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Rome - February 5, 2007

ROBERTO E. WIRTH: BORN A HOTELIER

By Lucy Gordan

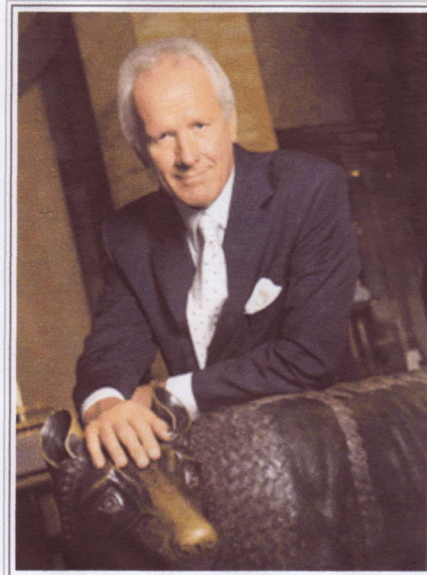
For well over a century the Wirth and Bucher families have left their distinct mark on the hospitality sector, owning and running their hotels in Switzerland, Egypt, and Italy. A Gemini, Roberto E. Wirth, President and General Manager of The Hassler Hotel in Rome, was born in Rome in late May 1950. He is the oldest of Oscar and Carmen Bucher Wirth's two sons

In November 2005 the magazine Hotels awarded Wirth the "Independent Hotelier of the World 2005" prize, which his mother had won in 1992. A few months later, in February 2006, the Mayor of Rome, Walter Veltroni, awarded him the "Il Campidoglio" prize in economics for Wirth's success as an independent hotelier in the present hotel world dominated by chains, as well as for his tenacity in overcoming a serious physical handicap: deafness from birth.

LG: You are the fifth generation of your family to be hoteliers and the second to be the owner of The Hassler. For over fifty years now The Hassler has been considered worldwide to be one of the best, if not the absolute top, hotel in Rome. What's the secret of your family's success?

RW: My mother's savoir-faire and the loyalty of our American clients. Before World War II The Hassler was not a luxury hotel. No room had a private bath. At the end of the War, Eisenhower requisitioned the building as the Headquarters of the US Army. Afterwards my father did major remodeling, putting bathrooms and air-conditioning in each room. Soon the ex-soldiers returned as our guests.

Another turning point was my parents' marriage in 1949. My mother was an American. She took charge of public relations. To be precise my mother was a New Yorker, not an American. New Yorkers are a unique type of American. She grew up in New York, but went to university in Switzerland because her parents were Swiss.



Lobby of The Hassler



Palm Court Garden



Double room

The secret of our long-term success is that The Hassler is still privately owned. It belonged to my parents and now to me. It's not part of a chain. We offer personalized service. Our guests feel at home here. For example, a world-famous British rock star told me that the wallpaper in the St. Peter's suite was the same as in his home. So each time he comes back, he feels as if he has never left home.

LG: What are the essential qualities for being a top hotelier?

RW: Many of my guests return every year and they want to see me. My daily presence here at the

hotel is a must. My guests have to feel at home. Maintaining their privacy is also a must. I always have to be gracious and try to establish a personal rapport with my guests without invading their privacy. I treat them in the same way I'd treat a visiting friend, not as clients, paying attention to their personal tastes and needs. That's why they come back every year. I treat every guest with the same courtesy. Customer satisfaction is very important. A top hotelier also has to have an open mind, to renovate the rooms and update the hotel's amenities.



Penthouse



Salone Eva, one of The Hassler's dining rooms

LG: Isn't The Hassler one of the few luxury hotels still to be family-run?

RW: Yes, as far as I know The Hassler is unique. The other world-famous luxury hotels around the world are mostly part of a chain or run by managers, not by the owner. My cousin, Gianfranco Bucher, on my mother's side of the family, partially owns and runs the Villa Serbelloni on Lake Como. Both my grandfathers and many of my great-uncles owned and ran luxury hotels: The Palace in Milan, the Hotels Quirinale, Eden, and Victoria all three in Rome, The Regina Palace in Stresa.

LG: When you travel where do you like to stay?

RW: In hotels in the same category as The Hassler, to update myself on possible innovations to introduce here.

LG: Where do you like to go on vacation?

RW: Ever since I was a little boy I go to a little town called Flims in the German-Swiss Canton of Grigioni. It's the only place where I can relax and get away from it all, where nobody bothers me or interferes with my peace-of-mind.

LG: When your father died in 1968, your mother Carmen Bucher Wirth ran The Hassler alone for many years... Tell me about your mother. Was it difficult to work for her?

RW: Neither my mother nor my father, not even on his deathbed, ever encouraged me to become the director of this hotel. They always thought my brother Peter would and should follow in their footsteps. Since I was born a deaf-mute, they thought I should become an artist. That way I could communicate through my artworks. I'm very open-minded, but I'm stubborn. I wanted more than anything else to run The Hassler. This hotel is part of my DNA.

When my father died I was only 18 and my brother was two years younger, so my mother took over. She didn't believe me when I told her that my ambition was to run The Hassler. She preferred my brother. Even, when I came back to Italy after years of experience working in hotels, I had to prove myself to her, earn her confidence. We argued a lot. After all those years in the United States, I was ahead of my time for Italy. She opposed my every proposal for innovations.

My mother was a PR natural. She was a hostess. The hotel was "her home". The clients were her guests. She loved to talk and she talked to everyone. Everyone enjoyed talking to her too. That's how the hotel became so famous. Even when she was elderly, she didn't want to be left out. She was stubborn as a mule, but so am I.

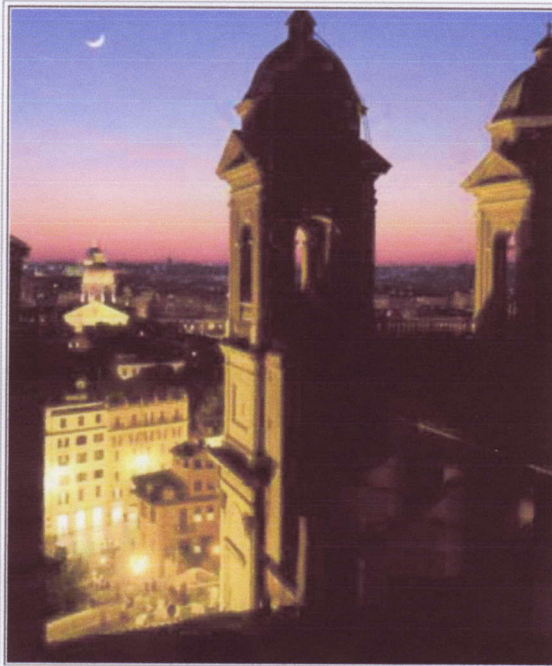
LG: So you were similar in character?

RW: Yes, I'm an extrovert as she was, but I'm also like my father. He was formal, precise, and serious. He was Swiss, born in Lucerne. His father was German, from Constance. He was much older than my mother. He didn't marry until age 58. He could have been my grandfather. My brother and I had to wear a jacket and tie every night at supper. My mother was a New Yorker through and through; my father could only have been German-Swiss.

LG: You were born a deaf-mute, yet you take personal care of all your guests. You must have had to continually jump over tremendous hurdles to overcome such a debilitating handicap...

RW: I've always been an optimist. I couldn't be anything else. I'm an extrovert in spite of my handicap. I would like to be a first-class communicator like my mother. I had to learn to lip read.

LG: Your father was German-Swiss and your mother American of German-Swiss origin; what country do you consider yourself from? What's your mother tongue? What other languages do you speak?



View from Imago, The Hassler's rooftop restaurant

RW: I think of myself as a Roman. I'm German-Swiss by blood, but I am deeply attached to Rome where I was born and have lived for 30 years now. I went to a special school in Milan for deaf-mutes and then to the Swiss school here in Rome before going to hotel school in Stresa and the Hotel School at Cornell University. My mother tongue is Italian. I also speak fluent English and some German. I lip read and know LIS and ASL (the Italian and American languages for deaf-mutes).

LG: You are very active in several organizations which help deaf-mutes, which ones?

RW: The Alexander Graham Bell Association for the Deaf and Hard of Hearing in Washington D.C., Gallaudet University, also in Washington D.C., and the National Technical Institute for the Deaf at the Rochester Institute of Technology in Rochester, New York.

LG: Tell me about the Roberto Wirth Fund?

RW: In 1992 Mercedes Bowman, my mother's sister, who didn't have any children of her own, honored me by founding the Roberto Wirth Fund. It's a charity which helps deaf children from their early infancy to age six, so that they can begin school on an equal footing with their classmates who have no hearing impediment. So far the results have been excellent. The Roberto Wirth Fund also trains young deaf people for the job market and assists them in finding jobs. The Fund also subsidizes a scholarship covering tuition and board for a young Italian at Gallaudet University. There all the students are deaf so our scholarship student, who may be deaf or not, studies there and then returns to Italy to teach deaf children.

LG: In 2002 you founded The International Wine Academy located just below here at the bottom of the Spanish Steps. How did you come up such an idea?

RW: I love Italian wines. For years now I've been constantly on the lookout for little-known, but top-quality, Italian wines. This project is very close to my heart. Over the years I've hosted many a wine tasting here at The Hassler, but it's not the right ambience for something on-going or permanent.

For a long time I had my eye on and hoped to purchase Via del Bottino no. 10 where Bertolucci filmed "The Siege" in 1998. The building had been abandoned for about 20 years. I was able to buy it in 1999 and three years later my dream of opening a school of wine-culture in Rome came true.

The International Wine Academy of Rome and Il Palazzetto, are my hobby, my jewel, my passion. Previously there was nothing of this kind in Rome. The students here are Romans, foreign residents of Rome, and people who come to Rome to study here on purpose. I wanted to offer courses about little-known, but top-quality Italian, but also not Italian wines, a kind of guidance in building up a special wine-lover's cellar.

The Academy has a restaurant, appropriately called "Aroma," and four bedrooms for guests, which together are called "Il Palazzetto," as well as classrooms, a library, and seminar space. The Director is Ian D'Agata. He is the only Italian expert to write for Steven Tanzer's International Wine Cellar, unanimously considered one of the three or four best magazines in this field.



Il Palazzetto

LG: Your favorite wines?

RW: For obvious reasons I can't give you a list of specific cellars and wines, but, in general I prefer Italian dry white wines, especially the ones that are still unknown or newly-discovered. Part of my pleasure is discovering new wines.

LG: Your favorite foods?

RW: Gnocchi alla romana, supplì, cannelloni, all types of pasta, and all typically Roman dishes. That's why the restaurant at the Palazzetto specializes in Roman dishes. But I can't omit my love of sweets.

I am the owner of Cicerone, the restaurant at the Imperial Hotel in Tokyo. I sent Francesco Aprea to set it up and be the Executive Chef. After three years in Tokyo I called him back to be Executive Chef here at The Hassler. Together we are the food-and-beverage consultants for Italian cuisine to two Italo-Swiss restaurants in India: "Vetro" at the Oberoi in Mumbai and "Travertino" at the Oberoi in New Delhi. I'm also food consultant for "Tintoretto" at the Park Hotel Bürgenstock. The first generation of hoteliers in my family built The Grand Hotel Bürgenstock. It was inaugurated in 1873. Over the years they also built the Park Hotel, the Palace Hotel, and the Hammetschwand, still today the highest chairlift in Europe, as well as the Bürgenstock railroad.



A room at Palazzetto (notice the trompe l'oeil curtains!)

LG: So you are a sweet-tooth?

RW: Yes, of course, especially of chocolate. Don't forget I'm Swiss.

LG: What are your hobbies?

RW: Jogging, so that I can eat chocolate.

LG: Please correct me if I'm wrong, but Il Palazzetto boasts a cellar of more than 400 different wines. The kitchen came later and food played second-fiddle. Isn't it usually the other way around, that wine accompanies the food, not food that accompanies the wine?

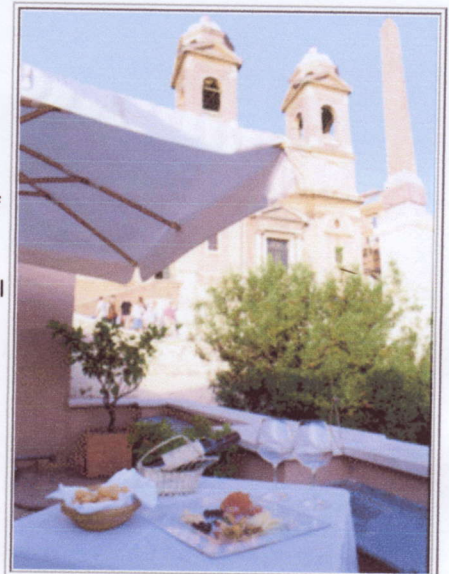
RW: Yes, you're right. That's usually true, but here we're talking about the International Wine Academy.

LG: At first "Aroma" was only open to the students or members of IWA. Last year you opened "Aroma" to the general public. Why this change?

RW: It's an example of "One thing leads to another." We had begun by preparing snacks for our students who stayed on after classes to chat. Then we started doing the same after our public tastings and conferences. From there we thought of giving classes on what foods to serve with specific wines. Afterwards we thought that our students, alumni who had become members of IWA, might like to come for an occasional evening. Since by last year we had registered over 2,500 members, we asked ourselves, "Why not open up to everyone?" A word of advice, however, reservations are a must because "Aroma" is small.

LG: What is the culinary philosophy of Antonio Martucci, the chef of Palazzetto?

RW: Most foods have existed for centuries. The creativity of a good chef depends on his or her ability to combine different ingredients. We are accustomed to finding the same combinations over and over again on menus. This is an obsolete concept. An ingredient should not be limited to a few uses in the kitchen.



Terrace of Palazzetto before the Spanish Steps

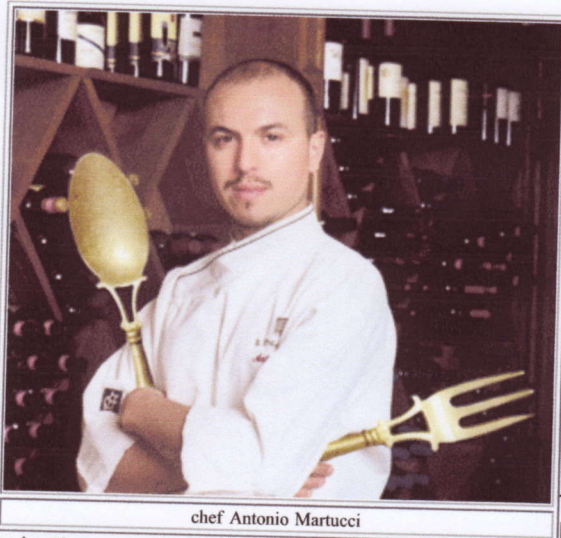
LG: His specialties?

RW: Pasta. It's his passion because pasta has been part of Latium's country kitchen, peasant food,

for centuries. Martucci is a magician in transforming gastronomic traditions into his own magical signature dishes. Paying very close attention to the quality of his ingredients, he gives a new and personal zip to classical local dishes.

LG: At the Palazzetto and at The Hassler the cellars are like the cuisine?

RW: Yes, although we stock wines from all over the world, I like to promote little-known Italian wines and at "Aroma" particularly local wines from Latium.



chef Antonio Martucci

LG: In December you opened a new roof-top restaurant at the Hassler; how is it different from its predecessor?

RW: I opened our new restaurant to celebrate The Hassler's 60th anniversary. Its name is "Imàgo" which in Latin means apparition, image, vision, dream. I chose this name because of the magnificent panoramic view of Rome — an unforgettable dream! The new elegant decor is also magical with mirrored walls and mirror-topped tables much farther apart than before for more privacy. We can seat only 60. We don't want to be a classical hotel restaurant where only guests staying at the hotel eat. We want the Roman community to eat at "Imàgo."

As I've said, I recalled Francesco Aprea from Tokyo to be our Executive Chef. He designed our brand-new kitchen where he cooks by electrostatic

induction. Another novelty is that a guest walking into "Imàgo" can see into the kitchen.

LG: Aprea's culinary philosophy?

RW: Good taste. Innovations with respect for tradition. A marriage of the senses: the eye and the palate.

LG: His specialties?

RW: Explosions of flavors. Refined Italian cuisine with a touch of Japanese and Aprea elegance.

LG: If you had not been born a hotelier, what profession would you have chosen?

RW: I would have followed my parents' advice and become an artist, a painter or a sculptor.

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