

CHARACTERS

CHRISTOPHE SCHENK



## A small miracle in Fusio

**He produces organic wines, organises classical concerts and now welcomes guests in a hotel that he has restored from top to bottom. Christophe Schenk tells us about the winding road that led him from Canton Vaud to Ticino.**

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In French-speaking Switzerland he is known for the eclecticism of his classical music festivals and the refinement of his wines. But it is in his new role as a hotelier that I meet Christophe Schenk. He welcomes me at the entrance to the Hotel Villa Pineta in Fusio, which he has completely renovated and opened on 9 July. It's the start of a new life for the 50-year-old, who doesn't shy away from challenges and isn't afraid of rolling up his sleeves. "I've just finished cleaning the rooms," he says, smiling as he prepares a coffee for me.

### A path of passions

The hotel-restaurant is a curious building on the hill on the left bank of the Maggia, at the entrance to the village. "It was built in 1908 by the then mayor of Locarno. It was designed by a Mexican architect and is a mixture of Swiss chalet and Jugendstil, which was fashionable at the time", explains Christophe Schenk in a polished Italian with a pleasant French accent. Each room has its own character, but there is a feeling of calm in each one. "Architect friends say it's a miracle that we managed to renovate the building in a year. It is true that when we bought it, it was in a sorry state. The first time one of my three sons came to see it, when I wasn't sure I wanted to buy it, he told me, 'I'm not going in there'," he recalls with a smile as he remembers the difficulties he has overcome.

"When I was seventeen, I had worked one summer at the Wildhaus in Sils Maria. The world of hotels has always fascinated me, and managing one was a dream I had long held. But life's events meant that I had to postpone it. Indeed, with family life and three school-age children in French-speaking Switzerland, the project of a hotel outside the canton seems unfeasible. "I had seen the advertisement for this building in Fusio a few years ago and had my doubts for a long time. Then in the winter of last year, Covid came, I fell ill and I was isolated. I'm a very present father, it was the first time I'd been away from home, but I saw that the family was doing fine without me. I had time to sleep, eat and think. And I made the decision. In May 2020 the contract was signed and work began, and today Christophe Schenk divides his time between French-speaking Switzerland and Ticino. As in all things, the new hotelier follows his passions and adapts to the course of events. As a young man attending the Faculty of Arts, he realised that what he wanted to do was classical music, and enrolled at the conservatory. "Classical music has always been a passion; as a child, I played at being a conductor. During my conservatory years, I played the piano for 4-5 hours a day. I play well, but not well enough to be a musician. I started too late, so I became involved in organising festivals and classical music concerts. But I don't regret anything," he says, choosing his words carefully and weighing his pauses.



Christophe Schenk: "The world of hotels has always fascinated me".

### A key experience

In his early twenties, he lost both his parents. "When my father died, my two sisters and I found ourselves managing his vineyard. We didn't have any experience; I myself wasn't particularly fond of wine and the idea of becoming a winemaker seemed like a burden. But it was a therapy to help deal with the grief. After seven years we decided to stop working together with my sisters and I continued on my own, downsizing the vineyard. This experience taught me dedication, a taste for experimentation and discipline. It brought me back down to earth. An important lesson for someone like me, who has 'his head in the clouds'," he explains, raising his hands to the sky.

In truth, having his feet on the ground doesn't seem to stop him from keeping his head in the stars and continuing to dream. "I'd like to organise artist residencies, and maybe concerts in the hotel grounds. I mean, I have to find something that makes sense, for me, but also for the guests," he reasons aloud, using the expression that came up several times during the conversation: "to make sense".

As different as the activities of an organic winegrower and wine producer, concert organiser and hotelier are, there is something in common. None of them meet basic needs, but all of them make life richer, even more so when shared. It's no coincidence that Christophe Schenk has created a white, a rosé and a red for the restaurant's guests: grapes from the Lake Geneva Region and the Ticino combined to create a new wine, bottled under the "incontro" label. An excellent premise for this new beginning.