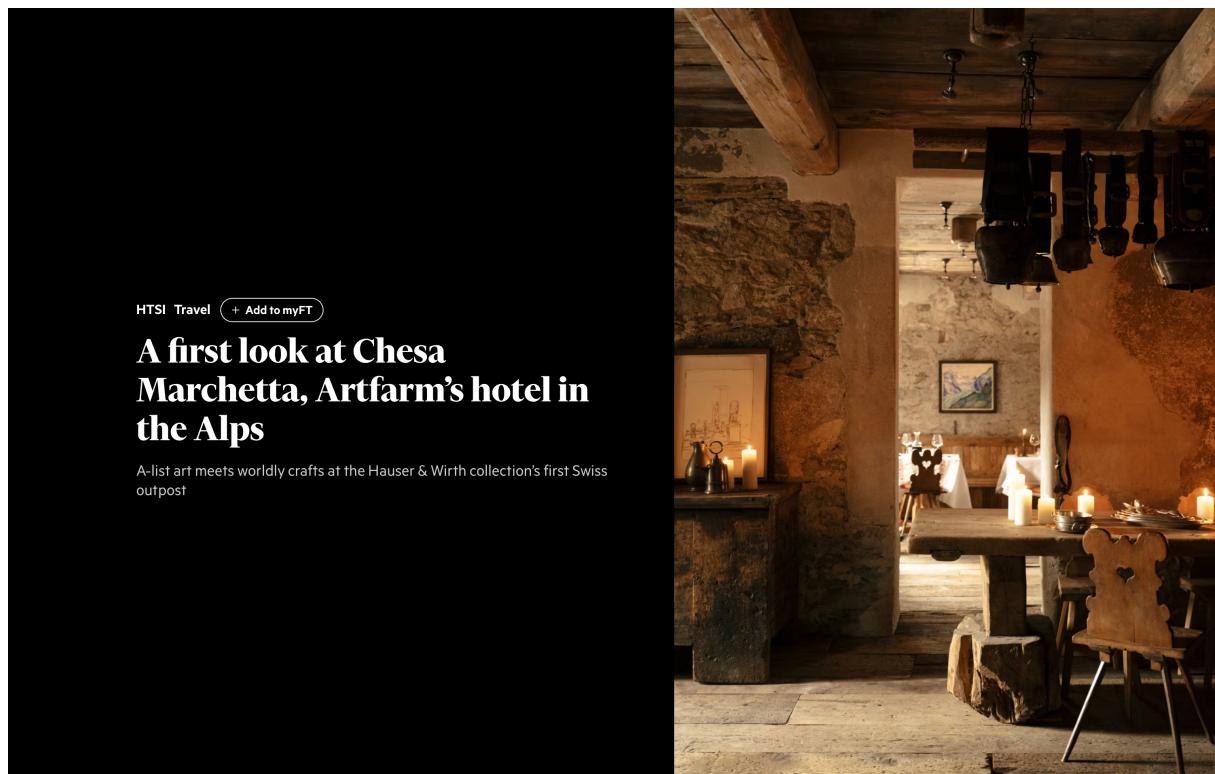


# FT

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Josh Hickey. Photography by Joël Hunn

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"Love is the ultimate luxury," pronounces Iwan Wirth. "It is the warmest feeling of being in the right place with the right person in the right life."

This whole project has a lot to do with love." For Wirth, the right place is Chesa Marchetta, a historic hotel and restaurant in Sils Maria, Switzerland, and the newest property to join Artfarm, the collection Wirth has created with his wife Manuela that includes The Fife Arms hotel in Braemar, Scotland. It is, the two say – almost in unison – "their most personal project to date".

The Wirths are best known as the co-founders (together with Manuela's mother Ursula) of the influential contemporary art dealers Hauser & Wirth, representing Louise Bourgeois, Mark Bradford, Philip Guston and Cindy Sherman. And while the global art market is currently volatile – the FT reported losses of 90 per cent to Hauser & Wirth's UK profit in 2024 – the Wirths' portfolio has continued to grow. A new London flagship is underway in a 19th- century Grade II-listed building on South Audley Street in Mayfair, and a new space in Palo Alto, California, will open next year.



The Kitchen Maid, c17th century, in the manner of Jacob Ochtervelt, hangs in one of the rooms at Chesa Marchetta © Joël Hunn

## **It was and is the most romantic place I know**

Iwan Wirth

While the gallery business rides the turbulent waves of the market, the Chesa Marchetta project follows a more serene, intuitive current, and taps the couple's personal link to Sils Maria. Iwan's connection to Sils reaches back to his childhood, when he would accompany his father, a mountain guide and architect, on visits to the village. He brought Manuela here on their first date.

"It was and is the most romantic place I know," he says. "My love and understanding of place began here, through architecture, nature and culture." Sils Maria has long been a sanctuary for those craving authenticity.

The quiet village is a cultural magnet that has drawn a remarkable lineage of thinkers, writers and artists including Rainer Maria Rilke, Hermann Hesse, Alberto Giacometti, Gerhard Richter, Jean-Michel Basquiat and David Bowie. Chesa Marchetta sits at its heart, a building that has housed two generations of the Godly family (and often their cows), which for decades they have also run as a hotel and restaurant. Sisters Maria and Christina Godly, the most recent owners, maintained the restaurant with a frugal traditional menu, featuring only one daily dish; the alternative was the fondue chinoise, with broth instead of oil or cheese. (The Wirths chose the fondue on that first date.)



The restaurant, overseen by chef Davide Degiovanni © Joël Hunn



The view up the main street of the town from the hotel © Joël Hunn



The family suite on the top floor © Joël Hunn



Chef Davide Degiovanni shaves black truffle onto homemade tagliolini © Joël Hunn

Paris-based architecture firm Laplace, with which they have collaborated previously, was entrusted with the renovation of this Engadin landmark. (It is also leading the transformation of the new Mayfair gallery.) “Our guiding principle was to make it feel as though we had never intervened,” co-founder Luis Laplace explains. “The Godly sisters created a deeply personal experience in their pension, an almost domestic form of hospitality, and it was essential to protect that spirit.”

Chesa Marchetta’s original structure dates back to the 1500s, though it has been rebuilt a few times since. “We travelled extensively through Engadin to study historic barns and farms in order to understand the architectural language of the region,” Laplace says. “Our priority was to retain as much historic fabric as possible. Up there, everything folds into a complete experience: the breadth of the landscape, the shifting light, the food that follows the seasons.”

The Chesa is in fact four buildings joined together: the larger home – now the hotel – the adjacent restaurant and the two barns. The façades, as is tradition in the Engadin, are adorned with sgraffiti – a technique of removing layers of plaster to reveal contrasting colour beneath, in geometric patterns often depicting symbols of luck and prosperity or family coats of arms. Guests enter through the former barns,

which link the hotel and restaurant buildings. Vast structures, they are the heart of the hotel, home to a roaring hearth and the bar. (Try the Alpine Juniper: mezcal, tequila, alpine botanical cordial and oak moss.)

## **The risotto has the very Swiss fragrance of mountain cheese**

Each of the 13 guest rooms is furnished with local antiques handpicked by Laplace. A chest of drawers may be hand-engraved, or tinted with real oxblood. The lace curtains in each window were made using the traditional Filetstick technique, perfected by a Benedictine nun from the convent of St Johann in Müstair, not far away. Blankets are from the Tessanda weaving collective, also in Müstair. The first sensory impression comes from the scent of the original panelling and ceilings, all carved from arve, a native pine that grows only at a high altitude and retains its fragrance for decades.



The “Tree of Life” room © Joël Hunn

The art collection, like the Chesa Marchetta itself, spans centuries. Old Masters join 20th-century and contemporary artists with confident restraint. “The art is not planned,” says Iwan. “We collect work we feel may enter into a dialogue with the house. This place makes it very easy. There is so much here already; the Giacometti family was here painting for generations.” In one guest room, Winter Landscape with Breaking Sun, by Giovanni Giacometti, Alberto’s father, depicts a vibrational pastel dream of the Engadin landscape. On the wall adjacent, above the bed, his son’s lithograph, entitled Le lac de Sils et le piz Corvatsch depuis la maison de Giacometti à Maloja, is a tangle of troubled lines depicting a more emotional paysage.



Valencian metro tiles in an en suite bathroom © Joël Hunn



Sculptures et bol dans l'atelier I, by Alberto Giacometti © Joël Hunn

A sumptuous family suite on the top floor contains a mesmerising mountain scene, *La Margna*, by the Swiss painter Carl Albert Von Salis-Soglio; it has been hung not far from Gerhard Richter's misty trio of pencil drawings on photographs of Sils.

The British-German artist Corin Sands has created his own fantasy with murals adorning the rooms, hallways and staircase; the motifs depict scenes of local legends. His palette is subtle, almost dormant, until a ray of sun coming through a window awakens a flash of colour on a rushing stream, a crowned trout or a faded pomegranate. It all adds to an intoxicating fairytale atmosphere.

The restaurant, under the guidance of chef Davide Degiovanni, will also maintain the spirit of Sils. "We've spent time with the farmers, dairy makers, butchers and artisans," says Degiovanni. "We're proud to give their craft a central place on our menus." The fare is a balance of tradition and creativity: ibex ragu, roasted polenta or smoked trout from the neighbouring lake. A veal tartare is dressed only with olive oil and chopped chestnuts; the risotto fills the room with the very Swiss fragrance of aged mountain cheese. Sommelier Giorgio Varotto matches each course with a local wine: a rich, creamy white Completer Malanserrebe from Domaine Donatsch is followed by a Pinot Noir from Thomas Studach.



A table in the hotel restaurant © Joël Hunn

"What can you contribute to a place where everything exists?" says Iwan. "Only culture." Wirth envisions a "brave and even radical" artistic programme for the new property. Much like The Fife Arms, with its literary and fashion festivals, Chesa Marchetta's *raison d'être* will be as the region's cultural hub. An exhibition of Alberto Giacometti, opening in Hauser & Wirth's St Moritz gallery on 13 December, will focus on the artist's relationship with the Engadin – and is a clear link to Chesa Marchetta's own collection. An exhibition of the writings, journals and photos of the anti-fascist writer and photographer (and Sils resident) Annemarie Schwarzenbach will inaugurate the hotel's literary series.

Like the home of a large family, which it always has been, the Chesa Marchetta buzzes with activity. A neighbour delivers cheese, bringing staff and friends running. A meal ends with grappa gifted by Manuela's brother Urs Hauser; general manager Federica Bertolini, who helped the Wirths launch The Fife Arms, exclaims "allegra!" – the Romansh catch-all greeting – to arriving visitors and guests. Says Laplace: "It's a way of living that roots you deeply while opening something rare, almost exceptional."

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