

KIMBERLY COHEN, CO-FOUNDER AND ARTISTIC DIRECTOR MAISONS PARIENTE



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Launched in 2019, Maisons Pariente is a family owned luxury hotel collection. Emma Kennedy talks to Kimberly Cohen about life as a hotelier as they prepare to make their début in Paris with their latest hotel, Le Grand Mazarin.

Could you tell us a little about your childhood?

I grew up one of four siblings in Neuilly Sur Seine, a Parisian suburb, until I was 11 when we moved to Brussels where I lived until I graduated high school at 17. My sister Leslie and I have always been very close, even though she is eight years older than me. She was a great role model, and I always considered her a second mother. Today she is my best friend.

I understand your parents were art collectors, what did this mean to you as children?

They were passionate about art, especially my mother. Growing up she would take us to museums and try to help us gain a better appreciation. We would talk about it and sometimes have workshops. Travelling also meant visiting local museums and understanding a foreign culture through their art. In our family home, we had art everywhere..

Where and how did the idea of a creating a hotel brand come from?

Growing up I thought I wanted to live overseas, to work as a clothing manufacturing agent in Honk Kong. I studied apparel manufacturing at FIDM in LA, but I always liked the idea of creating a hotel brand. This possibility became real when my father bought some land in Courchevel with the idea of building a five-star hotel, with the intention of finding an operator to manage it.

What did you feel was missing in the boutique hotel sector?

A five-star hotel experience that had conviviality, where the service wasn't stuffy, and answered to today's customer expectation. A hotel that did not define luxury as being 'bling' but instead was chic and comfortable, with a focus on the attention to detail. Somewhere you felt like you belonged.

Who did you turn to for advice and inspiration when you were developing the Maisons Pariente hotel concept?

We drew inspiration from our memories of hotels and experiences we had as children, as well as our more recent travels as adults. As a family, we brainstorm a lot and talk about every decision, along with extended family and friends. We try to be mindful of everyone's expectations and needs, from our grandparents to our children.

How involved are you in the design process of each hotel?

My sister and I are very involved and choose every single detail – we consider each hotel as our baby. Each time we start from scratch with the design, always taking into consideration the where, why, how, for who..

How have you chosen the interior designers you have used?

We always try to think; who would be the best for this project, who would have the clearest understanding of the concept, and who do we have a good feeling with. We look at magazines and past projects for inspiration. We worked twice with Charles Zana, on Lou Pinet and again on Crillon le Brave, where he has created two very different interiors for both projects.

What is your specific role and what does that involve on a day-to-day level?

As Maisons Pariente's Co-founder and Artistic Director, I take part in every decision regarding design (architecture, decoration, etc), the identity of our projects (branding, marketing, PR, social network, etc), and the customer experience / atmosphere (scent, music, tableware, gifts, amenities, spa brand, art curation, uniforms)

Most of my work happens before the opening of the hotel. It involves a lot of meetings and hiring different talents for the project, working on the architecture with the team, and travelling (going on site, looking for new manufacturers, overseeing our furniture production, PR trips, etc.). Emails. Tonnes of emails.. like everyone nowadays.

What are the strengths and challenges of working as a family?

For me it has more positives than negatives. It is very empowering to work with your family. We push one another to do better and are not scared to show our weaknesses. We also lean on each other and try to bring out the best in each other and each situation. My sister is better at certain things and me at others.. and the same for my father.

As for the challenges, I'd say it's that it never stops. We are always working or talking about work at home. For the rest of the family, it can be difficult.

Opening four hotels in three years is quite an achievement, not to mention brave. What gave you the confidence to believe Maisons Pariente would be a success?

Brave or crazy.. I don't think we quite realised at first the amount of work and dedication it would require from everyone. We didn't know it would be a success but like my father always says, "only the ones who don't try, won't fail". My father has the soul of an entrepreneur. He started from nothing and is never scared to try. He could have retired at 60 years old but decided to reinvent himself. He is always looking at what's next. He is a true inspiration for my family. We call him our 'Locomotive'.

What is your approach to sustainability and how are these goals being met?

At Maisons Pariente, sustainability is one of our core values. We take it very seriously. We try as much as possible to work with local manufacturers and we respect the low impact construction regulations to make our buildings more efficient. We recycle. We do not use single use plastic apart from our bottled amenities products – which we are moving away from this year and replacing with larger reusable containers. We work with non-profit organisations such as Unisoap that recycles soap bars while working with people with disabilities. For our coffee, we work with Cafe Joyeux, a coffee shop that works with people with disabilities, and in our Provence property, Crillon le Brave, we just obtained the green certification, Ecotable. Our two restaurants have been awarded the 1 Ecotable label, a testimony to a well-advanced ecological approach.

Ecotable is a company whose mission is to accompany restaurateurs in their ecological transition. It is the first sustainable restaurant label that promotes establishments and allows everyone to choose their restaurant based on ecological criteria. The label identifies eco-responsible restaurants throughout France and, following a meticulous audit, awards one, two or three Ecotable macarons depending on the establishments' approach. We are very proud!

With your latest hotel, Le Grand Mazarin scheduled to open in October, does it feel like 'coming home' to be opening a hotel in your native city?

It definitely feels like coming home, however it has been a real challenge for us trying to understand the expectations of tourists coming to Paris while being Parisian ourselves. We had to put ourselves in others' shoes while still trying to build a place that will also please the Parisians. The exercise is quite interesting but not easy.

What is your future growth strategy, or is it more organic than that?

We don't really have one. We are very opportunistic in that way. We always look at new projects and decide to make them only if they make sense for us. We are looking mainly in France right now but are not excluding opening a hotel outside, however it would need to be somewhere close.

How big is your management team, and what do you believe makes a good leader?

At our head office in Paris, we are a team of 15 people. Our Managing Director supervises a management committee of six people; Sales Director, Financial Director, Head of Purchasing, Head of FF&E and OS&E projects, Communications and Marketing Director. We have surrounded ourselves with a team of experts who share the same values as our hotels.

I believe being a good leader is inspiring others to do things they thought they couldn't and create a sense of belonging. Also, setting the example. To be a good leader you need to understand the tasks that are required from the people you manage, to be able to accompany them along the way. Never be scared of getting your hands dirty as your colleagues will only respect you more for it. Also, good communication is key.

What has been your biggest challenge to date, and what do you consider your greatest achievement so far?

The biggest challenge would have been to prove myself. When we first went into hospitality, I had no experience and had to trust my instinct. It was very challenging, and I was second guessing myself a lot. I had to learn how to trust myself as well as accept that errors will be made and that it is ok, as long as I learn from them.

My biggest achievement, apart from my beautiful family and baby girl, is my company, Maisons Pariente. I have never worked as hard or wanted something to succeed as much as this. I believe in a short period we have gathered a great deal of talent based on common values. When a guest tells me that their stay was memorable, this warms my heart. I am so grateful to be a part of their journey.

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