

WROUGHT WITH PLEASURE

by Kathleen Nicholson Webber

Don't expect a Tuscan to strike a deal at a sleek boardroom table; leave that to the Milanese. After all, Tuscany is known for a slower pace and a respect for traditions — so if you have come to talk business, pull up a chair by the terracotta-topped iron table and accept a steaming espresso.

Entrepreneur Greg Evans recalls scenes like this vividly. After years of traveling to Tuscany with his wife Suzanne, he felt he wanted to be a part of that culture and to bring a taste of it back home to the United States. And after much negotiation (in the traditional fashion, of course) the couple is doing just that, importing a paragon of fine Tuscan craftsmanship: hand-wrought Caporali furniture. The Evanses are the owners of Princeton, NJ-based Tuscan Hills, a three-pronged business empire that rents and sells Italian villas, that manages remodeling of the villas if needed and that offers hard-to-find, Italian, hand-crafted pieces to furnish these luxe estates (or your average Bucks County stone house for that matter).

It all began back when the Evanses decided to renovate an old farmhouse and barn in the Italian countryside. *Il Granaio* (the granary) had been vacant for 75 years, but the couple learned quickly that villa restoration has become a booming industry, as new construction outside major Italian cities is prohibited.

The completed project has a traditional Tuscan flavor but all of the modern conveniences, and the rooms are filled with rustic, but innovative Caporali furniture. After the arduous renovations, the Evanses were schooled in the vernacular of building codes in the region, and they had a Rolodex full of craftspeople — including contacts with the Caporali family in Santa Mama. The Evanses were so captivated by the Caporalis' work that they wanted to begin importing it to the United States. But it took several phone calls and two meetings before they could even get a look at the catalog, so protective were the owners of their designs.

To the first get-together, Evans brought a Tuscan interior designer along for support. "If it was a Roman designer they might not have talked to me," Evans recalls. "It would be like me taking a New York designer to a meeting with a Vermont craftsperson." The two camps sat around a classic iron table in front of the fireplace in the showroom. "Of course, during our meeting, we had two or three espressos, brought to us by Fiorella Caporali. We talked



extensively about the American market, the situation with the exchange rates and also about their vision for the company's growth. They wanted to know a lot about me, of course, and why I wanted to work with them, how I would market the product — and when I could return with my wife to stay with them in their villa!"

After a while, principal Enzo Caporali took Evans on a tour of his workshop, where the designer/craftsman demonstrated how the iron is heated and forged. This method is one that has not changed since 1885, when Enzo's grandfather Lorenzo Caporali opened a small workshop in the town of Santa Mama, Italy, forging tools and utensils. Later, he expanded his successful business to include artwork, gates and eventually furniture. The business is still in the family, and now 16 full-time craftspeople make the furniture using the same techniques first developed over a century ago — from forging the iron to sculpting and welding the brass ornamental balls that adorn the beds.

Inspired by the Renaissance as well as the Art Deco period, Caporali designs are what Evans calls "classic Tuscan," but always with an element that makes them look new. Evans, whose own villa contains enough of their wrought iron to fill a showroom, notes, "Real wrought iron is very rare. Most of what is out there is cast iron, which has welded seams. With wrought iron, the joints are heated, a hole is poked to fit two pieces together and then they are melted together."

Because of the painstaking design and production process, volume is low, but the company is looking to expand its production facility in Santa Mama to accommodate the U.S. market. One bed can take 40 to 50 days to hand-make, hence the retail price of \$2,000 to \$6,000. A small, wall-mounted coat hook is \$150, while a curvy, modernist rocker with a leather sling goes for \$4,100. There are consoles, benches and beds, as well as dining, bedside



THREE GENERATIONS OF CAPORALIS KEEP THE TUSCAN TRADITION ALIVE.



and coffee tables. While some pieces are grand in their designs, others are so in their scale. The Baldacchino canopy bed requires a 9½ foot ceiling to house its whimsical cupola.

Last December, Evans opened a showroom on Nassau Street in Princeton and filled it with Caporali pieces as well as Venini mouth-blown art glass, Busatti linens and textiles, Deruta ceramics, Arnolfo di Cambio crystal, wood Pieracci chairs and furniture from Mobili Paganelli. "We only import home goods that are made by hand using the original techniques from small, family-run businesses and that have never been sold in the U.S. before," says Evans, who is slowly getting the word out about Caporali state-side. The Evanses are placing Caporali in designers' showrooms as far away as San Francisco and will soon open in design centers around the country.

As Evans talks about his relationship with the Caporalis, he produces a Champagne cork signed by the two businessmen. "This was one of our contracts. We shared a long, two-hour lunch with our families in their beautiful villa filled with Caporali furniture." No wonder Evans wanted to bring that lifestyle home with him.

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