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VILLA RENIELLA

Debbie Travis Epicurean Dream

by **Marie-Josée Paradis**
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Way before HGTV, Property Brothers, Mike Holmes and Brian Baeumler TV shows, there was Debbie Travis. She made a name for herself as the “Queen of renovations” and “Pioneer in Lifestyle Television”. She and husband Hans Rosenstein own WAM, a TV production company based in Montreal. Debbie Travis' name is synonymous with impeccable taste and good life. Through her very successful career with 5 television series, a successful home product line at Canadian Tire and Sears, 9 books and a syndicated weekly newspaper column, Travis managed to turn decorating into a lifestyle.

I had the chance to catch-up with Travis this summer, between two of her Tuscan retreats.

She told me that her dream of owning a property in Italy started many years ago after filming an episode of one of her TV series there. The Tuscan dream evolved into not only owning a home but sharing it with likeminded women - now men are also included in some retreats - so in 2008 the search was on.

A year later, still with no property, during a speech in Vancouver she said: “I want to invite women out to spend a week with me at my villa in Tuscany”. Women responded: “Take me!” The next day, she was flooded with emails requesting to join her. However, the problem was that the villa was still just a dream... So, Travis flew to Italy, rented a large villa and hired a team of chefs, barmen, yoga instructors and a life coach. In 2009, she held her first retreat. It was a runaway success and the hunt intensified to find the right home to purchase. She found a ruin nearby and the four year renovation began; it would change her life forever.



THE PROPERTY

Villa Reniella was a run down, abandoned ruin; a 13th century tower and farm, sitting on 100 acres of olive groves located on the edge of a UNESCO National Heritage Site. The property is comprised of the main villa, the "fienile" (barn) and the "porcilaia" (pigsties). The neighbouring towns are Montepulciano and Pienza.

Initially, Travis hated it. "It was basically a pile of stone with trees growing through the buildings and chickens running around." However, her husband Hans was already in love with the estate, mostly for its breathtaking views over the magnificent valley. Jokingly, he said that if she didn't want to share this place with him, he would marry someone in the village up the hill. "The average age of those ladies is 86." Travis laughed! They went ahead and bought the property.

THE RESTORATION

Villa Reniella's renovation took over four years to complete and Travis spent as much time there as possible, sometimes months at a time.

None of the original material that could be salvaged was wasted. They recycled wood and stone from the old buildings. The original stone floors were so pitted from the cattle you couldn't put a chair on them, so they were replaced and used outside. Some of the wood was reinvented to create furniture. True to her designer signature, all rooms feature a splash of bold colour that adds personality, without overpowering its ancestral architectural features. This style she calls "Rustic Chic".

INTERIOR DESIGN

In five-star hotel style, all three buildings have been converted into 14 luxurious suites. Furnishings were purchased by Travis in a variety of antique markets across Europe and mixed with super contemporary Italian pieces. All suites are decorated with Designers Guild linens, wool mattresses and fitted with modern Italian bathrooms, stone floors and state of the art lighting. Every suite opens up onto its own private garden with views of the surrounding vineyards and olive groves.

STAYING AT VILLA RENIELLA

In 2015, the property was ready to welcome its first group. The "Girls Getaways" allow women to invest in themselves through hiking, biking, truffle hunts, cooking classes, yoga, and massages. The week also includes personal time with a life coach. Travis has an incredible local chef who prepares meals from her own vegetable garden and local organic produce. Copious amounts of Tuscan wine are also enjoyed.

However, Travis now offers various types of getaways. Other packages include Gourmet Weeks (for men and women), Corporate Retreats and even a Mind & Body week. Outside of the retreat season, you may experience la "Dolce Debbie" by renting this amazing property through Luxury Retreats. (www.luxuryretreats.com)





ORGANIC PRODUCTS FROM THE FARM

Travis is thrilled with her new farming endeavour. Villa Reniella produces Extra Virgin olive oil, lavender and rosemary oils - all 100 per cent organic, guaranteed free of any pesticides, chemical fertilizers and GMOs.

CERTIFIED ORGANIC OLIVE OIL

The certified organic, cold-pressed, extra virgin Tuscan olive oil is available for purchase online. I had the chance to personally taste this exquisite olive oil. I strongly recommend it!

"This liquid gold is the most glorious colour and is alive with complex flavours."

LAVENDER PRODUCTS

Planning to take advantage of the land and expand her crops, Travis found herself dreaming of a lavender field. She was inspired by the ones found in Provence, France whose climate is similar to Tuscany's. Thinking "Why not?", with her farmer Luciano, they planted about 20 rows of this fragrant and relaxing plant. The experience has been a success. Travis dries the plants, fills silk bags, and tucks them lovingly under pillows for her guests. The rest of the flowers are infused to create an organic body massage oil and essential oil.

ROSEMARY OIL

Rosemary oil is one of the latest additions to her organic farming products. She had discovered enormous bushes on the property and wanted to make good use of them. Besides its amazing taste, Travis tells me that rosemary offers some impressive health benefits, including help with dementia and inflammation; it also relieves muscle aches and pains, and is apparently good to prevent hair loss too.

WINE COLLECTION

Travis is a passionate and enthusiastic entrepreneur. A true epicurean herself, she was excited to tell me that next year, in her partnership with Pillitteri Wines, she will be launching a new wine, a Rosso di Montalcino, a Super Tuscan from her fine wine collection. She already offers a superb Pinot Grigio – delicious!

You can follow Debbie Travis' adventures in Tuscany on her Facebook, Twitter and Instagram pages.

Grazie Debbie. A presto!

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