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## Building 'Authentic' From the Ground Up

SD Hotels concentrates on wellness for its guests, giving them a 'good life.'

By SHEILA MARIKAR

At the breakfast buffet of Borgo Egnazia, a high-end resort in Fasano on Italy's eastern coast, there's a carafe of a substance unlikely to be found at any similar luxurious hotel elsewhere in the world: *stren di latte e cacao*, or milk serum and cocoa. It looks like hot chocolate but tastes like seaweed, pungent enough that it might trigger the gag reflex of a consumer more accustomed to starting the morning with something from Starbucks. A centuries-old breakfast staple in this part of the world, the drink is essentially a protein shake made with the whey that remains after milk has been curdled and strained.

"We're working on encouraging more protein at breakfast, and milk serum is a way to do that without going to eggs," Aldo Melignano, the proprietor of Borgo Egnazia, said one day this spring, pitched forward on a white couch in one of the property's many breezy white porticos.

Melignano, 41, is the son of a local landowner, all the Adriatic in the Puglia region (or, in Latin, *Apulia*). Mr. Melignano observed that most such establishments had one conspicuously healthy restaurant, and then a number of venues with more indulgent fare.

"In our case," he said, "everything is the healthy restaurant."

Eating virtuously means something different to everyone. In the land of wine and pasta, Mr. Melignano, 40, has created a hospitality venture that is capitalizing on hype around two distinct travel trends: wellness and "authentic" experiences.

His company, SD Hotels, turns traditional Puglia farmhouses into resorts that focus on fitness (Apulian folk dance classes in 400-year-old olive groves) and otherworldly spa treatments (one massage uses "volcanic water") in addition to traditional Italian fare (handmade orecchiette pasta; octopus in a broth of just-plucked tomatoes). Mr. Melignano now oversees five properties in the region.

"We live a good life in this part of the world," Mr. Melignano said. "I never thought specifically, 'O.K., we need to do this because wellness will be a trend' or 'We need to procure our foods from farms because it's going to be trendy to buy local.' It was just the way we did things."

"The lifestyle here, reconnecting to nature, simple things — it's coming back; it's what we do," he continued. "Maybe we're just in the right place at the right time."

Mr. Melignano also owns San Domenico House, a 19th-century hotel in London's Chelsea neighborhood, and a bistro nearby, as well as an Apulian tourism company and a golf course. Of all his properties, Borgo Egnazia is the largest, with three public pools, a village square out of a Hollywood location scout's dreams and nearly 200 rooms. They start at around \$500 per night, while the fancier villas can cost well over \$2,000.

Celebrities like Madonna have been won over by the resort's imitation medieval facades and farmhouse-chic interiors, an effect best described as "Game of Thrones" meets Restoration Hardware. Justin Timberlake and Jessica Biel married on the site. SD Hotels, which last year had revenues of about \$80 million, started with the family's summer home, *Masera San Domenico*, down the road from Borgo Egnazia.

"I would board a train with eight to 10 friends the minute the school year ended and come down there," said Mr. Melignano, who grew up in Rome.

In 1989, testing the region's potential for international tourism — the beaches of Puglia remained relatively undiscovered by the Continent's hordes of holidaymakers — his mother, Maria, decided to turn the home into a hotel.

Mr. Melignano took a year off between high school and college to help. "We saw a lot of examples around the world of former manor houses and manor houses that had been converted into hotels, especially in England and Scotland," he said.

The problem: finding staff members fluent in both English and the whims of affluent guests. He ended up hiring a handful of countrymen from the staffs of high-end Italian restaurants in London and New York.

*Masera San Domenico* remains one of



SD Hotels' more exclusive properties — young children are prohibited, and only guests may dine in the restaurant. That is in part because of an ultraexclusive resident: Mrs. Melignano, 71, who lives there in a 15th-century watchtower once used to guard against the Ottomans.

After attending Cass Business School at City University of London, Mr. Melignano worked briefly in investment banking, then received an M.B.A. from the University of Pennsylvania's Wharton School. He got a job as an assistant to the chief financial officer of Ian Schrager's Morgans Hotel Group, which led to a latter position in the business development department. He eventually ran the division.

Back home, his mother's hotel and a second property were taking off, and in 2007, Mr. Melignano left Morgans to take control of the family business.

At least one old boss is betting on him. "The way he has the finger on the pulse of the world traveler is unique," said Sherry Harris, a former chief strategy officer of

Tip, the bay by the old city gate in Monopoli, Italy on the country's eastern coast. Below that, the resort Borgo Egnazia. Above, Aldo Melignano, the proprietor of Borgo Egnazia. Right, two of the resort's pools. Above that, a chef in a restaurant there.

Morgans Hotel Group.

Borgo Egnazia was built on land originally owned by Mammoli and intended as an air base.

"In 2010, we saw the activity going on on that flat piece of land, and he said he was building not a hotel but a town," said Alvin Nebuloni, an owner of the Apulian winery *Masera La Vell*. "We thought he was crazy, frankly."

Some of Mr. Melignano's other innovations may arrive more conservative business owners as crazy as well. He encourages the local guides employed by his tourism company, *Indigenes*, to bedazzle their clients and invite them for meals at their homes or swims off secluded beaches.

"We like to think of them as your best friend in Puglia," he said.

Every guest at Borgo Egnazia is paired up with one, and the guides, mostly female, roam through the corridors of the property in gauzy white dresses.

Mr. Melignano plans to open more hotels in Italy before expanding farther abroad — perhaps the Caribbean, South America, even as far as New Zealand.

He has the United States in his sights as well.

"We're fantasizing about doing a farm- or ranch-style place that would take some of the elements from Borgo Egnazia and reinterpret them," he said, "maybe in the American West."