

By Grace Cain / Photographer James Merrell

Bulgari's creative director *Lucia Silvestri* tells how she found her dream pied-à-terre in southern Italy and restored it with love



Postcards from Puglia

From her sun-filled studio in Rome, Lucia Silvestri is reflecting on how much she has missed travelling over the past 18 months. “I especially can’t wait to come back to London,” she says, in her warm Italian-accented English. I peer over my laptop screen at the thick, heavy rain that has been pummeling my rather sad London-based window for what feels like a lifetime. Personally, I think I’d much rather be in Italy.

Silvestri is the creative director of Bulgari, but it’s clear from the moment she starts talking that her connection with this storied Italian brand runs much deeper than a title. Considering she’s worked there for the entirety of her adult life – more than 40 years – perhaps this shouldn’t come as a surprise. “I feel so close to gems. They are in my blood. My life is very colourful, as you can see.” Here, she gestures to the walls around her, which are covered in vibrant designs for Bulgari’s latest collection, Magnifica. “I’m so excited about this one, because it’s a tribute to all the women of the world. We are so inspired by women; our designers are all women and (of course!) I am a woman, the creative director of this beautiful company.”

A life intertwined with a brand – even one as irresistibly glamorous as Bulgari – certainly wouldn’t be for everyone. Of course, Silvestri (her wrists glittering with bracelets, her neck circled by gemstones) is perhaps more passionate than most in her approach to work. “I love Rome, I love being Roman and I love jewels,” she enthuses. “But sometimes when I have had a long or stressful week, I feel the need to escape the city and relax in the right way.”

For Silvestri, that way is Puglia. Tucked into the heel of Italy’s boot, around five hours by car from her home, this rustic little peninsula feels a million miles away from the bustle of Rome and the Bulgari studio. “It’s a very special place,” she says. “I discovered it quite recently, in 2013, when one of my best friends invited me to stay in her *trullo*.”

For the uninitiated, *trulli* (the plural of *trullo*) are charming historic homes with thick limestone walls and conical roofs that look – as Silvestri poetically phrases it – “like something from a fairy world”. The most intriguing aspect about these dwellings is that they are unique to a picturesque slice of Puglia known as the Valle d’Itria. They are also laden with history, some of them dating back as far as the 14th century. And when Silvestri arrived at her friend’s *trullo*, she was immediately and utterly enthralled.

“I fell in love with the land straightaway,” she recalls. “I always compare it to the way that I work with gems, because I like to be able to feel their energy – and from the moment that I first arrived in Puglia, I could immediately feel that same positive force.” When Silvestri discovered that the owners of a nearby property were looking to sell, she wasted no time in arranging a visit. This particular home away from home had been in the same family for generations, and belonged to a woman in her nineties. “She had spent her childhood there with all her brothers and sisters – a family of 11 people! In such a small home!” Silvestri shakes her head in disbelief. “But she told me that they had all been so happy and grateful to grow up there, and she wished me the same joy.”

At this point, Silvestri holds up her phone to show me a photo that she took of her *trullo* just after she purchased it. “When I discovered this *trullo*, it was immediately love,” she smiles fondly. “It was just so cute.” I squint at the dilapidated pile of crumbled bricks on the screen. Half ruined, it looks like something from a completely different world to the charming structure you see in the photos here.

Silvestri may have been smitten with the place, but she was under no illusions as to the complexity of the renovation process ahead. She also felt strongly that she should seek help from someone who had an intimate understanding of the local countryside, not only because of her own spiritual connection to Puglia, but because all *trulli* are protected under strict laws enforced by the Italian government. Fortunately, she found the >

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perfect person: Bepi Povia. “I consulted a few different architects before closing with Bepi,” Silvestri recalls of teaming up with the local architect and interior designer. “When I finally found him, we immediately started to talk about nature and the energy of Puglia. I discovered that he is not only an expert landscape architect but also a very spiritual person, and I immediately felt that he was the right man to help me. He understood that I wanted to leave the original terrain as untouched as possible.”

Of course, refurbishing such a stringently protected building was never going to be easy; indeed, Silvestri’s *trullo* is just 20 minutes by car from Alberobello, a town of more than 1,000 *trulli* that has been designated a UNESCO World Heritage Site. The process was inevitably a long and complicated one, and the fact that Silvestri’s schedule at the time required frequent travel made it even more difficult. That’s where Povia came in. “Bepi was very important for maintaining contact with the local authorities and ensuring we had all the right permissions,” says Silvestri.

Ultimately, she just ended up adding two small rooms – both much more modern than the original *trullo* – with the exterior largely preserved. Given that the entire process took more than five years, was it really worth it? “Of course!” Silvestri’s face breaks into a warm smile. “I’m very happy with the result. I have kept the interiors very simple and relaxed, with natural tones and materials. I wanted it to be a contrast with my home in Rome – and as I said, my life in Rome is very colourful!”

Silvestri has also stayed loyal to the Puglian landscape with her choice of furnishings. “Some of the first pieces I bought for the *trullo* were terracotta vases from Grottaglie, a nearby village that has been producing some of the region’s most beautiful ceramics for centuries,” she recalls. “Just before I finished the *trullo*, I spent a great deal of time exploring local antique markets and stores, so I could furnish the space in an authentic way.”

This all feeds into the dream Silvestri built: a beautiful departure from the vibrant, ornate worlds of Rome and Bvlgari. “It’s true, it is a contrast,”



From top: Lucia Silvestri’s rural oasis is filled with “natural tones and materials”, in harmony with the surroundings; a bedroom with quite the view opens onto olive orchards



Courtesy of Acqua di Parma, Jars and La DoubleJ

she acknowledges. “Because I want to completely escape and have time for myself. I do also love to visit Puglia with my mum (she’s in love with my *trullo*!) or with my best friends, because we can just relax and spend time together. But sometimes it’s important for me to visit alone.”

Judging by the way that Silvestri describes her Puglian home, it seems like the perfect place to enjoy your own company. “It’s very quiet,” she says. “Sometimes all you can hear are the birds singing over the breeze.” Her days in Puglia are often spent simply enjoying the *trullo* and the enchanting views beyond. “I am surrounded by greenery. All I can see are the rooftops of the other *trulli*. If the weather is beautiful, I will just sit and read by the pool all afternoon.” Surely a sojourn in such picturesque countryside must do wonders for creativity? “Yes, although I can find inspiration anywhere,” Silvestri shrugs. “For my jewellery designs, I often look to flowers, nature and trees, so in that way Puglia is perfect. But for me, the most important thing is having a place where I can rest.”

Silvestri is, however, quick to emphasise that her love for this unique part of Italy extends beyond the walls of her home. “There are so many beautiful places to discover in Puglia,” she says, a little wistfully. She highlights Ostuni (or ‘The White City’ as it is often known), a labyrinthine collection of whitewashed buildings that overlook the sapphire waters of the Adriatic Sea; and Cisternino, a postcard-perfect little town with thousands of years of history. Then there is Locorotondo, a picturesque jumble of *trulli* and baroque grandeur that keeps watch over the vineyards and olive groves in the valley below; and the bustling city of Lecce, where visitors can sit at one of the many cafés and watch the locals go about their business. “Every



time I visit Puglia, I discover something new,” says Silvestri. “And it’s not only the incredible places – it’s the gorgeous food! The fresh tomatoes, the mozzarella... it’s the best cuisine in Italy.”

The best food in Italy? That is high praise indeed. Surely that would be enough to tempt anyone to make a permanent move? “Even though I love my *trullo*, I couldn’t live there all the time,” Silvestri says, shaking her head. “I’m Roman. I would miss my city too much. However, Puglia and the Valle d’Itria... there is nowhere else in the world like it. It really is very special.” □

From left: With breathtaking views of villages and vineyards, one of Silvestri’s favourite spots to read is by this hilltop pool, set just above the trullo; featuring original stone flooring, custom banquettes provide a stylish resting place in the family room

A TASTE OF ITALY



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