

# Breaking Molds and Exceeding Goals

By Olivia Boynton | Photos by Tom Rosencrantz

Growing up in Barcelona in the late 1970s, during the resurgence of Catalan culture, Carmen Cruz—now general manager of Casa Madrona Hotel & Spa in Sausalito—was surrounded by a city imbued with history and cosmopolitan flair. Barcelona had become a melting pot of intellectuals and fashionistas, and repression of the Catalan culture had been lifted. Cruz's love of languages, traveling, and learning about other cultures flourished. In that bustling city, she nurtured her curiosity by writing, painting, and connecting with people from all walks of life.

Seeking truth and a deeper understanding of humanity, Cruz filled her room with books, from Don Quixote and La Regenta to *The Odyssey*, Aristotle's works, and stories from Greek mythology. She was also inspired by strong, rebellious women such as Joan of Arc, Marie Antoinette, and her own mother. Born shortly after the Spanish Civil War, her mother was an entrepreneur, a rare occupation for women of her time. She encouraged Cruz to dream big and work hard, with kindness in her heart. Cruz learned from her muses to value her intelligence and rebellious spirit, and to trust herself to go beyond society's limits.

Cruz discovered the world of hotels as a teenager, seeing the hospitality industry as an avenue to create meaningful experiences. Being in hospitality enabled her to learn about different languages, cultures, and people while breaking industry norms as a young woman. Earning her hotel management degree by age 27, Cruz had established herself as one of the youngest boutique hotel executives in Barcelona.

After such rapid success, she sought a deeper calling in her work. Led by her internal compass, she sought a break and found herself leaving Spain to attend a business program at University of California, Berkeley, and fell in love with San Francisco. "I knew one thing: I wanted to be the best and learn the most about the hotel industry, and I could only do that here."

In Barcelona, she had dreamed of working for Hilton Hotels. Her dream became reality in 2000, when she joined the Hilton family as the front desk manager in downtown San Francisco. Over the course of 10 years, Cruz was promoted first to assistant director, then to director of front office operations, director of rooms, and finally assistant general manager.



Today, Cruz is a trailblazer in the hotel industry. "As a general manager," she says, "I have only one main rule for myself and my teams, and that is to leave the ego at the door so we can create something spectacular and have fun in doing so!" Considering rules and expectations as guidelines for success, Cruz challenges limitations. "Never apologize for being intelligent," she continues.

Through her leadership roles in the hotel industry, Cruz has never forgotten her first front desk job and the labor of love that shaped her career into what it is today. Her ability to genuinely connect with people is the heart and soul of her life. "We do not know people's stories, where they came from, or why they left their countries. I interview everyone, and I create relationships that go beyond knowing my employee's names," she explains. "I want to know what are they passionate about in life and their dreams. I never forget where I came from and all I did to be where I am today." This is why you can find Cruz dusting, making a bed, or helping clean a bathroom. "I never underestimate anybody because of the job they might be performing, I often remind my teams that what we do is not who we are, it is just what we do."

Today, she continues creating unique experiences and innovating the industry. Following in her mother's pioneering footsteps, Cruz inspires others to do more, dream more, and become more, by believing in their potential.