



# STYLE IN SPADES

ALTHOUGH THE OWNER/DESIGNER OF THIS TUSCAN VILLA HAD ALREADY RESTORED FIVE OTHER FARMHOUSES, HER NEW SOLUTION TO THE FAMILIAR CHALLENGE OF ITS HILLTOP SITE WAS TO IMPORT TONS OF EARTH TO CREATE A LEVEL AREA FOR OUTDOOR LIVING



In the sitting room (main picture) of Giorgio and Ilaria Miani's villa, Casellacce, grey walls provide a backdrop to sofas and chairs, designed by Ilaria, covered in fabric by Ian Mankin in scarlet and purple - colours picked up in the rugs and striped lampshades, also by Ilaria. On the wall hangs a panelled mirror-glass sheet that echoes the form of the adjacent window. Straw-coloured curtains frame doors that give on to the garden, part of which is laid out as a kitchen garden (opposite below). Nearby is the infinity pool (opposite above), which is dominated at one end by a metal-covered wooden globe from Vietnam, available through Ilaria Miani





When we first bought this house six years ago, our friends wanted us to make it just like our other houses,' says Ilaria Miani, as we drive towards her newest Tuscan farmhouse, Casellacce. It is one of six houses in this corner of central Italy that Ilaria and her husband, Giorgio, have restored over the last two decades. Painstaking attention to detail and faithful preservation of the past have made the Mianis' Tuscan homes some of the area's most notable.

'Not everyone initially understood our fascination with these old Tuscan farm buildings,' says Ilaria. Fascination? Some would call it obsession. But today no one can deny that the Mianis' decision to make such houses the focus of their lives has been extremely successful. After their first house, Atalante, came La Macchia, Zingoni, Palazzolaccio and Rombolino. 'With each project we have learnt more,' says Ilaria. 'That said, there are constant themes which dictate the look and feel of each house.'

Ilaria explains: 'Restoration is the first priority. Each project takes its tone from the building itself, even if there isn't much left to speak of. A bit of coloured plaster still clinging to a crumbling wall, a small carved stone niche, a sagging painted shutter: these are the elements that speak across the centuries of the soul of the house.'

But if houses do indeed have souls, Casellacce today has a completely new one and is dramatically different from any of the Mianis' preceding projects. 'People tend to think that these houses and even the landscape have been here for ever,' says Giorgio. 'But this area of Italy was completely abandoned until the Origo family came in the Twenties and reclaimed the land for agricultural use.' This meant that not only did the landscape change – barren clay hillocks giving way to lush fields of wheat and corn – but the farmhouses, too, went through changes.

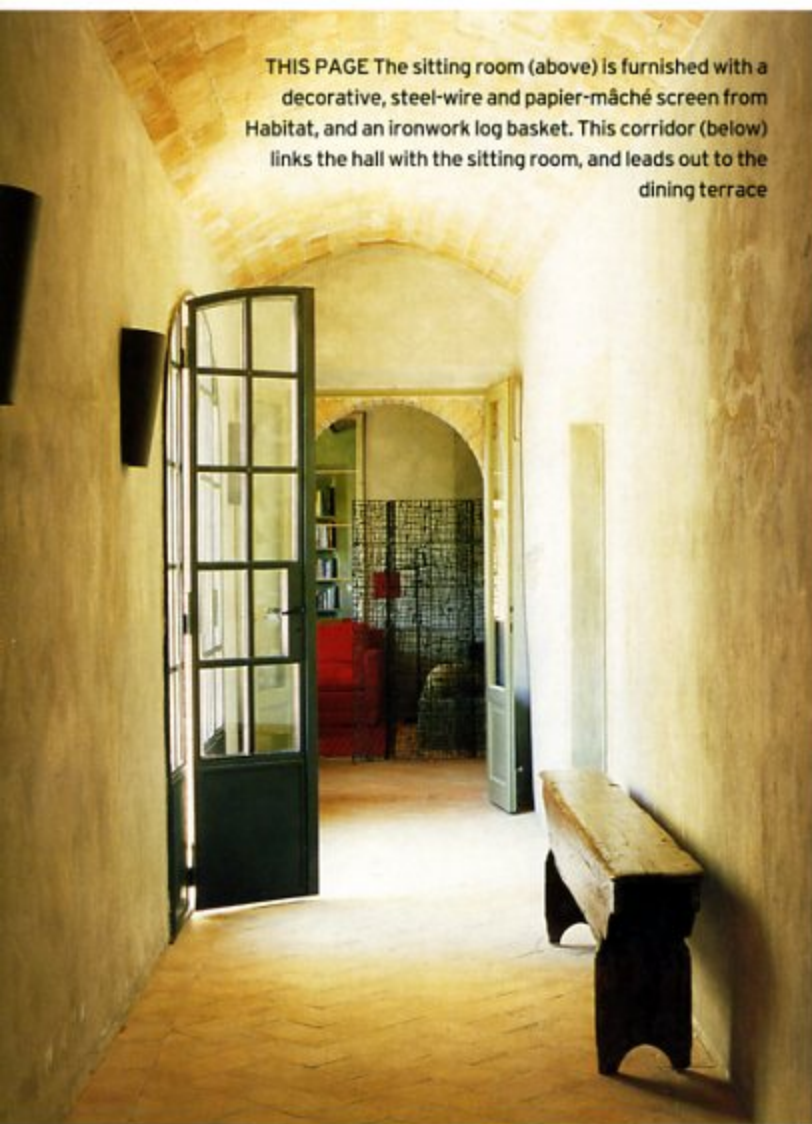
By the time Ilaria and Giorgio found Casellacce, very little that was original survived. 'That's why I had no qualms about tearing much of it down and starting afresh,' says Ilaria.

The kitchen, formerly a stable, is the heart of the house. A large, square table stands in front of a roaring fire. Very little in the room – from the chairs and lamps to the cutlery and table linen – has not been designed by Ilaria herself. She began 'designing when she couldn't find the pieces she needed for an early restoration. Now, 25 years on, Ilaria presides over one of Rome's hottest home-furnishings shops in Via Monserrato; her designs range from scented candles and teapots to beds and sofas.

The craze for 'Chiantishire' means that people are more familiar today with central Italian country style than ever before. But at Casellacce, Ilaria is having nothing to do with the often formulaic, 'rustic' decoration of so many houses in the region. The sitting room is typical of her approach. 'I wanted the fireplace to be a focus here, but I also wanted it to be an obviously new addition,' says Ilaria. The hearth is set into the inside wall, with only the most minimal masonry hood to set it off. The walls are finished in a bespoke wash finish in neutral tones, with hints of the grey plaster coming through. This unelaborate feeling is in keeping with the original Fifties brick and iron ceiling, which recalls the room's use as a pigsty.

Upstairs, instead of terracotta flooring, Ilaria used wide planks of bleached oak throughout. Beyond this single shared feature, each room is different, with bespoke beds and colour

THIS PAGE The sitting room (above) is furnished with a decorative, steel-wire and papier-mâché screen from Habitat, and an ironwork log basket. This corridor (below) links the hall with the sitting room, and leads out to the dining terrace





THIS PAGE In the hall (top right), a smart iron bench and coat rail echo the black-and-white rug. Coloured glass vases are arranged on the windowsill (top left). The terrace is overhung by oak trees and encircled by plants including roses

schemes of their own. 'Amiata', a corner bedroom overlooking nearby Monte Amiata, is Ilaria's favourite. The cool grey four-poster bed is capped by a pyramid-shaped canopy, which creates a cosy haven in an otherwise lofty room.

Inevitably, Ilaria had to create bathrooms from scratch – one for each bedroom. But in order to avoid cutting up the bedrooms, she devised an ingenious solution. A small but luxurious bathroom is now an integral part of each bedroom, partly contained within dividing walls and retractable doors. Working with local stonemasons, Ilaria and Giorgio devised bespoke fittings: sculpture-like basins sit on pedestals carved from local stone in shades of moss, putty and creamy white. There isn't a white tile in sight.

As this is predominantly a house for holidays, it was important to make the outside areas perfect. The courtyard outside the sitting room and kitchen is a recent creation, with its wood-fired barbecue and tables shaded by pergolas. Similarly new is the wide expanse of lawn surrounding the house. 'Most farmhouses were built on top of hills for practical reasons,' explains Giorgio. 'This guarantees fantastic views but precious little space to put down a pool or play bowls.' Previously, the Mianis had terraced their gardens, but here they bit the bullet, built massive retaining walls and brought in tons of earth to create the expanse of lawn (just under an acre) whose centrepiece is the pietra serena-lined infinity pool. Even the 60-year-old mulberry trees are new to the site.

'Although we now have six houses in the region, we do use them all,' says Ilaria. 'It's a bit like musical houses.' The couple rents out all of the houses for part of the year, using them themselves in rotation. 'Only by living in a house can you understand what each one needs,' Ilaria says. 'This results in houses that are very practical, but very personal at the same time. And I hope that the same can be said for the furnishings I design. Quirky, personal, but in the end, just the thing you were looking for if you only knew it' □

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OPPOSITE CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT In the main bedroom, wing chairs are covered in 'Lamartine' by Designers Guild. The spare bathroom features travertine basins. A pair of black lamps frames a painting on this chest of drawers. The black-and-white spare bedroom is in the eaves. Another bathroom has a granite basin



**THIS PAGE** The kitchen and dining area deftly combine modern elements with old. In the dining area (above right), an antique, distressed-wood cabinet is juxtaposed with new chairs painted in black, white and grey; the kitchen chairs (below) are painted raspberry and white. Also in the kitchen, stainless-steel, dual-fuel ovens flank the fireplace, designed by Giorgio, which is lined - like the work surfaces and shelves - in pietra serena. Crockery, stored on open shelves beneath an arch (above left), is plain white and black; the zinc and steel hanging lamps, designed by Ilaria, are also black



