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SMOOTH OPERATOR

Armando Manni's CV may read like he can't settle on a career, but as an entrepreneur with a midas touch, it's no wonder he's not afraid to try something new. Lee Marshall reports.

Armando Manni is one of those people whose Google search results seem to belong to a number of different namesakes. Surely the director of an award-winning Italian feature film can't also make the world's best – and most expensive – olive oil? And can either of these people really have just launched a new accommodation concept in Rome – a 'curated apartment' with the services of a five-star hotel?

Yep, they're all that Armando Manni. A Roman born-and-bred, 54-year-old Manni graduated from Italian business school with cum laude honours, but "while I was studying I discovered a passion for photography – so that's what I ended up doing".

Specialising in rock music, Manni charted the New Wave scene of the late 70s, doing magazine and publicity shots for groups from The Clash to The Police. The moving image was his next stop, with a stint as a TV director followed by a short but intense feature film career. Manni's one and only film to date, *Elvjs e Merilijn*, was a dark road movie centring on a Bulgarian Elvis impersonator and a Romanian Marilyn Monroe lookalike who are hired to perform at a Rimini nightclub. It garnered upbeat reviews and picked up awards at several international festivals, but did little at the box office.

Manni is still proud of what he achieved with the film, but he came away from the experience disillusioned by the near impossibility of making quality films pay for themselves in today's Italy. And he had another distraction to contend with: his son Lorenzo was born on the last day of shooting.

Passionate about food and wine (he has one of Rome's best-stocked private wine cellars), Manni set about weaning his son by introducing him to some of the world's top restaurants – including Per Se in New York, where Manni persuaded chef Thomas Keller to make an exception to his usual "no kids" policy. At the same time, he began to give some serious thought to quality food products – and the smoke and mirrors that surround their image and marketing.

It was extra-virgin olive oil that galvanised Manni's attention – because of "the big difference between what you think you're getting and what you actually get".

To be classified as 'extra-virgin', olive oil has to have an acidity level of less than 0.8%. The problem, says Manni, is that the oil is tested as soon as it is pressed. But in the period that follows, "it starts oxidising rapidly – due to UV rays, the presence of air in the bottle, and temperature swings". As a result, much of the oil we buy at the supermarket as 'extra-virgin' would be better labelled 'former extra-virgin'.

Immersing himself in scientific reports, Manni soon realised that it was the polyphenols in olive oil that gave it its health-enhancing antioxidant qualities. But polyphenols are fragile things: in a study that Manni commissioned from Florence University, it was shown that olive oil exposed to the sun in a clear bottle loses 70% of its polyphenols in just 40 days.

Gradually, Manni's extra-virgin obsession crystallised into a business opportunity. With the inheritance left to him after his mother died he had bought some land in Tuscany, on the slopes of Monte Amiata, the extinct volcano that dominates the southern part of Siena province. "I could have grown wine there, but I would have wanted to make the best wine in Italy, and that would have put me up against a lot of my winemaking friends. So I decided to make the best olive oil in Italy instead," he says.

For Manni, the gap in the olive oil market was at the very top end. "There was no olio d'oliva to compare with wines like Petrus or Margaux. That was my target," he adds.

Armed with his scientific data and a maniacal attention to detail, Manni worked out a strategy. First he bought up a series of olive groves near his Amiata estate that featured the rare and prized Olivastra Seggianese cultivar. Next he decided that if he was going to achieve his aim of selling "live oil" – olive oil that still tasted newly pressed when you poured it at home – he would need to decant the just-pressed oil into small 100ml bottles of thick green glass, extract the air from the neck and replace it with inert gas, and deliver the bottles to his clients by FedEx. The first pressings and tastings led Manni to offer a range of just two oils: Per me (For me), a tangy, throat-tickling cru from trees at the upper altitude limit of the growing area, and Per mio figlio (For my son), a milder and smoother oil from olives grown halfway up the mountain.

Success came almost immediately – on the back of a wave of media coverage. Manni's celebrity customers include three out of the world's top four chefs (the exception being El Bulli's Ferran Adrià, who favours the olive oil of his native Spain). Nine years after the 2001 launch, Manni now has 900 clients – around half of them restaurants. He sells exclusively via his website, manni.biz, with the minimum order being 10 bottles at €22 each (all transport costs included). At €220 a litre, this is easily the most expensive olive oil in the world – and yet

Manni's sales were up 30% in 2008, and held steady in the crisis year of 2009. Of the 18,000–24,000 bottles produced each year, Manni sells most by allotment. "I managed to keep 17 back for myself this year", he laughs.

Perhaps this has something to do with Manni's knack of making the Ferrari of olive oils sound like a bargain. It's so potent, he claims, that you only need a quarter to a third of the quantity that you would normally splash onto salads: "a teaspoon is enough". And if he decants it into 100ml bottles, it's not, he says, to inflate the cost per litre. "Think about the standard 75cl wine bottle," says Manni. "That size was chosen because you generally finish a bottle of wine in an evening. Why shouldn't the same logic apply to olive oil? You wouldn't drink from a bottle of wine that has been open for a month." Manni describes his oils as "sleepers"; "It's like 2001: A Space Odyssey or Alien - they stay in these protected pods and then get woken up when you open the bottle."

Over the last 10 years, a rapport has developed between Manni and the 30 or so restaurateurs and 800 private clients who he counts as regulars. "Many have become friends, and when they come to Rome, they're always asking me for advice on where they should stay or eat or go to buy wine."

If his olive oil business began because he wanted to do right by his son, Manni's latest venture, Casa Manni, was born out of the desire to do right by his clients - but also out of the pressing question of where to go from here. "My problem," says Manni, "was how to grow the brand. I could expand it with ancillary businesses like cashmere that would have taken Manni more and more into the luxury sphere - or else by increasing production. But why do that when I have no serious rivals?"

Instead, Manni decided to follow his instincts once more. The idea for Casa Manni, a 'curated apartment' centrally located between the Trevi Fountain and the Pantheon, grew naturally out of his role as a sort of Rome concierge for his friends and clients - but also out of his frustration with "the impersonality of luxury hotels". Manni asked leading US interior designer Adam D. Tihany to style the apartment, and arranged for friends like New York Times food writer Maureen Fant and Rome-based art historian Frank Dabell to meet guests and give them an insider's view of The Eternal City.

Once again, he seems to have struck a chord: six months after opening, he's on target to break even after just a year (his business plan had allowed for three). Guests have taken enthusiastically to the ancillary services offered by Casa Manni; during the course of a three-night stay, the average couple will spend €2,500 on renting the apartment, and at least another €1,500 on extras like wine, walking tours, exclusive after-hours access to exhibitions, and dinners prepared by up-and-coming Roman chefs.

So will we be seeing a fourth avatar of Armando Manni next time we Google him? "Casa Manni is still pretty new," he laughs. "Though I would love to open another Casa Manni in Venice. And Florence. And London. And, of course, New York..."