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Hotel owner Santiago Bebianno



A Brazilian boutique hotel

BY MICHELA BARONE LUMAGA

Casas Brancas is an ever-evolving architectural and design experiment which has been continuously modified and perfected by its owners, the Bebianno family. Located in the heart of Buzios, a former fishing village 2 hours from Rio de Janeiro, Casas Brancas was founded by Alfonso Bebianno over 40 years ago.

An English textile engineer by trade, Bebianno initially constructed a *posada* consisting of only four rooms with deep-arched windows overlooking the bay. The shimmering façade of the hotel, used by fishermen to triangulate the positioning of their nets, immediately became known as 'casas brancas' – literally, white houses – a moniker that has remained to this day.

The size, scope, and visual impact of the hotel have grown over the last four decades like a sea shell following the mathematic rule of the golden section – suites, terraces, and private passageways fan out around the original core structure, revealing hidden patios and tropical gardens while achieving perfect balance and spatial harmony between intimate and communal, public and private.

Emphasizing the significance of the guest's individual experience, all the suites of the hotel are unique while maintaining respect for the building's original architectural character. Contemporary details like polished concrete floors, built-in bookcases and shelves are coupled with antique wooden chairs, restored picture frames, Art Deco light fixtures, and marble sinks. Curved walls and niches organize the layout of the rooms, playfully shifting between positive and negative spaces.

Located on one of the highest terraces of the hotel's primary facade, Café Atlântico affords panoramic views from Centro across the entire Bay of Buzios while offering guests an assortment of traditional Brazilian cuisine, fresh catch-of-the-day and exotic fruit cocktails. While the food at Café Atlântico is lauded consistently as being some of the most interesting and delectable in Buzios, the astonishing sunsets provide explosive visual fireworks that redefine 'romantic dinner'.

The second generation of the Bebianno family, Luisa and Santiago, have successfully continued to build on their father's legacy. Luisa, Marketing Director of Casas Brancas, completed her MBA in the U.S. at the University of Colorado, Boulder, before returning to Brazil to assist her mother, Maria Amelia, and brother, Santiago, in managing the hotel. An ambitious young business woman, with lively, intelligent eyes and a gentle disposition, Luisa decided to reserve a portion of the hotel for a spa. Her brainchild became one of the largest spas in Brazil when construction was completed, consisting of 6 massage rooms, several change and shower rooms, and a large Jacuzzi, all incorporated into the architecture of the hotel.





Today, the spa employs 7 full-time staff and, in addition to an extensive menu of full body and deep tissue massages, offers yoga and tai-chi classes as well. Luisa's creative energy is readily apparent when she talks about her vision for the hotel, describing the possibilities for future projects as 'endless'. Next on her to-do list: a complete renovation of the hotel's swimming pool and main deck. Luisa envisions a large infinity-edge pool extending out into the horizon, allowing visitors to feel a direct physical and spiritual connection with both sea and sky.

Luisa's brother, Santiago, has also introduced his personal flair to the hotel's brand. Returning to Buzios in 2001 after working a two-year stint in Miami in the high-pressure world of advertising, Santiago assumed the roles of both Manager and Director of Media Relations at Casas Brancas. His first goal: to

update the style and image of the hotel. 'At that time in Brazil, waiters were still wearing bow-ties and closed shoes, and restaurants were playing Vivaldi...,' he says, 'and I decided to have my crew wearing linen trousers and Havaianas.' They also started to play contemporary lounge music with some old school Bossanova, which contributed to creating a new scene in Buzios: more cool and contemporary than before.

Another labour of love for Santiago which has boosted the hip factor of the Casas Brancas brand, is his new restaurant, Rocka. 'I needed a special place to protect my clients from Buzios's summer frenzy,' says Santiago, so he created a space where they could enjoy a superb meal or just relax and sip champagne.

A weathered, wooden beach shack set on a cliff a mere 15 metres from the sea and overlooking some of the most beautiful landscape in Buzios, Rocka is as

unassuming as a casual day at the beach. But don't be fooled – this is no mere oyster shack (although briny-fresh oysters are available by the bucketful), but rather a four-star gastronomic phenomenon helmed by Santiago's close friend and emerging talent, Argentinian chef Gustavo Rinkevick. Gustavo's passion for cooking began when he was a boy, climbing mountains and sampling the food of remote, native villages; he was head chef at one of the best restaurants in Ibiza before forming a partnership with Santiago to establish Rocka.

The menu at Rocka begins locally, where Gustavo personally procures all his meat and fish from nearby farms and fisherman. Fruits, vegetables, herbs and flowers are all grown organically by a farmer named Carlinho, for example. Hidden from the main road down a small dirt path, past goats grazing in the high grass



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and the pastel-painted brothel on the right, Carlinho's small plot of worked soil feels like some lost, tropical Eden.

Besides the obvious staples such as cilantro, arugula, tomatoes, beets and so on, Gustavo, having realized the potential for this garden project and the relationship he has with the gardener, agreed with Carlinho to grow more exotic and indigenous vegetables such as mini bananas, taioba, nira chives, pimenta aroeira, and aboborinha, as well as edible flowers such as mustard. 'I am exploring the endless potential of the local fruits and vegetables,' says Gustavo, 'creating a menu that respects traditional Brazilian tastes but is also lighter and healthier.'

The juxtaposition of Gustavo's refined, sometimes delicate menu and the savage roughness and beauty of the surrounding landscape, adds to Rocka's deliberately

contrasting dual identity and affirms the owners' original concept, making this hideaway one of the most desirable destinations in Buzios.

The Bebianno family has continued to gracefully redefine the luxury resort for 4 decades with its hotel, Casas Brancas. Uncanny intuition for the latest cutting-edge trends in food, design, fashion, and architecture makes for perceptual business acumen, especially when establishing a lifestyle attitude.

Lucky for us guests, though, we need not trouble ourselves with these seemingly casual details, although nothing has been left to chance. All we need to do is slip off our sandals, sit back on the plush white cushions of the deck chairs outside Café Atlântico, sipping our maracuja caipirinha while listening to Seu Jorge as the orange fireball slowly disappears behind the masts of the sailboats moored in Buzios Bay. ■

Chef Gustavo Rinkevick

