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Independent Hotelier of the World: Danilo Zucchetti

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By [Barbara Bohn](#) on 11/9/2020



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“He’s a gentleman first of all. He’s a signore, as you say in Italy, a gentleman.”

Danilo Zucchetti, managing director of the iconic Villa d’Este, certainly is a signore, as legendary hotelier Vincenzo Finizzola says. He’s also the patient but uncompromising caretaker of a property that dates to the 1500s, has been a hotel since the 1870s, and possesses the timelessness, effortless elegance and historical details that can only be copied elsewhere but never duplicated.

“A basic feature for a general manager of Villa d’Este is not to transform it into a hotel,” says Jean-Marc Droulers, former owner and general manager of the Cernobbio, Italy, property for many years. Instead, “(he) has to be faithful to the five centuries of its history.”

Zucchetti’s own philosophy harmonizes with that dictate: “Always evolve but never change.” For his years of dedication to the craft of the hotelier, from Four Seasons Hotels and Resorts in multiple countries, to his management of historic hotels in Italy, HOTELS is pleased to name Danilo Zucchetti, managing director of Villa d’Este Hotels, Independent Hotelier of the World for 2020.



“We cannot deny that the location we are in is supreme,” Danilo Zucchetti says of the Villa d’Este’s perch on Italy’s Lake Como. “But there is a lot to do with the intangibles that you manage to deliver.”

The Villa d’Este has 152 rooms and suites in two historic buildings and four villas on 25 acres on the shore of Italy’s celebrated Lake Como. In a typical year, it has 330 employees, and 2020 was supposed to break the revenue record set the previous year. But with Italy taking the early, brutal brunt of the COVID-19 pandemic, the opening was postponed to June, “with the intention to really go through this season as a sign of rebirth,” Zucchetti says. When regular guests returned, many commented that it was their best visit yet.

“Why is that?” he says. “We managed to keep normality, even by applying all the protections and everything.”

Guests have some new needs today since he joined the Lake Como hotel in 2005 as general manager (he was promoted to managing director in 2011). “The level of empathy requested now is higher than ever before,” Zucchetti says. “When you do something for the guests, they appreciate even more.”

A harmonious, carefree atmosphere defines Villa d’Este. “Even now the words I hear the most is that there’s a calm, despite the situation,” he says.

An Italian hotelier

That calm emanates from the affable, thoughtful Zucchetti himself. “He has this capacity to do things in the right moment, with the right attitude, with the right people,” says Finizzola, GM of the Four Seasons Milan from 1992 to 2015 and now GM at Bauer Hotels in Venice – where Zucchetti had been GM for three years earlier in his career.

Finizzola hired Zucchetti in 1993 for a front desk position and remained a sort of mentor and adviser as Zucchetti moved to cities including Berlin and Tokyo for Four Seasons. During his initial interview, Finizzola recalls telling himself, “This guy will have a great future.”

And on his own visits to the Villa d’Este, Finizzola says, “I saw that he got full respect from his employees”: friendly without being friends, instructing without arrogance or pontification. “There is authority and there is autorevolezza,” – the difference between snapping orders and leading with respect and assurance, he says. “You have to treat everyone with respect... I think deep in his heart, a little bit of Four Seasons is still alive.”



“(Zucchetti) has this capacity to do things in the right moment, with the right attitude, with the right people,” says Vincenzo Finizzola, who hired Zucchetti in 1993 at the Four Seasons in Milan.

Zucchetti’s formal career started with Four Seasons, which he says “wasn’t just a chain, it was the chain,” after attending hotel school in Switzerland. But his interest in hospitality was piqued early: Seven of 10 relatives on his mother’s side ran a restaurant or a small hotel, where he worked as a youth.

“Honestly, I was not thinking that was going to be my business, but with time I realized I had a true passion for this,” he says. “That’s how I started, basically, during the summers in this beautiful countryside in Vicenza, close to Venice.”

In Milan, he got a taste of luxury hotelkeeping under Finizzola. “For me it was really the best nurturing experience I could get, because opening 28 years ago in Milan, with the presence of Isadore Sharp instilling in everybody with his charismatic presence, saying, ‘It’s beautiful as it is, but now it’s all up

to you,” Zucchetti says. “Just those simple words make you understand. And of course, that is the time you absorb more. I was eager to absorb all this teaching.”

Zucchetti took the lessons from Four Seasons to Venice in 1999, when he became GM at the Bauer Hotel & Il Palazzo. “I was able to, without altering the individuality of the property, bring in the consistency,” he says. The move was a key part of his evolution as a manager, although he declines to get specific about his leadership style, which he says “has to adapt to the property you are in.”

Without a management company at the Bauer, he took a more “autocratic” approach to ensure that new standards were followed. With Villa D’Este, he was joining a company whose standards had been in place for decades.

“My role was more management style based on contribution,” Zucchetti says. “My priority was maintaining our identity, keeping what was the key of this successful property.” Always evolve, never change.

“He is autocratic every now and then,” says Ezio Indiani, Zucchetti’s predecessor at Villa d’Este and now GM of the Hotel Principe di Savoia, a Dorchester Collection hotel in Milan. “I think he’s very patient. I think that he’s very wise. He listens to people and he takes the time to take the decision. But then, yes, I’ve seen (him) in certain situations in which you’re needed to be, let’s say, tough.”

Indiani adds, “(Zucchetti) learned the dynamics of an international company. And then at the Bauer, he started to learn the dynamic of a small company, and he got the best of both to perform so well at Villa d’Este.”

“He has an extraordinary capacity of dealing with his own people at every level,” says Indiani. “He has been patient and very clever in selecting the right people to assist him.”

Maintaining excellence

“My definition (before the pandemic) was that luxury is not synonymous with ostentation, but it’s the opposite of mediocrity,” Zucchetti says. “You can have many definitions of luxury, but I think luxury is whatever you do with the excellent mindset. Everything needs to be excellent, which doesn’t mean opulence or ostentation.”

Especially now, it includes providing what people have been craving for months: time and space. “I think we are going back more to the analogical, slowing down the pace. That’s what I see as the need of the guests, to slow down the pace and to really appreciate the thread of time.” He sees himself as the caretaker of the property and its history.



Danilo Zucchetti's predecessor at Villa d'Este, says, "I think (Zucchetti is) very patient. I think that he's very wise. He listens to people and he takes the time to take the decision."

So does Droulers, whose family had owned the hotels since the early 1960s. "I thought the background of Mr. Zucchetti fit very well with the Villa d'Este atmosphere," he says, based on what he knew of Zucchetti's experience at the Bauer.

"He was very much keen to maintain the atmosphere of that older hotel, and to adapt to it instead of having the building adapt to his thinking of what a hotel should be... Of course, a hotelier needs to be extremely attentive. He has to have a keen eye. When he enters into a room he must understand at once what is going on, what is right, what is wrong. And I think that Mr. Zucchetti has that quality that his glance is at once attracted to the things which should be improved – even if they're small details."

The details help make a guest's stay at Villa d'Este "not exactly at a hotel but the private room of a hotel," says Droulers, who sold his shareholding in 2008 and ended his tenure as a CEO and part owner in 2011 after nearly 45 years with the hotel. He remains a board member.

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"A hotel should not compromise about its approach because if the hotel is successful it must be faithful to the crowd that goes to the hotel, and newcomers must fit into the crowd," Droulers says. "It's not the opposite, otherwise you'll change everything."

Indiani echoes that thought. "I used to meet clients that were 80 years old, telling me, 'I used to come here at the end of the Second World War when I was 20 years old with my parents. And since then,

every two, three years, I have to come back for a long weekend, because I've got so many fond memories.'"

The hotel has embraced modernity, however. Zucchetti says he balked initially at installing WiFi on the hotel's terrace – who wants to share that charming lake view with someone's Zoom meeting? – but gave in. However, "the priority is not to change the perception of the place," he says.

That WiFi comes in handy, though. Zucchetti, who is married with two teenage sons, conducted this interview over video conference from a sunny suite that is one of his favorites because a particular celebrity always stays there. Peering over his shoulder during the conversation was a portrait of 17th-century Spanish soldier. (After the interview, Zucchetti panned the camera of his computer out the window to show off the terrace and lake).

Timeless perception

If that soldier were visiting today, he might only recognize the main mansion, built in 1568 by a cardinal as a summer residence and converted into a hotel, along with another villa on the manicured grounds, in 1873. Today it and a sister property in Florence, the Villa La Massa, are family-owned and members of The Leading Hotels of the World; two other hotels are located in Como.

Villa d'Este arguably is ground zero for the luxury, unique history and sense of place that so many other hotels strive for. Historical gravitas, tasteful elegance, an affluent and influential clientele with famous names (from Franz Liszt to contemporary celebrities that Zucchetti declines to mention) requires a manager who can balance timeless appeal with the demands of contemporary guests.

"The timeless perception is also due to the location we are in. We cannot deny that the location we are in is supreme," Zucchetti says. "But there is a lot to do with the intangibles that you manage to deliver... Authenticity, I know, is a little bit abused in this era, because it's not easy to keep authenticity for a long time unless you really have a clear vision of the importance of this for your property."

That authenticity has helped the Villa d'Este maintain its once-in-a-lifetime aura. As Indiani says: "To be someone, you must have stayed at least a weekend in Villa D'Este."