

WOMEN OF INFLUENCE

MAGAZINE

CANADA'S TOP FEMALE BUSINESS OWNERS

From the RBC Canadian Women Entrepreneur Awards

A candid conversation with **CATHERINE REITMAN**

The Hardest Workin' Mom in Showbusiness

The Dolce Vita of

Debbie Travis

Connect. Advance. Lead.





"I'm currently living on a plane,"

Debbie Travis says with a laugh while marvelling at the new phone system she's just managed to set up to overcome the Wi-Fi challenges she's been having in rural Tuscany. A brilliant multi-tasker, Debbie quite obviously thrives when she's got a lot on the go.

Her personal brand is synonymous with home decor and DIY, and includes six television series – the latest being last year's Oprah Winfrey Network documentary series *La Dolce Debbie* – nine books and a weekly syndicated newspaper column read by 6 million people. With the 2016 launch of the Debbie Travis Home Collection at Sears, an approachable fine-wine collection with Pillitteri Estates in Niagara and the recent transformation of a 100-acre medieval property in Tuscany into a stunning villa for women's retreats (where she serves as the host), to say Debbie's life is busy would be an understatement.

"What people often don't know about me is that the most important hat I wear is that of TV producer," she says. She and her husband, Hans Rosenstein, work together in the production and distribution business at their company Whalley Abbey Media (WAM), through which they produce all of Debbie's shows plus other lifestyle series. They also produce a number of crime shows, including the hit American docudrama *Real Detective*. "I was trained in the U.K. in television production, and that's what I love doing the most," says Travis.

The Dolce Vita

OF DEBBIE TRAVIS

Ever since the launch of *Debbie Travis' Painted House* in 1995, she's been inspiring people in Canada (and beyond) to do a little more with their home decor. Now, Debbie's inviting women to join her at the Tuscan villa she transformed from top to bottom – but that's not nearly all she has on her plate. BY HAILEY EISEN

Born in England, Debbie met Hans at a television festival in Cannes. A few weeks later, they were married and living in his native Montreal. Because she didn't speak French, she had trouble getting a job in TV in Quebec, so she started a painting business, bringing paint finishes that were hot in the U.K. to Canada and painting offices, restaurants and homes from Montreal to New York. From there her first television show, the award-winning *Debbie Travis' Painted House*, was born in 1995 and helped pave the way for other decorating and home-improvement shows that followed.

"When it comes to starting any new venture," Debbie says, "you need to have the confidence to just do it. And that's not easy." While she understands how a lack of confidence can hold a person back, Debbie says she finds the adventurousness of being an entrepreneur addictive, and that has fuelled all of her projects.

"Women are very good at talking and sharing – but there are always people who will bring you to your knees with a comment or negativity," she says. "It takes a huge skill to get past that – to believe in yourself. You know I can't even make a bed, and here I am running a hotel."

When the idea of spending more time in Italy – one of her favourite vacation destinations – presented itself, Debbie didn't stop at finding a holiday home she could share with her husband and two grown sons. "The more time we spent in Tuscany, the more incredible I felt," she says. "I don't know if it was the views or the people or the way of life, but I started to get this idea of, *What if I shared it?* If I feel like this when I'm here, then why not create a place where women could come, from all over the world, and be with other like-minded women?"

So in 2009, when she was giving a speech in Vancouver and the presenter asked, "What's next?" she only half surprised herself with her response: "Well, I'm inviting women to a villa in Italy."

"I'm still not sure where that came from," she says, laughing. The retreat, which had been a spark of a great idea, didn't yet have a physical location or a solid plan in place. But the next day, it was sold out.

In her true "just do it" fashion, Debbie found herself on a plane flying to London to get her best friend of 30 years on board. The two women, who maintain a great working partnership, rented a villa that summer and ran two successful retreats. They continued that way with one retreat per year until they found the perfect property, a 13th-century watchtower and farmhouse, and invested a huge amount of personal time and money into transforming it top to bottom.

While it's still winter in Canada when Debbie Travis and I speak, there's nothing cold or dismal about the place she's working from. Nestled among organic olive groves, lavender fields, vineyards and orchards, Debbie's luxurious Tuscan villa is not only her office away from the office, but a wildly popular retreat destination that's now booking up years in advance.

Debbie isn't just the creative force behind the operation, she's actually involved in every single retreat, working alongside a life coach, yoga instructor, holistic medicine practitioner, chef and other experts that she's hand-picked. "Some women arrive and are surprised that I'm here participating in the retreat," she says. "Well, yeah, I'm here. I'm taking toilet paper rolls into every room. I love it."

Her weeklong retreats that run from May to October provide women the opportunity to get away, by themselves or with friends, for a uniquely rewarding journey that involves a lot of talking, eating and drinking, self-care, hiking, biking, swimming, dancing and the forming of invaluable connections. Lifelong friendships and



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even business partnerships have been forged among women who've arrived knowing nothing about one another. As Debbie explains it, "Whether they're at a crossroads in their lives, are about to turn the page of a new chapter or are perfectly content right where they are – every woman leaves happier, revitalized and more empowered."

Thanks to the huge success of the Girls' Getaway retreats, they've opened up spots for a couples' retreat as well as for private groups and corporations. Currently, Debbie is spending about eight months of the year in Tuscany – once you see the photos of her villa you'll know why – but she's back and forth a lot between Italy, the U.K. and Canada.

"What's amazing about technology is that you can really work from anywhere," she says. "I can sit outside with a glass of wine from my vineyard and this fabulous view and I can be working in my PJs." It's from this perch that Debbie will likely spend a good part of this year working on her next book, which is still under wraps, as well as adding to her Sears collection and expanding her wine offering. Of course, she'll also make time to hand-pick olives from her grove in order to create her annual batch of organic olive oil and stuff bags with lavender (also freshly harvested on-site) to use within the villa.

"People ask me when they come here, 'Why are you doing this?'" she says. "And it's true, I could make more money selling mugs with my name on them in a department store. But this makes me a better person, and a happier person. And we all have to be able to find that – to be open to that." ☺



Join Debbie Travis at her **Women of Influence Luncheon** event on **March 9** in Toronto. For tickets, visit womenofinfluence.com/events.



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