

Luxury with a capital L: The Capri Palace Hotel & Spa

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Tonino Cacace, second-generation owner of the Capri Palace Hotel, talks to Margie Goldsmith about artistic luxury, artisan culture and why bigger really is better.

As Tonino Cacace, owner of the Capri Palace Hotel & Spa, sits on the terrace of his hotel gazing out at uninterrupted views of the Bay of Naples, he muses that luxury is not only in the surroundings but in every detail of his hotel.



The Capri Palace Hotel & Spa is in Anacapri, the highest town of Capri, constructed over the ruins of a Roman palace built by Emperor Augustus and later embellished by Tiberius. "My little village is a place of the soul," says Cacace. "The days roll by at a leisurely pace. The very essence and nature of this place have withstood the test of time." Cacace's love for the hotel is not only because his father built it; Cacace is an artist and since the 1800s, artists have been drawn to Anacapri for its seclusion and extraordinary light.

But the restful island with its views of the endless sea and the opulent hotel give everyone an artist's eye even if they can't produce the art themselves. "The sea is unquestionably the dominant element here: it is in the flavour of our dishes and in the eyes and smiles of our people; the sea will continue to stir our soul as we relive the beauty of this magnificent place," says Cacace.

In the 1950s, the international jet set adapted this playground as the place to see, to be seen and to shop. Tonino Cacace was not born yet when his father, Mario, and mother, Rita, opened a department store in Anacapri called Mariorita in 1950. After 10 years, they bought a piece of land and built the Palace Hotel, which originally had 110 rooms. Nearby, Tonino's great grandmother had a little inn in the village, which she named after herself: Mariantonia.

Mario Cacace very soon enlarged the department store to sell more luxury goods. In 1960, he built the Palace Hotel, where, he instilled courtesy, warmth, elegance and professionalism in his staff. Both the Palace and the Mariorita became a Mecca for discerning travellers seeking luxury and privacy. Guests included Jackie O and Aristotle Onassis, Sophia Loren, Audrey Hepburn and Grace Kelly.

Tonino had intended to study art and literature at university in Rome, but his father had other plans. He wanted to raise a future hospitality entrepreneur, so he sent Tonino to University Federico II in Naples. In 1975, Tonino earned a law degree. He was 23 years old. That same year, his father tragically passed away aged just 53. Tonino rose to the challenge and took over the helm of the hotel.

Tonino, a visionary as well as an artist, wanted to create something unique for the most discerning guest. In just a few years he transformed the hotel, renamed it the Capri Palace and personally greeted all the celebrities, business people and entertainers who came to stay. Now, 35 years later, he has completed three major refurbishments and has created L'Olivo, a two-Michelin-starred restaurant with exclusive fabrics by Loro Piana; the Beach Club "il Riccio" on the sea of the Blue Grotto; the Capri Beauty Farm, a medical and wellness institution; and an atelier for visiting artists.

The Capri Palace Hotel & Spa's 5-star L rating is the highest luxury denomination a 5-star hotel can receive. Everywhere in the hotel are important pieces by modern and contemporary artists. The rooms, reminiscent of elegant Roman coastal villas, include travertine baths and some have gardens and private swimming pools. "Success isn't based on one's vision, it's putting a strong and motivated team together, conducted by a smart management," says Cacace. Yet it is he who makes all the decisions — from which rooms will be made bigger to the colour of the chairs and tables at the Beach Club.

"I knew I wanted to paint the Beach Club chairs blue," he says, "but I was looking for a blue that makes you happy." Cacace experimented with every shade, but was still not satisfied until, on a trip to Mykonos, he found his perfect blue. "Look," he says as he strolls through the restaurant pointing out the bright blue painted chairs and tables. "Doesn't that colour make you happy?"

Cacace is about more than just details. These days, while some resorts are increasing the number of guest rooms versus luxury suites and decreasing the price, Cacace, a believer in bigger-is-better, is doing the opposite. "In order to create a true luxury hotel, I have added more suites and reduced the number of classic rooms," he says. The hotel originally had 110 rooms whereas today there are only 79, including two deluxe junior suites, seven with their own private pools, 11 suites, 12 junior suites, 26 classic rooms and 28 deluxe.

His latest creation is the 150-square metre Paltrow Suite, stunning in black and white marble with original Dèco furniture, 300 square metres of garden and a plunge pool on top of the hotel. "Gwyneth Paltrow has been a guest at the hotel," says Cacace. "To me she represents the new classy elegance: cultured, well-mannered and without ostentation. That's what I wanted this suite to reflect." Before the Paltrow Suite was refurbished, it was known as the Megaron Suite and cost €3500 per night. Now, the Paltrow Suite goes for €5600 per night during the high season.

Cacace knows his celebrity clientele well. Understanding that privacy is the ultimate luxury, he created a personalised, state-of-the-art medical treatment facility, the Capri Beauty Farm. Opened in 1992, today it is still considered the best medical spa in Europe. The Beauty Farm offers medical treatments and aesthetic medicine under the direction of Dr Professor Francesco Canonaco, a specialist in paediatrics, food science and medical oncology. Guests enjoy treatments in a soothing and luxurious environment while participating in weight loss and cleansing programs, metabolic response and heart analysis, dietetic-nutritional workshops, and a "Leg School" for the prevention and cure of cellulite and vascular leg problems.

Cacace's latest addition is his vision for Mariorita, the boutique at the base of the hotel founded by and named after his parents. But the store has much changed from when Mario and Rita ran it. It is now a new concept store where a shoemaker and a dressmaker hand-make custom sandals, Capri pants and linen shirts. The store also carries luxurious Italian jewellers such as Bulgari and Vehrnier and other brands including Versace, Fontana, Armani, Valentino and Missoni.

To celebrate L'Olivo's second Michelin star, received last year, Cacace has opened a small food store close to Mariorita where shoppers can find the best items from the region. The shop, called "Il mondo di Mariantonia", is a reflection of the genuine products of Anacapri and the traditions of the Cacace family.

Cacace feels the future of shopping for ultra high net worth individuals is artisan-created merchandise. "All the artisans who sell their goods here are local, from Naples and the Amalfi Coast area. And while you can walk in and have a custom-made pair of Capri pants or sandals, the calibre of the artisans in Mariorita would more likely make sandals studded with semi-precious and Swarovski gems or a silk tie with a small coral horn attached on the inside for good luck".

Cacace has also started an artist-in-residence programme that allows an artist to use the atelier for two weeks, with all art materials provided. "Artists use Anacapri and the island as an inspiration," he says. "The light and architecture of our island enhance the creative energy."

Hotel guests can arrange a visit to the atelier to watch the artist's creative process and now, Cacave has added another feature: hotel guests – even those with no prior artistic experience – can take water colour painting classes the last week of each month. Capri is still a place to be seen, and while celebrities such as Harrison Ford, Julia Roberts, Liz Hurley and Kobe Bryant still visit the hotel, Cacace extends the same warmth and hospitality to all his guests. "All our clients have to feel comfortable," he says. "The only regret I have is that I cannot be a guest at my own hotel."