

BY ZAHID SARDAR

PHOTOGRAPHS BY CLAUDIO BONOLDI



DESIGN FORTITUDE

"I grew up here and love it," architect Cosimo D'Astore, who lives and works in Brindisi, Italy, said.

An ancient Greek settlement, this city in Puglia, a much-invaded region in the peninsular heel of Italy's boot, was a principal gateway for crusaders setting sail for Jerusalem.

Brindisi's history also includes a period of audacious incursions by Turks and Arab pirates during the 1500s. That's when fortified farmhouses called masserie — less well-known than 19th century corbel-vaulted conical stone trulli houses from the region — emerged inland, away from the penetrable Adriatic coast.

Several crumbling masserie still attest to the area's tumultuous past and the last of these self-sustaining walled compounds, in a sense, are as important as the remnants of the old Appian Way that linked ancient Rome to Brindisi's harbor.

Restoring masserie has become D'Astore's passion. He seeks out such bastions, sifts through their history like an archaeologist unearthing ruins, and brings them back to life.

One of those dilapidated masserie that he recently restored for an American couple with Pugliese roots is a few miles west of Brindisi and just outside the town of Mesagne.



**A SPARKLING RESTORATION
OF A FORTIFIED FARMHOUSE IN
PUGLIA, ITALY, ALSO SIGNALS A
RENAISSANCE OF REGIONAL CRAFTS**





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It is composed of several asymmetrically planned buildings that probably grew by accretion within their walled enclave, including an original stone farmhouse and star vaulted stables that lay abandoned for several decades.

“People in the area called it Masseria Pizzorusso because, it probably had a caretaker with a *pizzorusso* or red goatee,” D’Astore said, shedding light also on the rosy pink color he chose for the 5,000 square-foot, two-story, vaguely Palladian-style villa that crowns the compound.

“I had seen many *masserie* before but this one was different. It had a mix of Moorish and neo-classical characteristics that made it special. It had a quality of light in the evening and the color of the ground around it was unusual,” the architect said.

The blackish brown soil in and around the 15-acre property is evidently ideal for growing ancient Negroamaro and Susumaniello grapes that have been cultivated nearby for centuries.



The first mention of Masseria Pizzorusso exists, according to D'Astore, in Mesagne town hall records from 1626. "But parts of it are as old as the 1500s," he said, pointing to stable walls as thick as six feet made of irregular blocks and to later additions made of more chiseled stone. "I decided to strip all the plaster and paint on the lower floor to reveal the story of those walls and now they are like a book that people can read for themselves."

An outdoor bread oven lined with a rare and coveted Roman-era slate that is not from the region highlights another chapter of Puglia's history, as does a defunct subterranean rainwater cistern that must have served well during droughts or sieges.

The pink two-story owner's villa was added in the late 1700s during more settled times when most landed gentry moved from nearby towns to country properties and made them more elegant. "Villa" Pizzorusso was born then and its elements from that period, including Moorish domed turrets at each corner and on the roof, a grand 19th century Florentine arched entry, and arched windows are now its defining characteristics.

"We decided to leave most of that the way we found it," D'Astore said indicating faded decorative paintings on ceilings in the *piano nobile* rooms that were simply cleaned and sealed. On the other hand, arabesque, integrally colored marble-dust-and-concrete floor tiles that had been damaged by vandals had to be replaced. Luckily, D'Astore discovered, they are still being made in the region.

"I found Osvaldo De Filippi, a company in nearby Lecce that is reissuing these designs using historic drawings and selected the ones that were nearly identical to the originals," D'Astore said. "I wanted to keep everything authentic."





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That wasn't difficult because the conversions of *masserie* like Villa Pizzorusso into small hotels or lavish residences all over Puglia, has also helped to revive traditional crafts. For instance, in Grottaglie, a short distance away from the villa the architect found an old ceramics factory that again makes olive-shaped finials like those atop Villa Pizzorusso.

He discovered that many artisans who made the cement floor tiles, reset thick stone blocks for floors in the stables, fashioned new stone balustrades for the rooftop terraces and repointed the masonry for his project came from families who had helped to build and maintain *masserie* for generations.

“Those family traditions were disappearing but in the last few years there has been a renaissance because people know there is work for them,” D’Astore said.

To balance classical building details and the current owners’ collection of flea market finds and vintage Italian furnishings in other rooms, D’Astore added contemporary elements in the ‘new’ spaces he created.

“I wanted to make the loft-like living room in the stables very simple,” the architect said. The storage cabinet is deliberately made of inexpensive stained pine to suit those areas formerly intended for farmhands. Conversely, B&B Italia sofas, Artemide lamps and a custom

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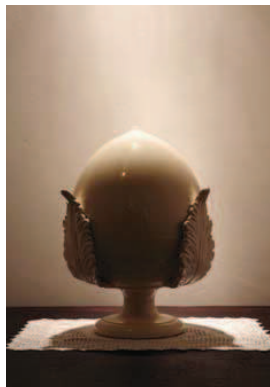
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“BUT EVEN THOUGH I USED IT IN A VERY DIFFERENT WAY, IT IS ALMOST IN THE SAME SPOT I FOUND IT,” THE ARCHITECT SAID, MARVELING AT THE **SERENDIPITOUS JUXTAPOSITION.**



dining table made from a single teak plank that seems to float on its light-colored wood base add a modern elegance. Triangolo chairs around the table have now become a signature choice in D’Astore’s other *masserie* interiors as well.

As if to constantly remind visitors that the light-filled living space once housed farm animals and olive harvests, D’Astore fashioned an abandoned olive press into a fireplace mantel.

“But even though I used it in a very different way, it is almost in the same spot I found it,” the architect said, marveling at the serendipitous juxtaposition.

He encountered another interesting detail when they started to make a door opening from the stables to the main house. “We found the words ‘Tytoniu Surowo Zabronione’ stenciled on the wall. I discovered it was Polish for “Smoking Strictly Forbidden,” D’Astore said, concluding that the villa was probably used as an armory when Polish troops were in Puglia during World War II.

“It is just one of Villa Pizzorusso’s many stories during its long life,” he added.

During Puglia’s hot, dry summers, Villa Pizzorusso must surely have been a fine refuge for soldiers sitting amid wheat fields, leafy olive groves and a walled orangerie filled with beehives for orange honey. The Polish garrison is long gone but for the new owners ancient *secolari* olive trees planted in enfilade outside the blossoming *masseria*’s gates still stand sentinel, offering shade.

