Italy, in one of the world's most beautiful places.

Today, the villa's 16 rooms breathe history without compromising on modern refinements and finesse. Vintage bargains from the surrounding area are blended with carefully selected design elements, and the floors are - of course - clad with specially produced Bolon rugs in an earthy colour scheme. Personal and harmonic are the key concepts, and every room has an elegant balcony or terrace boasting a magnificent view of the vineyards. The sisters' painstaking meticulousness and eye for detail can be seen as a common thread in everything from the key placed in your hand upon arrival, the beautifully decorated common areas, to the hotel's restaurant and pool area in cool natural stone.

Piedmont is a fantastically interesting wine and food destination, famous for its exclusive white truffle, full-bodied Barolo wines, effervescent Spumante Brut and Moscato dessert wines. The vineyards surrounding Villa La Madonna have been handed down from generation to generation. You would be hard pushed to find a more authentic Italian experience. Not least because the wonders of the area are yet to be fully realised by tourists. In Villa La Madonna's own restaurant, Head Chef Hermann prepares his food with the same ethos. Here, you do not eat to live, you live to eat. The restaurant is open for lunch and dinner concocted from meticulously selected produce from the local markets and from the estate's kitchen garden. During the summer, dinner is served under the stars on the evocative terrace. The ambitious wine cellar features a mixture of local Piedmont wines with the estate's own Barbera and Cabernet Sauvignon. Dusk in Piedmont and the glowing sun disappears behind row after row of grapevines. Right here, where time seems to stand still and everything feels as though this is the way it's supposed to be, Annica and Marie Eklund have revived and given life to an Italian place we hope you'll soon call home.

Warm welcome

Family of Villa La Madonna