

A PLACE OF HARMONY

AS DANIELA PRASUNA COPPINI
CELEBRATES HER 70TH BIRTHDAY, THE CHERISHED
MATRIARCH OF LA PALOMA REFLECTS ON HER
ETERNAL LOVE OF COOKING

Words: Christopher English Photos: Luana Failla

It's been 20 years since Ibiza's most beloved restaurant opened its doors in the tiny hamlet of San Lorenzo. The charming patios of La Paloma, overlooking a verdant vegetable patch and the rolling green hills beyond, have hosted guests from far-flung lands, expats with curious back stories, high-standing politicians, rock stars and Hollywood jetsetters alike. Regardless of who you are, La Paloma has always welcomed one and all with open arms. Most people recognise Mouji Longhi as the face of La Paloma but the genius behind the Italian-tinged cuisine at this storied eatery is her mother, Daniela Coppini.

Her journey to Ibiza came after decades of traversing the globe and dedicating herself to the teachings of the enigmatic spiritual sage Osho, who gave her the name Prasuna. When Mouji, who had relocated to Ibiza, was pregnant with her second child, Prasuna made her way from the sheltered sanctity of the Sannyasin community – where she had lived since 1981 – to be by her daughter's side and connect with her cherished grandchildren. "The ashram provided me with an amazing opportunity to find out the truth about myself," she explains. "It was such an important time for me, but the need to be with my daughter and grandchildren was strong and my decision to leave the community came from the heart."



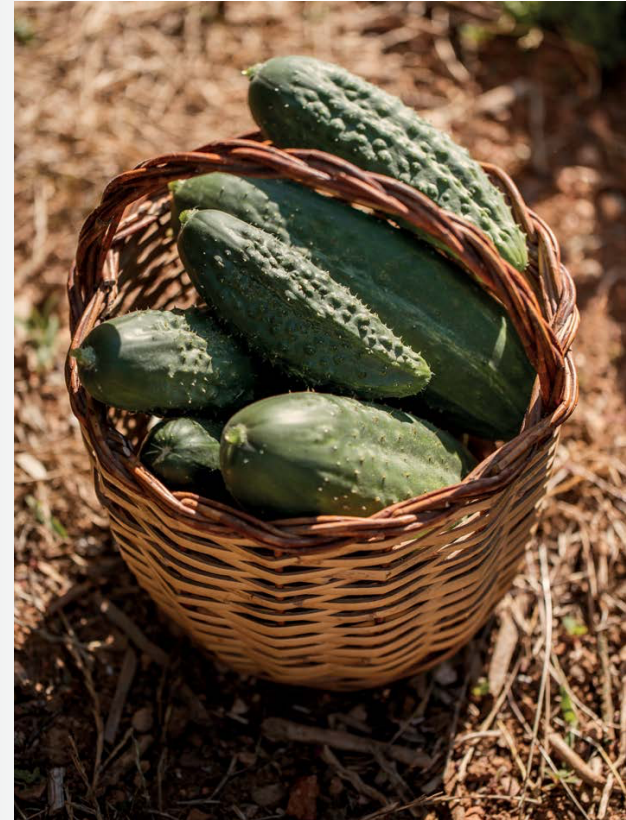


Osho's ashram was not her first experience of communal living. Raised by her parents in a gentle Christian community in the Tuscan countryside, she would watch in awe as her mother spontaneously prepared exquisite meals for guests with scant resources, schooling her in the significance of quality produce. "This is the most important element of any dish," says Prasuna. "It came from my mother Luisa. She was an incredible cook who cared deeply about the ingredients she used, and she passed me this gift."

After living in the ashram for so long, Prasuna was left with little in the way of what society considers the requisite tools for modern life – qualifications, bank accounts and such. Even so, she departed with something far more valuable and profound. Her talent for cooking was a seed sown by her mother and enhanced by her time in the ashram, where she provided nourishment to its residents. "I still remember my time in the commune with so much joy," she says. "We would be on the floor preparing food beside huge vats of chai – all of us devotees of Osho, sitting in silence and love. I remember the smell of fresh curry leaves in the ghee for the dhal. I learned a lot about the simplicity of cooking. And of cooking with love." Even with this background and deep culinary intuition, her first contact with a professional kitchen was the antithesis of these experiences. "My first job in a restaurant was shocking," she recalls. "After the serenity of the ashram, it was aggressive and very stressful, with a lot of things happening that had nothing to do with food."

This episode only strengthened Prasuna's resolve to realise her dream. "My wish was to open a place where I could offer honest food from a place of harmony," she says. She'd met famed island architect Rolph Blakstad at a dinner party she was catering, and they bonded over a fondness for food and a shared interest in spirituality. They became firm friends, and his encouragement was vital to the birth of La Paloma. "He really supported me," Prasuna says. "Someone had told me about a place in San Lorenzo that was available to rent, and I asked him to come with me to see it. The landlord was a little suspicious since his previous tenants had not paid the rent, but when he realised we were reliable and willing to put a lot of love into the place, he gave us his blessing."

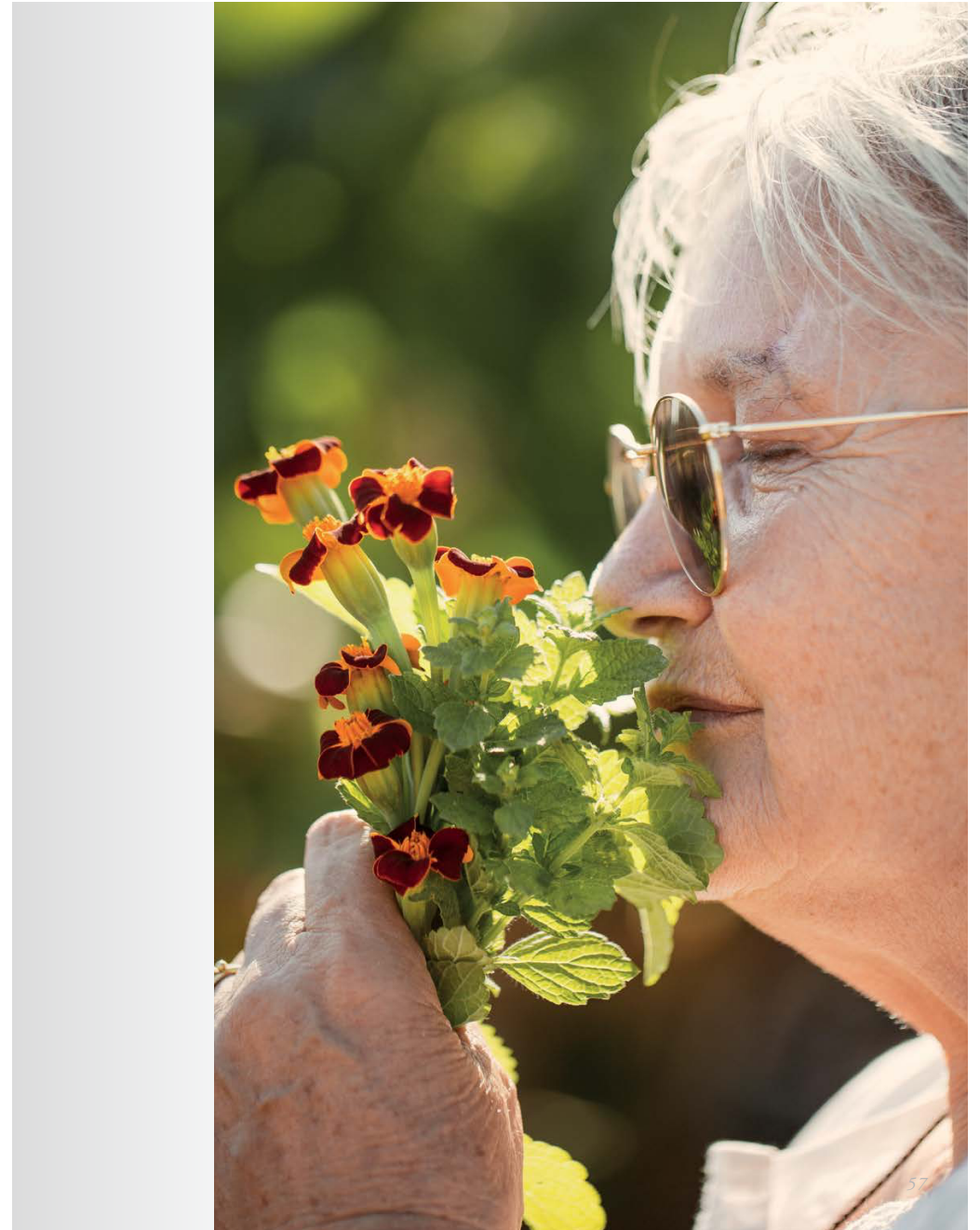
Though the *finca* was beautiful, it was dark and neglected. With next to no budget to renovate, Rolph suggested painting the old chairs and tables in a specific tone of blue. The result is a delightful shabby chic aesthetic born out of necessity rather than design. Many years prior, Rolph had dreamed of a white dove flying over San Lorenzo and suggested the name in Spanish, La Paloma. The sign that greets customers at the door was hand-painted by him and presented as a gift. "We didn't have any money to pay him," Prasuna recalls. "He would have refused it anyway, but he always ate for free. The restaurant would not exist without him".





La Paloma was born out of a strong sense of family and community. Mouji, her then-husband Amit, and Prasuna's sister Samvega, all brought invaluable skillsets, along with the support of a host of other island friends. Prasuna planned a menu featuring the food that she loved. "I learned from the beginning that with a small menu, we could easily adjust according to the seasons," she says. "When we started, we had very little money, but as we became more successful, I was able to source more organic produce directly from local farms and import Parmesan and capers from Italy."

The menu at La Paloma is not easy to categorise, perhaps most simply described as Mediterranean with an Italian leaning, plus influences derived from Prasuna's time in the ashram. "It was an international community, so I was cooking with people from Japan, China and Korea – people from all over the world," she says. "Living in India also led me to discover spice. In Tuscany, we





used parsley, rosemary, garlic and sage. To encounter coriander, cumin and turmeric was incredible. We also had a large Israeli community, and I was introduced to all those flavours too – it was a very exciting time for my palate.”

The evolution of the restaurant grew further with the opening of the café. “We were lucky enough to be very busy in the first year and needed more help in the kitchen,” says Prasuna. “A friend in Pune connected me to Nir Cohen, who was in charge of the ashram kitchen at the time.” After a long email exchange, he arrived in Ibiza with his young family. Prasuna and Nir instantly developed a very special relationship, and when Nir expressed a desire to only work during the day, so he could spend more time with his newborn child, an old garage was converted into a kitchen. The perennially popular La Paloma Café was born, offering smoothies, salads, Middle Eastern-inspired sandwiches, and other edible delights.

Another integral character in Prasuna’s story is undoubtedly Juanito Stan, now La Paloma’s head chef and someone Prasuna speaks of with great fondness and reverence. “When we first opened, the landlord asked me if I had a job for this young Romanian boy,” she recalls. “I needed a dishwasher, so Juanito came to work with us when he was just 18 years old. He was very humble then and still is now. One day, I decided to teach him more skills in the kitchen, starting with the basics like how to wash salad. Now, it’s as if he inherited my hands, the hands I myself inherited from my mother. She was from Parma, where they make pasta in a very different way, much thinner and very refined. He makes pasta exactly as she used to.”

Having recently celebrated her 70th birthday, the infectious energy Prasuna has instilled in La Paloma shows no sign of abating. Moving through the gardens that are immaculately maintained by her son Vania, she gracefully receives guests’ compliments with warmth and gratitude. Every night, she joins the team in the open kitchen at the end of service. “We have a lot of fun in the kitchen,” Prasuna says. “I like to help to clean up because it’s such a beautiful moment to share with the staff, as we prepare everything for service the next day.”

After two decades, the iconic restaurant has not only survived but continues to thrive, a phenomenal feat on an island as changeable as Ibiza. “La Paloma originated from a strong intention to find a place to serve the food I love,” Prasuna says. Looking around at a full house of contented and loyal customers, her wish has indeed come to fruition – a testament to her inner balance, her unaffected kindness and her steady determination to bring love into every act.