

# Federica Minozzi, the Queen of Ceramics: “I believe in this material, a butterfly with a titanium core”

By Alessandro Rossi

*Director in chief, Forbes Italia*

“Tiles? I wouldn’t say tiles. If anything we talk of ceramics, as we work mainly with large surfaces. And I’ll say more. The image I have coined for this material is that of a graceful butterfly with a titanium core”. Federica Minozzi, CEO of Iris Ceramica Group, has clear ideas. While the image of the “graceful butterfly with a titanium core” was coined for ceramics, it also fits her down to a tee. Federica is a young, sunny and charismatic woman who knows how to laugh, but above all knows how to do her job, that of the leader of a company with 1,500 employees and a turnover of over €500 million. She’s a keen Anglophile, with a boundless admiration for Queen Elisabeth. But Federica doesn’t feel like a queen, judging by her method, her approach to work and her relations with others is inspired more by King Arthur’s Round Table: *primus inter pares* (“first among equals”). And seeing as we’re talking about royalty, she received the crown (of Iris Ceramica Group) from her father, Romano Minozzi, now 87 years old, – who according to Forbes has an estate worth 1.5 billion USD – and who continues to offer her his advice and experience.

Federica is an optimist (as all business persons should be), a visionary, as we will find out below, and just like the great monarchs of the past were the Defenders of the Faith, in our times she belongs to the category of the Defenders of the Environment, given how much she believes in and works towards sustainability. This is clear straight away, when she offers her own definition of ceramics: “a multi-purpose material which at the same time offers a significant sense of lightness; an ideal raw material for creating unique solutions that improve the interaction between humans and the environment.”

So here are the story and goals of Federica Minozzi, in her own words, responding to the questions posed by Forbes.

## **Let’s start from the beginning. Once upon a time...**

Once upon a time, there was my family, and it’s still there today. My father Romano Minozzi, 87 years old, founded the company in 1961, and is the President. Ceramics have always been part of my life, I remember when I was young, my cousins and I would play at buying and selling majolica samples I wanted to become a criminologist or a writer, but I didn’t have the courage to tell my father, and I thought:

“OK, let’s have a go”. And then I fell in love with ceramics, thrilled by the possibility to create and make my own designs.

**Female, charismatic, and the boss’s daughter. Was it all easy right from the start?**

Far from it. At the start it was tough, in this mainly masculine sector. I was very young, and the boss’s daughter. People judged me, there was a lot of prejudice towards me and I had to show that I was more capable than the others right from the outset. In the company, I started working in the factory. I have come a long way along the path of professional and personal growth to get where I am today.

**You have climbed up the ladder.**

Yes, it has been a lesson in life. Working with a father, a very famous and successful businessman, isn’t easy. I am a perfectionist, I demand a lot from myself. This has always driven me to work with determination to reach the goals I set myself. My father is extremely demanding, and he always told me that, as I was his daughter, I would have had to show that I work harder, and am worth more, than any other manager. And that’s what he did: he has always judged me severely, demanding more from me than from others.

**Based on your experience, do you prefer working with men or with women?**

I think that the best working environment is one with a balanced presence of men and women. Everyone is different, so it’s wrong to generalise, but I see that women tend to be more analytical, more sensitive, they pay more attention to detail and listen more to others. On the other hand, men are less afraid to make decisions, and know the art of synthesis. Different approaches and different visions help me to assess the decisions I have to make more completely.

**How should a manager establish relations with their staff?**

You need to be authentic and coherent in your leadership, based on your own values. It’s crucial to be able to engage people in your vision, generating the enthusiasm and passion needed to make every person feel a part of the project, an entrepreneur in their own field of responsibility.

**How is it possible for someone so young to lead a company with a turnover of €500 million?**

You need constancy, determination, passion and plenty of curiosity, so that you can always look for new ideas and inspiration to bring into the company and to create. Then, you have to have great sensitivity, in order to see and anticipate change, trying to be at least one step ahead.

**Always looking out for new ideas. What’s your secret?**

The best inspiration has come to me studying successful realities outside of our

reference sector, from completely different worlds, like Lego or M&M's. For example, one of our projects was inspired by M&M's, which printed photos onto sweets. I thought: the consumer world wants customised products. And so we developed a pioneering, innovative technology: Design Your Slabs, used to create unique custom designs for our ceramic formats.

**What advice would you have liked to follow, and what advice didn't you follow?**

I would have liked to start my career in a different company, perhaps abroad. I think it would have allowed me to become aware of my own skills and limits quicker, it would have allowed me to bring other points of view into the company. But that's how it was, and that's fine.

**True. In fact, today...**

Today we have three industrial hubs: one in Italy, one in the United States and one in Germany. Then we have several commercial branches, a family of 1,500 employees and a consolidated turnover of €500 million.

**How many brands?**

We have eight main brands. One, Seventyonepercent, was born last year and is a line of luxury bathroom furnishings made partly in ceramics, in partnership with Paolo Castelli. At the moment we're also launching the brand Bottega d'Arte, focusing on the rebirth of traditional ceramic arts. We are seeking to re-enhance the great history of handmade ceramic crafts.

**Which brand are you most connected to sentimentally, and which on the other hand has the most potential?**

I would answer the first part of the question with Fabbrica Marmi e Graniti, one of our most successful brands. I set it up in 1998, and the whole philosophy of that branch, errors included, was born with me. In 2007 it had a turnover of €93 million. Of all our brands, Fiandre is the one with the most potential for architecture, and has always worked at the highest levels: we supply high-quality materials and services. We are working more and more in the luxury sector, because we want to restore that nobility to ceramics, as they deserve.

**In the past ceramics were a symbol of luxury, then they became a product for the masses, and now you want to raise their status again. What is changing?**

Life styles are changing. Today, more than anything luxury means living well. And ceramics help to create environments where you live well. In England, ceramics, understood as high-quality porcelain, carries the wording 'by Appointment to Her Majesty the Queen', demonstrating that being able to produce it is a privilege. But it must be of the highest quality. Ceramics have accompanied humans since ancient times, since the discovery of fire. Unfortunately, over the years, the concept of the

tile, the result of industrialisation, has become something low-profile. Our idea is to create that perfect blend of art, history, culture and quality.

**The luxury market opens an infinity of new frontiers.**

In geographical terms, we are already present in 170 countries worldwide. But we aim to enter different distribution channels, creating exclusive and custom solutions with our materials. We have launched a collection in partnership with the designer Guillermo Mariotto, combining technological know-how and the nobility of ceramics with the creative flair of the designer. The idea is to bring the fashion and furnishing worlds together, because we know there's a huge demand for luxury materials. Our aim is to bring well-being and beauty into people's homes.

**You began with terracotta, and have built so much innovation. Who imagined this path?**

One of the things that made me fall in love with ceramics is that they are an oxymoron: apparently fragile, yet with incredible technical characteristics. My father founded the company with pioneering entrepreneurship, and by osmosis I inherited the culture of seeking out new challenges. England is the perfect blend of that extreme drive towards innovation and the conservation of tradition. In our own way, we are similar, because we're proud of our heritage but at the same time we continue to invest in innovation.

**What relationship do you have with the local territory?**

We have always invested heavily in the local community. I think particularly of health, we have bought cutting-edge equipment for the local hospitals, and the artistic, cultural and social side. During the Covid lockdown, we helped families in difficulty with equipment for remote learning. For us, supporting young people in their studies and hobbies means contributing to a better future.

**Throughout your history, there has always been close attention to sustainability. Now it's a hot topic.**

That's true, it's a hot topic, but we were there a long time ago. We were born with sustainability. In the 1960s, my father used to hang up signs with the equation  $\text{Economy} = \text{Ecology}$  written on them. We can't think of a lasting economy if we don't take care of the environment around us. In 1972, an event was held in Bologna called Pollution, focusing on a new aesthetics of pollution aiming to raise awareness on environmental protection. In 2009, we created Active Surfaces, the eco-active ceramic surface that reduces pollution. In 2018, we eliminated all our emissions of volatile organic compounds.

**And now Iris Ceramica Group is gambling on hydrogen.**

Hydrogen is the only really green fuel, if it is produced with green energy. We are building the first green hydrogen-powered factory. Hydrogen is the fuel of the stars,

and we're creating a storytelling project around this. We are installing photovoltaic panels on the roof of the new factory in Castellarano, and these panels will power the electrolyser which in turn will power in particular the ceramic kiln, which is what consumes the most fuel, which today is methane gas.

**So you have blazed a new trail.**

We hope that this project will lead our competitors to do the same, creating a demand for hydrogen, because producing it in-house is really complex, especially for small businesses. We would like to contribute to getting things moving in a new direction.

**... While remaining true to tradition, like the English.**

Ah, that's for sure.

<https://forbes.it/2022/07/07/federica-minozzi-regina-ceramica/>