

CIAO, PAOLO

Grace Cain takes a virtual voyage to Puglia to see the holiday home of Baxter's genial CEO *Paolo Bestetti* - it's the hottest ticket in town



“ Bestetti remembers feeling instantly enamoured with four aspects of Italy’s picturesque heel: the Baroque architecture, the food, the welcoming warmth that radiates from the Apulian people, and the light ”

Should you happen to be wandering the warm, sleepy seaside village of Nardò near Lecce in Puglia, you should try to avert your gaze from the intricate Baroque architecture and run your eyes along the tops of the time-worn *palazzos* that line the tangled streets. You may just spot the heads of more than 130 cacti peeking over the wall of one particular terrace and – behind them – Paolo Bestetti, the CEO of luxury furniture brand Baxter, relaxing with a book and a glass of wine beneath the buttery Italian sunshine. That is, if he doesn’t already have guests.

“I am in the centre of the village,” he explains. “My friends pass by, they see me on the terrace, and they say: ‘Hey, Paolo!’ And I say: ‘OK, come up and take an *aperitivo*, or we can cook something together.’” According to Bestetti, the result is usually a kitchen full of chattering neighbours mixing drinks or concocting something delicious to enjoy *all’fresco* as the sun traces time across the sky. “My wife is not always happy with me,” he chuckles warmly. “She gets nervous. But I always tell her that there is no need to worry. First, because we have a big wine cellar – and as long as our friends can take a glass of wine and some olives, they are happy. Second, because we know many good chefs! There’s no need for us to do anything. Someone will just start cooking in the kitchen, and the rest of us will help or just sit and talk. I think it’s really fun to use the house together in this way.”

It’s probably fortunate (for Bestetti’s wife, at least) that their Nardò home is mostly reserved for weekends and the summer months; otherwise, they might never get anything done. The rest of their time is spent in Milan, where Baxter has its headquarters. And it was actually thanks to his work that Bestetti first found himself in Puglia; he had opened a showroom there to test some of Baxter’s new designs and visited frequently in order to gauge the local opinion. He remembers feeling instantly enamoured with

four aspects of Italy’s picturesque heel: the Baroque architecture (which he describes as having an “incredible mystery”), the food, the welcoming warmth that radiates from the Apulian people, and the light. “It might sound strange, but the light in that part of the world is totally different... there’s something spectacularly charming about it,” he says. “I felt like I had found the place I wanted to retire to – or at least to relax in.”

Bestetti’s own warm-heartedness is palpable even through the medium of Zoom, so it comes as no surprise that he was attracted to the natural affability that he found in the south. “There is a special energy here. The people are very friendly. On one of the first occasions that I was in Puglia, I had to ask someone to show me the way to a restaurant because I was completely lost. She took one look at my face and said, ‘I’ll get my car, follow me and I’ll take you there.’” He laughs. “This is something that doesn’t happen in the north of Italy.”

That said, finding the right place to call home proved tricky because Bestetti is – by his own admission – “very fussy”. However, fate and his innate charm intervened when he struck up a conversation with the owner of a concept store and restaurant in Lecce. “It’s still one of my favourite places,” he smiles. “When I first visited, I got talking with the guy because I loved his store, and it turned out that he had just bought a Baxter couch for his daughter in Milan. He was the one who suggested that I go to this village of Nardò.”

Bestetti claims that he saw 100 houses before he came across his 19th-century *palazzo*. One night, as he sat on the roof and gazed over the many Baroque church spires that pierce Nardò’s skyline, he realised that this was his home. “I liked the energy, the views, the surroundings, the way that the light filled the house... I could just imagine how it could be a home.”

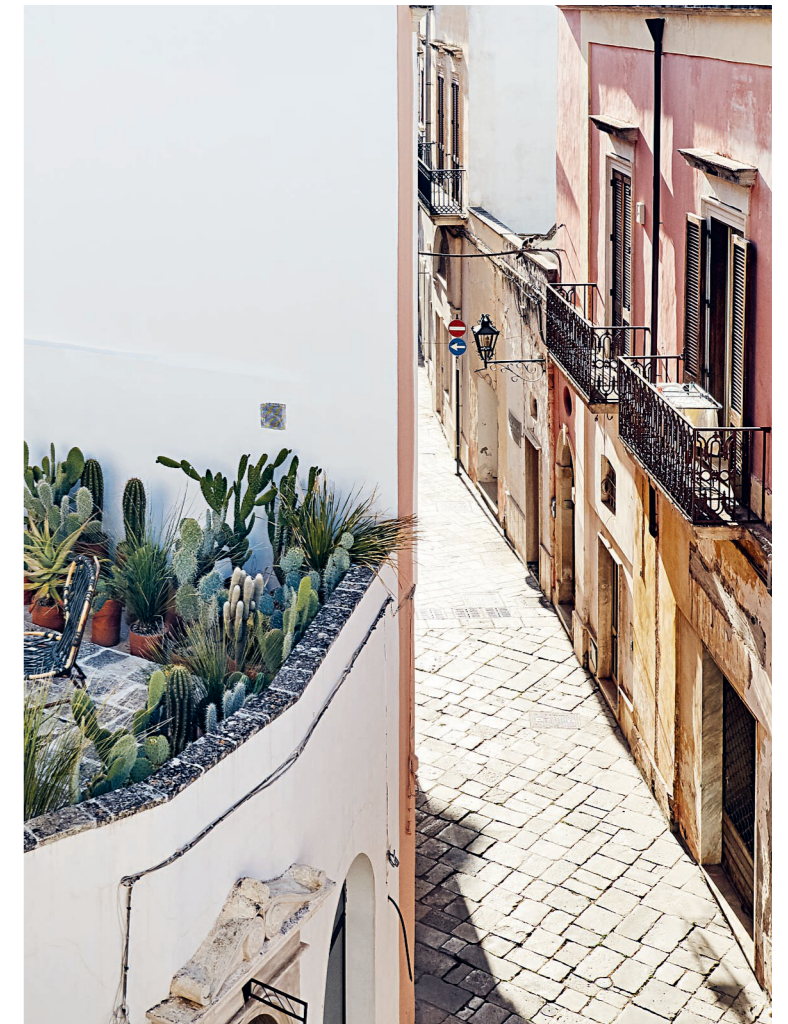
‘Imagine’ is the operative word here. This was an old building, and it was going to take some work before Bestetti’s Apulian dream could become a reality. He enlisted the help of Claudio Colaci, a local architect who Bestetti felt would be respectful to the building’s history. >



Bestetti restored the house's original walls, revealed to him and his team during the cleaning process



This page: The sun-soaked terrace's relaxed dining area, dotted with a healthy cactus collection, makes the perfect spot for impromptu visits from friends and neighbours. Opposite page: Bestetti's 19th-century Puglia palazzo is in the centre of Nardò, overlooking a quiet village street

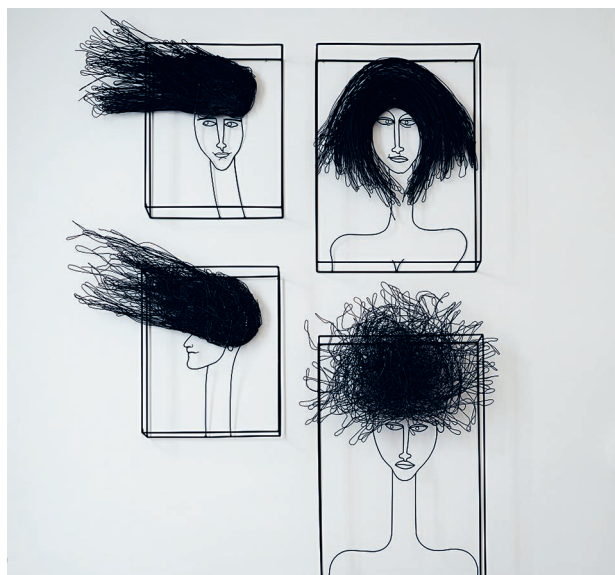


“Old houses have one problem: there is no light. But Claudio came up with the idea of putting big windows in strategic points, so that the sun can shine into the house all day,” Bestetti recalls. “It was fantastic. That was really the first step in the renovation.”

The entire process was supervised by Stefano Guidotti, the director of Baxter's creative department, who played a key role in enhancing the building's existing beauty, while also transforming it into Bestetti's ideal space. “I wanted this house to feel very relaxed, so I can walk through the door and immediately feel as though I am on vacation,” he says. “You can see how the colours are all very calm.” However, even that palette is partly the result of a happy hiccup of fate. It was only after Bestetti and his team began the cleaning process that they discovered half the house still had the authentic sandy beige and icy blue walls, as well as the original floors. “The workers told me that they would paint it!” he exclaims, in mild horror. “But I said, just clean, and leave it as it is. I will restore it completely. Do nothing, just clean.”

The result is a house in two parts. “One half is like a movie scene. The other is slightly more modern, but still respectful of the ambience, the surroundings and the origins of the building.” Given that Bestetti is in the business of interior design, it will come as no surprise to hear that decorating was the fun part. “We spent a lot of time exploring flea markets and antique shops,” he grins. “It was a challenge to make the final selection!” It was important to Bestetti that the house felt representative of the surrounding area, so he and Guidotti kept their searches local. After finding an artisanal business specialising in custom-made cement tiles, Guidotti designed a collection that is completely unique to the house. In the bathroom, the tiles zigzag across the wall in fractured monochrome, producing >

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a striking contrast with the recovered church basin that acts as a sink. Guidotti also helped to design the 130 vases that provide homes for Bestetti’s extensive cactus collection. “I have many,” says Baxter’s CEO, somewhat stating the obvious.

In Bestetti’s labyrinthine home, it feels as though every turn of a corner puts you in sight of a different Baxter classic. Upholstered in custom fabric, the streamlined Housse Mono sofa in the living room is the first in a long list of pieces by Paola Navone for Baxter; the Innsbruck bed, as well as the strikingly intricate Gallipoli light in the kitchen, are all Navone’s work. Antonino Sciortino is also well represented – in the dining room’s distinctive metal-rod Gibellina Vestita chairs, which are watched over by a selection of his playful wire wall sculptures. “But it’s not only Baxter!” Bestetti states. “My dining-room table is from Porro, and I have a Déshabillé armchair by Draga & Aurel.”

In some cases, Bestetti’s possessions are relics of his business travels. “It’s like an obsession. I buy things whether I think I’ll use them or not. I like to have a physical library of my trips.” Thus, the woven plates from Zimbabwe that hang on the white-washed walls of the kitchen, waiting for Bestetti’s neighbours to drop in for a drink.

All of which takes us back to the terrace, Bestetti’s favourite part of his Nardò home. “Sometimes, I just like to lie down on the sofa and read, or just look at the stars.” Of course, as we now know, quiet moments in this particular little corner of Puglia are not always easy to come by – but Bestetti wouldn’t have it any other way. “There is really only one thing you need to know about my home,” he says. “And that is: if you happen to pass by our door, you can just ring the bell and there will always be a glass of wine waiting for you.” Meet you there? □

From top: Antonino Sciortino’s wire wall sculpture overlooks proceedings in Bestetti’s dining room; woven plates from a visit to Zimbabwe adorn a wall of the kitchen; the terrace, Bestetti’s favourite place in the house