

Quiet revolution

HOSPITALITY / SOUTH TYROL

In the Italian town of Brixen, a subtle reinvention of hospitality is under way. Alongside smart new-builds, historic establishments are receiving tasteful makeovers by a new generation of hoteliers and architects eager to offer cosy stays and an elevated view.

By Ed Stocker
Photography Andrea Pugiotto

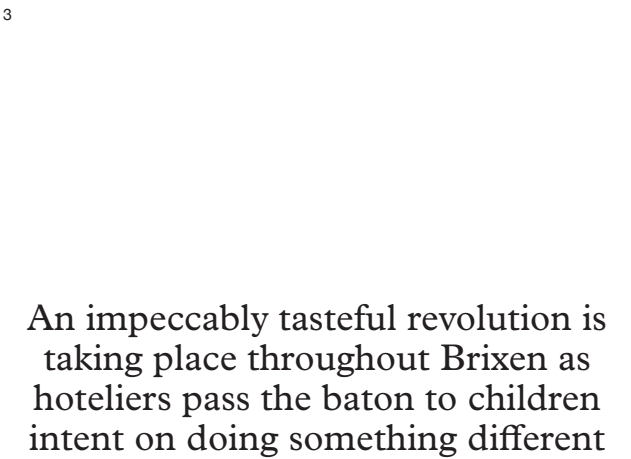


There are few more gratifying ways to enjoy Brixen after dark than by heading up to the roof of the historic Adler guesthouse. If it's cold enough outside, whiffs of steam will be rising from the swimming pool, heated to 35C in winter, as you shed one of the hotel's earth-hued dressing gowns and step into the warming water. Behind the pool, the dark shadow of South Tyrol's snowcapped Plose mountains loom; in front, and seemingly within touching distance, the floodlit spires of the White Tower and the cathedral stand to attention in the town's picture-postcard historic centre.

Despite several name changes and a few brief interludes, the Adler has operated as a hotel for more than 500 years on a plot of land next to the river where the town was first founded. But until recently, it was just another traditional spot in the majority German-speaking town, which is known as Bressanone in Italian and has a population of 23,000. That is, until extensive five-month renovation work finished in summer 2023 that installed a pool on the roof, as well as overhauling the sauna and moving the reception. Out went the old-school yellow curtains, the mishmash of furniture styles and the busy walls. In came a more understated aesthetic, with the curved shape of the vaulted ceilings given centre stage. Neutral tones dominate the 43 bedrooms and oak, travertine and glass are the prevailing materials.

"I love the minimalist style," says Silvana Messner, originally from Germany, who runs the hotel along with her Tyrolean partner Christoph Mayr. "Before you couldn't see the walls." Mayr's family has owned the Adler for almost 40 years but its recent makeover is part of a bigger change in the northern Italian town. In fact, a decidedly quiet and impeccably tasteful revolution is taking place throughout Brixen as hoteliers pass the baton to children intent on doing something different. It's turning this small Dolomites town into an unlikely hospitality hub.

The overhaul of places such as the Adler is being watched keenly by local councillor Sara Dejakum who,



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Brixen address book

- Adler Historic Guesthouse**
Recently refurbished in a subtle way that stays true to its historic roots. The pool, steam room and sauna are beautiful – as are the views. Check out the café too. adlerbrixen.com
- Anders Mountain Suites**
The huge terrace looks onto the Dolomites, offering incredible views of the Peitlerkofel and Geisler mountains. Rooms are consciously private and set across two floors. anders-suites.com
- Lasserhaus**
A beautiful new hotel overseen by Milan's Vudafieri Saverino Partners features 10 rooms, three of which are suites. Includes artwork by the likes of Esther Stocker and Ingrid Hora. lasserhaus.it
- Santre**
Up above Brixen, Santre was founded by three brothers with the help of family. Using land that once belonged to their farmer grandfather, there are 62 suites here, two pools and an extensive wine and cocktails list. santre.it
- Fink**
A clean, modern vaulted restaurant with a menu inspired by the simple food of the monastic tradition. Try locally grown risotto with Jerusalem artichoke, a Brixen vegetable tartare or slow-cooked beef washed down with a crisp South Tyrolean red wine. fink1896.it
- Decantei**
A former butcher's shop, this space was completely refurbished in 2019. Today it functions as a meat-focused locanda (they still make their speck in-house) that somehow manages to be both modern and traditional. The owners are planning to add guest rooms soon. decantei.it
- Vitis**
A wine bar with hundreds of bottles from South Tyrol and beyond. Owned by the family behind the Adler, the food is also excellent. The refurbishment was overseen by Bergmeisterwolf. adlerbrixen.com/vinothek-vitis
- Pur Südtirol**
A market featuring products from South Tyrol, from fruit and vegetables to wine and beer. Also sells a select number of handmade products. pursuedtirol.com
- Degust**
Located just north of Brixen in Varna, Degust is an excellent cheese shop founded in 1994 by chef Hansi Baumgartner and his wife, Edith. Focused on raw-milk cheese. degust.com
- Finsterwirt**
The Adler family's original hotel sits above Vitis. Dating back to 1870, the restaurant is another world, with rifles in cabinets and lots of dark wood panelling. The food is highly refined. adlerbrixen.com/restaurant-finsterwirt

among other roles, helps to develop Brixen's tourism policy. She meets MONOCLE at the fresco-filled *rathaus* (town hall) to explain how the town has been looking to increase visitor numbers while steering away from day-tripping mass tourism and encouraging a more discerning demographic. In 2019, Brixen came up with what Dejakum calls a "model client": between 40 and 50 years old, with a medium to high income and interests spanning architecture to food.

Dejakum says that eight hotels, either new or refurbished, have been completed in Brixen since 2018, while there are a further five projects in the pipeline and an additional one up on the Plose mountain range. She talks about a new breed of hotelier "doing things with good taste and refinement" but the boom in hotels is about much more than tourism policy. "There's a whole circuit of people involved, from entrepreneurs to bankers," she says. "And they feel the municipality is giving them the right support." Thanks to this ecosystem, there's still no chain hotel in Brixen despite plenty of interest; the nearest one is down the road in Bolzano.

The latest generation of hoteliers tinkering away on historic properties wouldn't go anywhere without the architects helping to realise their visions. Over in a 15th-century building filled with maquettes and split by a mezzanine floor, Gerd Bergmeister, co-founder of Bergmeisterwolf architectural studio, has his own theory about the recent flourishing. Like many people who speak to MONOCLE, Bergmeister mentions the recently departed mayor, Peter Brunner, as being a catalyst during his tenure. But the architect also cites Brixen's long history of domination by the church as an episcopal town dating back to the Holy Roman Empire. As the church's grip has loosened, says Bergmeister, Brixen has become less traditional. "There are lots of architects working with what is beautiful and adding to it," he adds.

Bergmeisterwolf oversaw the Adler's revival, diving into the building's history to return the façade to its original colour and studying plans from 1720 that

showed that the exterior was once covered in bay windows, an architectural hallmark of Brixen. The studio set about returning these features to the building while giving them a modern twist: the triangular metal-framed windows, for example, are a clever way to honour the past while also looking forward.

Bergmeister is also working on a rarity in Brixen's centre: a clay-brick, new-build hotel called Badhaus, which is set to open in March 2024 and will include a public plaza. It will be managed by Viertel Group, an enterprising local company that also includes a beer brand and Lasserhaus, an art-focused hotel.

Clearly there's a confidence to Brixen's hotel scene as the latest generation shakes up the status quo. Take Fink, a stunning addition set in a 15th-century building that combines a seasonal, vegetable-focused restaurant with nine upstairs suites that feature lime-washed walls and terrazzo flooring in the bathrooms. The Fink family had long operated a bistro downstairs but when Florian Fink and his wife Petra took over, they wanted to offer something that they thought the town currently didn't have. "I said, if it stays the same, I'm not sure if I'll come and be part of it," says Petra. Today the restaurant is full and the rooms upstairs are starting to get traction.

Perhaps the most radical rethink has come at Anders Mountain Suites, about a 30-minute drive above Brixen. Andreas Plattner had a different vision to his parents, who had long operated a traditional mountain lodge on the same spot. He convinced them to demolish the lodge and build a highly modern, wood-dominated structure overseen by Brixen architect Martin Gruber. In the process, the establishment went from 22 rooms to just seven suites, each with its own sauna and views of the snowy peaks. As he makes a few fixes at the property ahead of winter high season, Andreas's father, Johann, admits that change was hard but he realises that it was the right move. Andreas, meanwhile, was never in any doubt. "We wanted to do something that no one else had done," he says with a smile.

Guesthouse looks onto the old town (7) Lissi Tschöhl from Viertel Group, behind Lasserhaus and new-build Badhaus (8) Room at Adler, with its contemporary bay window (9) Gerd Bergmeister in his Brixen architecture studio (10) Fink's Jerusalem artichoke, red apple and hazelnut risotto

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TRAVEL



Taste of the nation

FOOD / LITHUANIA

Lithuanian food is getting a lift, and a new restaurant with rooms in the region of Ukmerge is the place to see why. Here we meet the Danish owner pushing an Icelandic chef to showcase the best of Baltic cuisine.

By *Sonia Zhuravlyova*
Photography *Tadas Kazakevicius*

“I have always had a love affair with food, farming and hospitality,” says culinary entrepreneur Niels Peter Pretzmann, who moved to Vilnius from his native Denmark a decade ago. “I also want to show that things can be done a little bit more responsibly.”

Today, Pretzmann owns sustainable food and restaurant hub Senatoriu Pasažas in a historic quarter of the Lithuanian capital and Farmers Circle, an organic regenerative farm in Ukmerge that is about an hour’s drive north of Vilnius. The farm, which is set around a historic manor house, supplies most of the ingredients for Pretzmann’s Vilnius restaurants and grocery shops but it was always his intention to open a restaurant there too – he was just waiting to meet the right chef to helm the operation. Enter Iceland’s Arnór Bjarkason, who was already living and working in the Lithuanian capital. Bjarkason’s passion for Baltic and Nordic cookery, plus his appreciation for the farm-to-table way of cooking, was exactly what Pretzmann was looking for. The young chef was brought on board to run the newly opened Red Brick, which MONOCLE visits on a crisp winter morning.

Pretzmann grew up on a farm in Denmark and knew exactly what he wanted to achieve at his own: to nurture the soil and bring healthier, more sustainably grown foods to the attention and plates of Lithuanian diners. The farm is currently home to 400 heads of Black Angus cattle, free-range hens and substantial tracts of vegetables and grains. Having noticed that Vilnius’s food scene was somewhat lacking when it came to celebrating its homegrown dishes and ingredients, Bjarkason and Pretzmann doubled down on their efforts to champion what they call “the New Baltic cuisine”.

For Bjarkason, heading up Red Brick, which opened in August 2023 as Lithuania’s first certified ecological restaurant, is the dream job. His six- and seven-course tasting menus only use produce when it is in season. “We also preserve ingredients in numerous ways, so we can use them during the frostier winter months when nothing grows,” says Bjarkason from Red Brick’s terracotta-and-bare-brick open-plan kitchen, while his Lithuania-born wife, Lina Marija Balciunaite, works at front of house, and their dog, Blues, watches over the proceedings. Bjarkason is prepping for tonight’s guests, who will be sampling everything from regional deer to dishes of organic duck, red cabbage and sea buckthorn.

Bjarkason, who has grounded his menu in Baltic ingredients, with influences from the Nordics and Japan, is delighted to be part of a new food movement – a fresh appreciation for what Lithuania’s rich soils and food culture has to offer. “It’s every chef’s wish to run this kind of restaurant, where I have freedom but also access to the best ingredients,” he says, adding with a laugh, “A carrot is never just a carrot.” He’s particularly



happy to see diners’ reactions to unusual combinations such as dessert made from mushrooms and garden-grown lemon verbena.

For now, Bjarkason has to import some ingredients such as soy and miso but he is working on making his own in the farm’s production kitchen, which supplies the shops in Senatoriu Pasažas with jams and sauces. “I like to use Asian flavours but not so that they overpower the beautiful ingredients.”

Bjarkason arrived at the farm in the summer, when the planting was already done, but he’s putting in an order with the farmers for spring. “I love Jerusalem artichokes,” he says. “But I’m happy to work with what’s available. It’s almost easier to make the menu that way, rather than having a very broad list to pick from.”

Apart from the spacious, light-filled restaurant, where floor-to-ceiling windows offer views of the working farm and the wild forests beyond, Farmers Circle is also home to the Black Barn, which hosts events, and the wood-panelled Sleepy Horse, the historic manor’s former stables that have been sensitively repurposed into cosy quarters for guests who might want to spend the night.

More than anything, both Red Brick’s young chef and its owner are passionate about taking care of the soil, farming as closely to nature as possible, sourcing Baltic ingredients and showing others how it can be done, with results that are ready to taste right there and then. “It’s all about flavour,” says Pretzmann. “When you grow things in a more sustainable way, you get more out of your produce.”

red-brick.lt



Five more Lithuanian restaurants to try:

Džiaugsmas, Vilnius
Serving dishes made from the best-quality Lithuanian ingredients, this restaurant serves seasonal dishes such as beef tartare with elderberry capers and cod fritters.
dziaugsmas.com

Monai, Klaipeda
A home-cooking restaurant in the sea port of Klaipeda, where fresh, simple, tasty food – and a slightly unexpected appreciation for spices – rules.
restoranasmonai.lt

Vila Komoda, Palanga
Set in a historic family home, this small seaside hotel also has a restaurant that serves an imaginatively prepared tasting menu that’s tempting many to visit.
vilakomoda.lt

Amandus, Vilnius
One of Lithuania’s most talented chefs, Deivydas Praspaliauskas serves a dynamic, seasonal menu for discerning diners in Vilnius Old Town.
amandus.lt

Nūman, Kaunas
Located in a cosy corner of Kaunas Old Town with a menu that features local ingredients combined with Nordic flavours, such as duck dumplings with mushrooms.
numan.tablein.com

PLAYING FOR KEEPS

TOYS / FINLAND

Why simple wooden playthings outlast the season.

By *Petri Burtsoff*

At a time when the market is inundated with children’s gadgets and gizmos featuring backlit screens, flashing lights and loud noises, there is something endearing about the enduring pull of simple Finnish wooden toys. The story is partly an industrial one: for centuries, forests have been the economic and spiritual lifeline for the Finns and the tradition of crafting toys from wood continues to this day, with some Finnish makers of wooden playthings having been around for more than a century.

These toys are durable, sturdy and, as a result, rather sustainable and frequently passed from generation to generation. As I type this, my two boys are playing with toys that my brother and I played with (and fought over) decades ago. Not only is this agelessness better for the environment during a time of throwaway culture but it also adds a pleasing element of storytelling and provenance to objects that modern plastic toys totally lack.

Playing with wooden toys has other benefits too. The natural tactility of wood is something that has been proven to have a calming effect on a child. The simple design of these Finnish wooden toys, such as the posting boxes, trains and block sets by mainstay manufacturer Jukka Lelut (founded in 1923), promote a playing environment that is more tranquil and

“As someone who care about design, I find wooden toys more pleasing”

– many argue – one that encourages the child to focus on problem solving and imaginative play (though, judging by the sounds of my children playing, it doesn’t induce meditative silence). Instead of offering instant gratification, like many of the modern toys, that slower pace of play can be beneficial for the child’s cognitive development, not to mention the obvious benefit of keeping children away from backlit screens.

As someone who cares about design and what they surround themselves with, I also find wooden toys more pleasing to the eye. Every parent knows that having children alters the way your home looks. Having plastic toys in vivid, lurid and lively colours scattered around the house isn’t in the least bit pleasing to the eye. Wooden toys, on the other hand, are more visually appealing and better designed (though no less painful to tread on).

Finland is not the only country in the world making excellent wooden toys. But to me, there is something about Finnish wooden toys that makes them stand out. Their playfulness? Perhaps it comes back to design and that effortless combination of simplicity, beauty and functionality that gives them a distinctive look and feel. But don’t get me wrong, they are not a fix-all solution for parenting. Children will fight over them, fight with them and try to break even your most cherished of childhood heirlooms. Luckily, if they’re made from wood, built with generations of know-how and time-tested, your children will have their work cut out to ruin them.

Petri Burtsoff is Monocle’s Helsinki correspondent.

(1) Duck with caramelised onion purée and roasted onions (2) Arnór Bjarkason picks vegetables with his dog, Blues (3) Red Brick restaurant (4) Bjarkason makes final checks to the Red Brick dining room (5) Bjarkason with his wife, Lina Marija Balciunaite, who works at front of house, and Blues