

THE ART OF HOSTING



AT SPERONARI SUITES, HOSPITALITY IS A CREATIVE DISCIPLINE, ONE THAT BEGINS WITH AESTHETICS AND ENDS IN EMOTION.

PAOLO CATONI
IN CONVERSATION WITH SILVIA MOTTA

One of those secret-but-not-too-secret streets that form part of Milan's hidden charm, waiting to be discovered step by step. Just around the corner from the bustling Via Torino, a hotspot for shopping, energy, and cosmopolitan flair, you suddenly find yourself wrapped in an atmosphere that feels suspended in time, placeless, timeless. In the background, the dome of one of the city's oldest churches, the 15th-century Santa Maria presso San Satiro, rises quietly above the rooftops, tucked away among the walls and ancient tiles of a small alley. It leads to a location named after one of the medieval guilds once based here. A shop window opens onto a space that feels both familiar and intriguingly exotic, a bistro with a black-and-white checkered flooring, deep red velvet drapes, wood paneling, and furnishings in fine hardwoods. Next to it, a discreet door opens onto the reception area shaped around the concept of what could be a new take on hospitality, which bears the name of this narrow street: *Speronari Suites*. Here waits Paolo Catoni, the mind behind the project, whose vision (together with partners who complement each other like pieces of a puzzle) has helped define these distinctive places. And with notable success. His is a complex personality: a manager, yes, but also a creative capable of moving fluidly across disciplines, identifying and launching ever-new hospitality formats, each with a unique character. He's seated at a table, the white tablecloth ironed to perfection, just like everything else here. A velvet jacket over an unbuttoned Oxford shirt, and that air of being both slightly wild and endlessly busy—carefully rumpled, in a way that draws you in. The first question arises naturally: "Paolo, where did your passion for hospitality come from?" He smiles. "Well... let's just say it grew on me, as I worked in it."

Ah, so you didn't follow a specific course of study?

Yes I did. I earned a degree in economics, followed by a master's in tourism economics at Bocconi University. My first real experience in the field was with Best Western Italy, and little by little, I fell in love with the hotel industry. But it wasn't something I came to with a lifelong passion. It started from a general interest in travel and tourism, but hotels? I hadn't really considered them. It was my time in a major international hotel chain that helped me truly appreciate the industry.

What drew you in the most?

There were a lot of things I liked, some right away, others over time. The first was this: I discovered the theory of revenue management, which in Italy, at the time, was still in its early days. I was fascinated, especially by the way prices were adjusted based on supply and demand. I got hooked on applying my academic background in inferential statistics to revenue management. Then, I gradually became absorbed by the operational side of the hotel, by how every little detail had to be tracked and perfected in running a property. Later on, as I grew professionally and launched my own consulting company, I came into contact with hotel businesses that approached hospitality very differently—from the world of boutique hotels and luxury hospitality. It's a completely different universe from what's known as "mid-market" hotel management.

What sets it apart? Can you explain?

It's different because the management of a standard three- or four-star hotel—especially those geared to-

ward business travel—is extremely cost-focused. There's very little room to generate profit other than by adjusting pricing. Let's start from a basic principle: a hotel can't increase its economic output unless it can change its pricing strategy. Why? Because the number of rooms is fixed across the year. If there's increased demand for rooms, it's not like jeans, you can't just make more. So the most important lever to generate revenue is price. That said, in the mid-range hotel segment, that lever is somewhat blunted, simply because there's a price ceiling you can't go beyond. It's a market constraint. That's why in the mid-market segment you have to watch both costs and revenues very carefully. Whereas in the upscale and luxury segments, the main focus tends to be on pricing as the key lever. So in the luxury segment, no one worries about costs... In the boutique and luxury sector, something different happens. People are willing to spend significantly more if they receive quality, attention to detail—and the experience to match. Often, there's no fixed limit on the final price customers are willing to pay for certain types of stays. That's why in Italy, you'll find hotels with average rates that comfortably exceed €3,000 per night. Just think of the Amalfi Coast or Lake Como.

Is it just a question of supply and demand, where demand drives the price?

It's not just about supply and demand. In the luxury and boutique segments, there's a pricing floor below which a hotel won't go, regardless of demand. This is all about positioning. Let's set aside revenue management for a moment. In a mid-range three- or four-star hotel, the operational approach is strongly cost-driven, because profit, and therefore revenue, can only be generated partially through pricing. As a fellow hotelier once put it, the difference lies in how hotels treat toilet paper—those that count the rolls used to cut costs, and those that prioritize guest satisfaction, and only then on incurred costs. The "toilet paper roll" quote is an exaggeration, of course, but

it captures something real. The idea that there are two ways of running a hotel: counting toilet paper rolls to save money, or enhancing your offer through small details and maximum attention to the guest, allowing you to charge higher rates. Some properties even manage to maintain high occupancy while commanding premium prices, because cost control becomes secondary to complete guest satisfaction.

Would you say that it's the hotel director who makes the difference?

The director plays a key role, especially in the boutique and luxury segment, where having the right attitude is crucial. In certain properties, the primary focus shifts away from cost and revenue, and the director must embody that shift.

That probably applies to all luxury industries, right? Fashion, design, food... Luxury can be interpreted in many ways. And you've just said your interest spans across all hotel types.

My passion for the technical side of revenue management is broad. It's something I apply across the board, whether consulting for a three-star campsite or a luxury hotel. Because in the end, professionalism doesn't change.

And yet, more recently, you've developed a different kind of passion.

Yes—one that's increasingly centered on the operational side of hospitality, and on passing on a sense of excellence to the guest. That's why I'd never see myself managing a large business travel hotel with 400 rooms. It just wouldn't be fun for me (except, maybe, for the revenue management side!). *Speronari Suites* is very effective, but it comes with its own structural limits—if it weren't for those, it could easily qualify as a full-fledged luxury hotel. Not being able to offer large communal spaces, for example, is a bit of a downside for me. But we make up for it with the in-room experience.

So what defines the luxury element at *Speronari Suites*? Is it the experience itself?

Exactly, it's the experience, the service. Compared to a large hotel, *Speronari* offers a few key advantages. We have only 22 residential units, so attention to detail is paramount. What we offer, in terms of service, is time, and a level of care that our team can dedicate to each guest precisely because of our size. If you need someone to go shopping with you, we'll do that. No problem.

In other words, like staying in a private residence, with a butler and staff.

That's right. We're not selling rooms. We're selling stays, in the broadest sense of the word, including all the experiences that come with living in the city of Milan.

How has luxury hospitality evolved in recent years? Back when travel was difficult—before airplanes,

when people relied on carriages, ships, and trains—reaching a destination was an experience in itself. The journey was long, complicated, sometimes treacherous, and arriving somewhere truly special meant discovering a world of rare beauty and elegance. Places like the Raffles in Singapore or La Mamounia in Marrakech: those were the icons.

Today, things are different. Many more people now have access to luxury, and not just in hospitality, but across all industries. Luxury has become more widespread.

So has the clientele become less “cultured” in its expectations, or perhaps just more diverse?

I wouldn't call it less cultured, just more varied. The very definition of luxury has shifted. What used to be a clearly defined standard has become multifaceted. Today's guests seek different experiences, and no hotel can satisfy all of them at once. So it's up to the hotelier to define which type of guest they want to appeal to, and design their offering around that target. Then there's also a philosophical element to it: some hoteliers don't pursue profit at all costs. Take the in-room experience, for example: every room has its own identity, and interior design taste can hardly ever be truly universal or please everyone. So yes, a room is designed to appeal to as many guests as possible, but it will always reflect the taste of the entrepreneur and their architect. From this perspective, *Speronari Suites* isn't a luxury hotel, it's closer to being a “home.”

Many hotels that offer exceptional service still receive negative reviews. Why do you think that happens?

Because guests come from all over the world, and they arrive with different expectations. Often, the fault doesn't lie with the hotelier, it's a matter of guests choosing a place that doesn't actually fit what they were looking for. The real issue is often superficiality at the moment of booking. If you're not paying attention to all the details when booking, you risk being disappointed. It's quite common for a travel agent to make the mistake of thinking: “*This client just wants a central location,*” and to satisfy only that one requirement. So they book *Speronari Suites* without going any deeper. Maybe the guest had expected a 200-square-meter spa—but we don't have that. And so the review ends up being negative. Very often, there's no real deep dive at the moment of booking. And this happens especially when there's a chain of intermediaries. Through OTAs (online travel agencies), there's often double intermediation. The booking isn't made directly by the client but comes through a third party who hasn't done a proper assessment. I believe that kind of misalignment could be reduced if luxury-focused intermediaries made a habit of visiting the hotels personally. In fact, it rarely happens in the luxury and boutique segments. Those professionals often know exactly what kind of structure they're offering, and they've experienced it firsthand. It makes a world of difference. You can't convey the feeling of a hotel without having actually stayed in it. We particularly value intermediaries specialized in high-end travel, not necessarily “luxury” per se, but those who seek out authentic guest experiences.

How do you choose the hotels you work with? Or do they choose you?

Unfortunately, I only manage one directly—or rather, *Speronari* is the only property I oversee fully (apart from Brera Apartments, where I'm still a shareholder, though no longer operational). The other hotels I work with are consultancy clients. They have their own identity, in line •

with the company philosophy that runs them. My role is to help maximize their profitability, without altering or compromising their essence.

So what exactly does your consulting involve? Do you weigh in on things like interior design?

My role is more about financial consulting: budgeting, strategic planning, and revenue management. Of course, I work within my area of expertise, so if they ask me: “*What do you think about opening a rooftop bar?*”—I’ll give my opinion. But it’s more of a peer-to-peer conversation. It’s not formal advice, and I don’t charge for it.

And when it comes to hiring managers or staff? Do you help with that too?

It depends. If someone says, “*Paolo, I need a director with these specific qualities,*” I can certainly help find someone. But that’s not really our core business. Our focus is strategy, business planning, pricing, and revenue optimization. We don’t do operational consulting. That said, we do work closely with our clients, so there’s often a dialogue. Clients come to HotelSolutions for hospitality consulting because they value our ability to look at things not just as analysts, but as hoteliers too. It’s rare to find someone with both perspectives. I also manage vacation-style accommodations, like *Brera Apartments*, and that kind of diversity in experience is highly appreciated.

How do you see the state of the industry today? Is it healthy?

The sector looks very healthy to me. Today, there are many new ways of approaching hospitality, each one tailored to a different need. Just look at the new generation of hostels, today they’re no longer dormitories for young travelers. Because a young person—even one who’s well-off and could afford a luxury hotel—is often looking for a different kind of experience. They want a space for social interaction and might even prefer a hostel over a hotel, regardless of the price. What interests people most now is the experience, how the room makes them feel. As long as the space is clean and has its own identity, that’s often enough. On the flip side, if a couple dreams of a fairytale vacation, they’ll look for a room that creates a sense of wonder. That’s why any hospitality model based only on “*overnight stay*” risks becoming obsolete. Even camping, with mobile homes, has its own vacation philosophy now. It’s no longer just sleeping under the stars, it’s an emotional, design-led experience, just like a hostel, a luxury or a boutique hotel. The future belongs to hotels that know how to define their positioning clearly. I find it hard to imagine success for any hotel that hasn’t figured out what it truly stands for.

Why?

Because today’s guest isn’t simply looking for a place to sleep in a given location, they’re looking for a spe-

cific experience. Understanding what they truly want is crucial. For example, for some travelers, what matters most is having a communal space, not whether there’s luxury shampoo in the bathroom. There are plenty of modern hostels that reflect this mindset—like *Ostello Bello*, with several locations across Italy, *Anda Venice Hostel* in Mestre, or Pierangelo Argentieri’s new hostel in Brindisi. All of them reflect a shared philosophy: hospitality as a social, open, and experience-driven concept.

Is it the makeup of the travel group that influences hotel choice? Let’s say, for instance, someone books for a tribe of seven wives and eight children. What do you do?

Unfortunately, we don’t always get to “*choose*” our guests. Of course I try to meet their needs—that’s my job—but realistically, I may not be able to satisfy them all, especially when it’s a large group. In an ideal world, a guest should book a specific property because it aligns with their actual needs. Still, location remains a decisive factor. And when I say location, I don’t just mean physical location, I mean emotional location. Even if I’m managing the best hotel in the world, if I can’t deliver what the guest is looking for in that specific place, it may still fall short.

There’s also the issue of destinations that were trendy for a time, then faded, and the impact that has on the hotels located there. Some iconic properties, like Cala di Volpe, are in unique, once-glamorous locations, but now struggle to meet today’s standards. So, is it the experience that matters more now?

I can’t speak to Cala di Volpe’s current performance, but I still consider it one of the most iconic luxury hotels in the world. That said, it may be experiencing a shift in guest demographics. The kind of clientele drawn to Costa Smeralda today is very different from that of the past, and hotelier must adapt to these changes. Exceptions include the spa market or properties that are destinations in themselves, where the physical and geographical location becomes secondary. In all other cases, it’s the destination that primarily drives the guest’s decision. First, I decide I’m going to Madrid, and then I choose the hotel in Madrid.

Once, for us it has been the opposite. I remember choosing to travel to Hyderabad, India, just to stay in a palace-turned-hotel. We even attended a three-day royal Indian wedding there.

Today, that dynamic has flipped. If the journey begins in the imagination, and the hotel delivers on that vision, the hotel itself becomes the destination.

There was a time when luxury meant staying in rare, almost mythical places, stepping out of everyday life into something exotic and unforgettable. That was the real emotion.

Yes—and now, some destinations are facing the opposite challenge: “*overtourism.*” Take Lake Como or the Amalfi Coast. If you talk to the directors of the main hotels along the coast, they’ll tell you things like: “*Unfortunately, our guests are starting to feel like hostages. In order to avoid keeping them confined inside the hotel, we have to come up with anything, like arranging motorboats to pick them up directly and take them somewhere more sustainable.*” In some destinations, many guests no longer enjoy leaving the property because of the chaos outside. This could eventually deteriorate many exclusive locations, unless we make these “unique” destinations not only sustainable, but also truly livable beyond the hotel walls.

Luxury can also be a remote place that offers unique sensations. It's the kind of luxury people are now willing to pay for. So if luxury today is also about emotional depth—about offering something truly unique—it becomes a question of what the guest is willing to experience.

Exactly, just like I said earlier. But apart from those exceptions, a hotel has to shape its offer depending on the destination and the specific characteristics of the property, no matter if that works to its advantage or not. *Speronari Suites* is a small boutique property near the Duomo in Milan, so my target can only be tourists coming to visit the city. I need to meet the needs of my clients—whether they're designers or fashion lovers—and in that sense, the location of *Speronari Suites* is perfect for soaking up the charm of "Milano Centro." Market segments today are very diverse. I try to find mine based on what I can offer. But you also have to adapt to cultural changes. I'll give you an example: as hoteliers, whatever our category, if we want to appeal to clients under 35, we can't ignore sustainability. Research shows that the first thing 70% of guests under 35 look at is a hotel's environmental impact. At first, the industry underestimated this. Many OTAs used to accept a sort of self-certification process, so every property came across as "super sustainable." Today, however, OTAs are asking for verified international certifications, because that's how they can be sure they're truly meeting the expectations of the end customer. Water-saving practices, for instance, are now among the mandatory requirements to get certified.

Is water usage just a passing trend, or are we headed in that direction for good?

Water consumption is just one of many sustainability metrics, but there are many other practices that are equally, if not more, essential. Sustainability is, on one hand, a collective responsibility, and on the other, undeniably a marketing tool. The real issue, however, is this: how far am I willing to go in adapting to market trends before I lose sight of who I am. Or, conversely, can I build such a strong identity that I'm the one influencing the trends?

In your opinion, what's the most luxurious hotel in the world, where luxury simply can't go any further?

I don't know, because luxury takes many forms. Personally, I like comfort, thoughtful details, I don't need an opulent room. What matters to me is space, especially enough space to put away my things and feel at ease. And light. Light is essential. I want to wake up with natural light; starting the day in darkness when I'm on vacation brings me down. But from a marketing standpoint, it's often the small details that define the experience. Here's one: in an ultra-luxury hotel I know, they change the rug in the elevator every single day of the week. The day of the week is embroidered on it. That rug alone signals to the guest that cleanliness is managed with great care, every single day. Another growing trend is Luxury

Serviced Apartments. Many high-end hotels are investing in private adjacent units, where guests can enjoy extreme privacy while still having access to all the services and amenities of the main hotel.



I'm reminded of a review we received once from an Arab guest staying in a very high-end hotel, who wrote: *"Where's the luxury? I was expecting golden faucets."* But no—today, luxury isn't universal. Not for him, perhaps. But for others, luxury means something entirely different. So what is enough to be considered luxurious? It's all relative.

What's the strangest request you've ever had from a guest?

There was a famous American pop star who wanted to paint the walls pink. But that wasn't all. She wanted us to change all the fixtures in the bathroom, and she demanded that someone be stationed behind her door at all times, 24/7. We politely declined. It simply wasn't feasible.

And what about the present—what does that look like for you?

Right now, I'm trying to convey my own personality through the property I run. I want guests to enjoy themselves and feel satisfied, but I'm not willing to bend the hotel's philosophy to accommodate every single request. If I did, I'd end up following the preferences of every individual guest, and that's just not sustainable.

Where did the idea of pairing the hotel with a high-end restaurant come from?

If I'm being honest, it just happened naturally. It wasn't planned, it's not a "format." But my partners and I would love for it to become one—because it really works, and it works well.

One last thing. There used to be word of mouth, "I had a great stay at this place, at that hotel." Have we lost that? Is there anything left that doesn't go through a social media filter?



Yes, it's still there. Word of mouth does still exist—even though social media now plays a big role. But it's hard to truly measure how effective it is. That's why, when someone asks us to work with a blogger, our first step is to understand whether their audience actually aligns with the kind of guests who would appreciate our hotel. Otherwise, it can turn into a boomerang. Personally, I find it unprofessional when someone reaches out saying, "I'll bring you an influencer with 300,000 followers", that number means nothing if they can't explain who those followers are. I prefer someone with fewer followers but whose values and content actually match the kind of clientele we have. I'll give you an example: in the world of influencers, the top bloggers often

speak to a very young audience. So why should I invest in a campaign targeting 18-year-olds, who won't be booking a stay with me any time soon? And besides, in ten years they'll probably have moved on, and so will that influencer. ♦