



# LA DOLCE VILLA

Original frescoes, grand fireplaces, enough room for three generations  
– a 16th-century home near Milan (with a few modern touches)

REPORT Emma J Page PHOTOGRAPHS Vojtek Ketz



# Home!

Erica Berla's bedroom, one of only two fully frescoed rooms in the villa. Opposite: sitting area in the guest bedroom

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Clockwise from this picture: the dining room with original painted wooden ceiling and frescoed walls; the front entrance; the rear of the villa; Erica Berla, left, and her sister Elisabetta



**W**hen literary agent Erica Berla first set eyes on a faded but historic villa an hour's drive from Milan, she had no idea that it would become the backdrop to every event in her family's life, from Christmases to weddings and graduations.

Her late father, Riccardo Berla, had been looking for a home where he and his wife could retire after a career spent in London, Barcelona, New York and his native Italy. It had to be large enough to accommodate his grown-up daughters, Elisabetta, Eleonora and Erica, as well as his passion: he wanted to create an English country garden. When he unearthed the 16th-century villa, with its grand rear portico and expansive gardens, he knew he had struck gold. But he had his work cut out securing it. "An elderly lady owned it, and she was very fussy about who she would sell to," recalls Erica. "My father visited her several times to persuade her that he was the man to undertake its restoration."



Erica and her siblings had mixed feelings about the property. "At first, we teased my father for being a bit of a megalomaniac, since the house seemed so grand with its frescoed ceilings," says Erica. "We also knew that he was buying it to pass on to future generations, so there was a great sense of responsibility attached to this new chapter."

But Riccardo, a director at Olivetti, known for its iconic typewriter designs, had a vision. He and his wife, Emilia, hired architect Enrico Caminoli to restore its intricate features, including grand fireplaces, original beams and wooden doorways, alongside frescoes believed to be painted by the artist Giovanni Battista del Sole, whose work can be seen in Saint Marta Chapel in nearby Varese. The villa's layout was simplified by knocking a warren of small rooms into fewer, larger spaces. Riccardo chose to rework the house into four interconnected living quarters, providing privacy for himself and each of his daughters. "And it has stayed like that for the past ➔



30 years because it works so well,” says Erica. “It means we each spend time here with our families and come together to cook, eat and hang out in the main house. My father loved to be sociable: every morning here started with a gathering in my parents’ bedroom.”

Furnished with pieces found on the couple’s travels abroad, the villa’s interior has an eclectic feel. “It’s a combination of old and new,” says Erica. “My mother was a devotee of the organic designs of architect Frank Lloyd Wright, yet nothing pleased her more than seeing a houseguest fall asleep on one of her English chintz sofas.” A Steinway piano is in the villa’s music room after residing in each of Riccardo and Emilia’s consecutive homes, including a 14th-floor apartment in Spain. Tiffany lamps mix with design classics by Alfonso Milá and Vico Magistretti, an antique writing bureau bought in England shares space with a classic

**Clockwise from top left: antique copper pans in the kitchen; the master bedroom; alfresco dining space on the rear terrace; the frescoed music room, with a Steinway grand piano and 18th-century chairs**

Italian daybed. Underpinning it all is a sense of homeliness, from the hung copper pans in the kitchen to the simple white linen tablecloth thrown over a vast antique dining table.

Recently, the sisters have redecorated. Family friend Marta Nowicka, interior architect and founder of Dom Stay and Live, has been part of this process, paring back each room, reworking furniture arrangements, decluttering and striking the balance between preservation and modernisation. “She looks at things through a different lens,” says Erica. “We had grown used to the bones of the house. For years, we hadn’t thought to light the fireplace

in the music room, but she reminded us how homely this place is and now it’s a ritual for us.”

The villa remains the beating heart of this family, just as Riccardo envisaged. Autumn weekends are spent cooking pumpkin risotto, minestrone and seasonal broths, as well as cycling and walking in the woods. And there are long afternoons spent unearthing their parents’ endless treasures. “The other day we found antique linens from my mother’s dowry as well as plans detailing each of my father’s plants – all of which still thrive in the garden,” says Erica. Now the siblings have children of their own, and some of those have families, too. “My parents would be delighted to see their great-grandchildren enjoying this house,” Erica reflects. “The keys have been passed to a new generation.” ■

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