

WORD OF MOUTH

THE THINGS WE CAN'T STOP TALKING ABOUT

A WORK OF ART

During the four-year renovation of Castello di Ugento, a 17th-century castle turned luxury hotel in southern Puglia, Baroque frescoes depicting Biblical and mythical scenes were restored, and its walled garden and orchard replanted. Page 19.



A GRAND REFORMATION

AN ITALIAN CASTLE IS NOW WELCOMING GUESTS

- In the past decade, Puglia's *masserie*, the simple farm estates turned stylish hotels, have been credited with luring travelers from the region's beaches and bringing them inland. The 17th-century Castello di Ugento, which reopened last month, borrowed the *masserie*'s historic conversion concept but cranked the luxury factor up a notch. Like so many of the best small hotels, Castello di Ugento, a 40-minute drive from Lecce through olive groves and vineyards, by definition,



Clockwise from far left: The grand staircase, added at the end of the 17th century; remnants of the original tower connected to the castle; the table set for lunch with antique silverware.

is a labor of love—and in this case the product of a major life change. Four years ago, the former Pepsi CEO Massimo Fasanella d'Amore di Ruffano was tired of the punishing pace of international business, and decided, along with his partner, Diana Bianchi, to start a new project—reviving his family's 374-year-old castle, which had gone unused for 33 years. So he wrangled a team of Italian artists, architects, and craftsmen, who feverishly restored the property, replacing old *carparo tufaceo* stones that had been worn down over centuries of use, adding a state-of-the-art cooking school, and fixing the expansive L-shaped balcony that overlooks the castle's eponymous town. The couple converted the space into nine minimal guest rooms with white *pietra leccese* walls and local ceramics (they live on-site, close enough to prepare the guests' espresso each morning and discuss the finer points of Salento's Baroque period with them during strolls through the walled garden). The centerpiece of the renovations, however, is the downstairs salon's ceiling, with 17th-century frescoes of figures and scenes from Greek mythology and the Bible whose gold cherubs and landscapes were meticulously restored by hand by a team of six who worked every day for 14 months straight. Though Massimo and Diana did exercise restraint at times, leaving the castle's original walls untouched in parts of the same frescoed room, a deliberate contrast with the rich hues of the antique oil paintings that are hung there. Throughout, there is an unmistakable sense of place, most noticeable in the way Puglia's clean, bright sunlight illuminates the pale blue-and-white palette, the very same one that Massimo's ancestors used all those centuries ago.

GIANLUCA LONGO ♦

Minimal furniture in a salon on the first floor, or piano nobile, emphasizes the castle's restored 17th-century frescoes.

