

Property development isn't an obvious pastime for the renowned chef Giorgio Locatelli – and, if his family's claims are anything to go by, he's lucky he still has the day job. When he boasts that he can change a lightbulb, his daughter, Margherita, 22, interrupts: "It takes six months of me peeing in the dark."

Locatelli breaks into a boyish grin and switches tack. He points to the hammock that is swaying gently in the grounds of his Italian home and says he is responsible for the handwork. Plaxy, his wife, interjects: "That's just tying a rope."

Yet what the chef behind the Michelin-starred Locanda Locatelli may lack in DIY skills, he makes up for in Tiggerish enthusiasm and dogged determination. It is these traits that led him to overhaul a 1970s property in Puglia, the unspilt heel of Italy. And why bother to learn how to wire a plug when you can keep the builders on side with food to make them swoon?

Today, a shirtless Locatelli, 55, is bounding about his newly renovated pad. He has already been in the sea. He gets up at 7am for the first swim of the day, and sometimes he'll spend an hour and a half in the waves. "The sun is quite low, and when you go round the rocks" – he points to the bay that's visible from the edge of the property – "you see all the light on the cliff walls, you can see the birds, hundreds of beautiful fish, starfish and sea cucumbers." He says the view creates the effect of being "in front of an amphitheatre. If you shout, you have an echo."

This summer retreat is 700 miles away from the village of Corgenò, in Lombardy, where he was born – and where he was chopping fruit in the family restaurant at the age of five. In the 1980s, following a stint at the Savoy, he moved to Paris to work at La Tour d'Argent before returning to London as head chef of Zafferano, in Belgrave. After a spat with the owners, he walked out and went on to start his own restaurant with Plaxy in 2002. Sixteen years on, he's still operating at full throttle: he has written cookbooks and fronted TV shows, and his restaurant is as popular as ever. Yet every workaholic needs some downtime, and for Locatelli, his Italian home from home is where he goes to escape.

He and Plaxy plan to spend about six weeks a year in Castro. His days involve a trip to the market or to a local farm, to buy pulses or chicory, and if he's up particularly early, he'll intercept a returning fisherman. "Sometimes, when I get up, I see they are on the way back," he says. "I stop them before they get to the port so I can take what I want." Other times, he'll go fishing himself, then cook what he catches.

He arrived in Puglia via Sicily, where he'd been holidaying every summer for nearly two decades. Having grown up in the "strict" north of Italy and established Locanda Locatelli as a northern-style restaurant, he found Sicily quite a contrast and was awestruck. "The land, the people, the culture were such a shock," he says. "I was so taken by the food and the people." He tried to buy a house there, but "it proved impossible".

Then, about 10 years ago, a friend invited the couple to Puglia for La Notte della Taranta, a music festival. "We rented a house in Gallipoli and thought it was absolutely lovely, so we decided to return." He eventually found what he was looking for in Castro, a town with a population of 2,500, which swells by more than three times in high season. The property, which had been divided in two, was used by two brothers in the summer months. Locatelli thought the two homes,



## BROUGHT TO HEEL

The chef Giorgio Locatelli has found his sweet spot in a 1970s home in the southern Italian region of Puglia – just as long as he doesn't have to deal with the utility companies or do any DIY, he tells Audrey Ward



By Giorgio Locatelli and his wife, Plaxy, spent 18 months renovating their minimalist holiday home in Puglia. The uncluttered property has steps leading directly into the sea, as well as a large outdoor dining area with a pizza oven

### LECCE

Fifteen minutes from Lecce, the "Florence of the south", this modern villa is set in six manicured acres. It has five bedrooms, four bathrooms, a pool, a tennis court, a yoga area and a bowling alley. The mature olive trees produce excellent oil. [the-viewing.com/aylesford.com](http://the-viewing.com/aylesford.com)

### BRINDISI

This fully renovated and furnished complex of trulli, on 15 acres, has three bedrooms, two bathrooms, a 10-metre pool, air conditioning and a working artesian well. It's a short drive from the hilltop town of Ostuni and half an hour from Brindisi. [immobiliareostuni.com](http://immobiliareostuni.com)

### MARTINA FRANCA

Three miles from baroque Martina Franca, and an hour from Brindisi airport, this tumbledown trullo is set in 2½ hilltop acres. Lapsed permissions, which would have to be renewed, allowed for two to three bedrooms, a pool, a basement and an additional trullo. [casapuglia.com](http://casapuglia.com)

built from local stone and set in a natural conservation area, were ugly, but he could see the potential – and, most important, there was a set of steps to the rear that led down to the Adriatic.

The day of completion, in November 2015, had a typical note of Italian drama. "We met the two brothers, their five brothers, the mother and the seven wives, and they had to sign in different rooms," Locatelli recalls. "Then the mother started to cry."

The sale went ahead, with the couple paying £700,000, although they say that if you're willing to sacrifice sea access, prices in town start at £150,000 (about £135,000). They immediately set about reconfiguring the layout, shifting the hallway from the back to the front and flipping the front-facing bedrooms to the back so they took in the panoramic sweep of the sea. They also added a third ensuite bedroom.

The once dark-blue walls were painted white and the two bathrooms were finished with polished concrete and local black and white hexagonal tiles. A row of cupboards running down the corridor provided the wardrobe space that the bedrooms couldn't accommodate.

The heart of the house, however, is the white-tiled kitchen, with Gagganau oven and a hot-water tap. Counterintuitively for a chef, it has been made smaller – the depth was reduced to accommodate a sliding glass door.

This has increased the size of the outdoor eating area, which has a barbecue and a pizza oven. A glass-fronted cabinet, sourced from a local furniture supplier, stores the crockery and serves as a pantry of sorts, while Ikea shelves line one of the walls, providing more storage. "It's a modern house," Plaxy says.

"There's no point bringing in fancy bits and bobs."

At the end of the corridor is the double lounge, into which the family retreat during the colder months – though, when you look at the two turquoise sofas, one

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meanwhile, rather than by the sun, it's hard to believe it never reveals itself here. In the corner of the room, there's a hint of nostalgia: an ever-changing lamp from the family restaurant, a Cisternella, where Locatelli learnt his trade. His cousin said it to him "for his much money", Plaxy says. "I went around buying stuff here and found one exactly the same for I won't tell you how much."

The overall feel of the place is modern and minimalist, and the simplicity of the Locatelli home is reflected in the few possessions they keep. "There is one pair of trousers and it's always in the same place, there's one pen and it's always in the same place," Locatelli says. "The knife and the fork and this and that. Anything you look for, you find it straightaway."

The lack of clutter contrasts wildly with the family home in Camden, north London, where they have lived for 18 years. "We have a house that is full of stuff," the chef sighs. "Both of the kids [Plaxy has a son, Jack, 10] grew up there and are gone now, and they have left all this crap. Plaxy has been going through it, slowly, slowly, trying not to upset them, chucking away bits and pieces."

While the building work went smoothly, dealing with the utility suppliers almost broke him. "We had a nightmare with the electricity board, a nightmare with the water board," he says, gestulating wildly. "They come, they connect you, but they don't send you the bill. Then they cut you off because you haven't paid the bill."

Trying to set up the direct debits was exhausting. "It was like reinventing the wheel. Then you do set up the direct debit and, months afterwards, you call your bank, asking, 'Has the direct debit been set up?' And they say, 'No.' You call the supplier back and they say, 'There is another thing you have to do.' Then next month you think, 'I'm OK, I've done it, it should be all right.' He claps his hands again."

His face falls, indicating that the merry-go-round starts all over again. "Plaxy said, 'You only notice it because you've done none of this in England.'"

The family stayed at the property for the first time in April 2017, 18 months after work began, and Locatelli, the big softie, cried when he saw his newly completed home. They spent about €250,000 on the work, and he urges caution for those planning a renovation in his country of birth. "Be careful with Italians," he says. "Give them half the budget that you actually have. If your budget is €500,000, tell them you have €250,000, otherwise they'll find a way to spend it all."

Locatelli has made friends with "the big English gang", including Helen Mirren, Suggs from Madness and the author and comedian Charlie Higson. In June, he signed as a judge on Master Chef Italia, with filming scheduled to take him north to Milan for four months, close to his childhood home, but if his schedule permits, he'll make a break for his southern bolthole later in the year.

What does his family make of his defection from the north? "When you come on holiday, you need to have a bit of simplicity, and that's what it's all about. They know I like the south better than the north, especially because I love the sun – I love to swim. The north is who I am, but this place gives me the chance to be who I want to be."

And, as if it was ever in doubt, he adds: "It's just heaven."

Made at Home: The Food I Cook for the People I Love by Giorgio Locatelli is published by 4th Estate at £26

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**the-viewing.com;**  
**aylesford.com**

A photograph of a modern villa with a swimming pool and a tennis court. The villa is a two-story building with a light-colored facade and a large, covered terrace. A large, mature tree with purple flowers stands in front of the villa. The swimming pool is a large, rectangular pool with a blue and white tiled border. The tennis court is a green, rectangular court with a white border. The sky is blue with some clouds.

€1.595M