

Domenico Dolce, left, and Stefano Gabbana describe their chemistry as a meeting of opposites

Just the two of us

From humble beginnings, Domenico Dolce and Stefano Gabbana have built a global empire encapsulating the Italian way of life that now extends to Australia, even as the designers fight a controversial tax evasion sentence

Story **Josephine McKenna**

Legendary songstress Dusty Springfield emerges from a glass mural, a portrait of a Madonna — the original — is splashed across the back of a chair, and a huge porcelain rooster evokes the spirit of Sicily. Entering the vast private salon of Domenico Dolce and Stefano Gabbana on the top floor of their global headquarters on a grim autumn day in Milan is like stepping on to a catwalk at one of their famously flamboyant shows.

There's an explosion of colour and a chaotic blend of classic Italian tradition with their own cutting edge inspired by the 60s, 70s and plenty of other eras as well. The walls are covered in crimson brocade and there's more than a hint of art deco but perhaps most surprising are the floor-to-ceiling bookshelves filled with tributes to rivals such as Ralph Lauren, Tom Ford and Christian Dior. Yet this brash remake of the corporate boardroom seems a perfect introduction to the style icons who created Dolce & Gabbana nearly 30 years ago. Domenico Dolce and Stefano Gabbana are among the wealthiest men in Italy, cited in *Forbes'* billionaire list of notable newcomers this year with a personal worth estimated at \$US2 billion each (\$2.1bn). Yet they enter the room without a flourish.

Despite fighting a controversial sentence for tax evasion in the Italian courts, they are taking time out from their latest collection to talk about their first store in Australia. Tall, lean Gabbana, 51, is dressed casually in a black pullover and pants, while Dolce, 55, wears pale grey with a pair of mischievous black-rimmed glasses that have become his trademark. There's no sign of Gabbana's three labradors that usually follow him around and both seem preoccupied — either with the upcoming collection or the prospect of unwelcome questions about their legal battle.

Dolce & Gabbana's new flagship store opened its doors in Collins Street in the heart of Melbourne in



September. “Our clients have been asking us for years to open a store there,” says Gabbana. “It has not been easy to find the location.” Filled with classic Murano chandeliers, burgundy velvet poufs and smoky black mirrors, the store bears all the hallmarks of the brand and is filled with men’s and women’s clothing, leather goods, shoes and accessories including sunglasses and fragrances.

Spanning more than 300sqm, the two-storey boutique sits inside the gothic Mayfair building in what the pair consider to be a prestigious location that harks back to the city’s Victorian era. “It’s a new continent for us,” says Gabbana. “And the most interesting city is this one.”

Celebrity endorsements such as those of Kylie Minogue and Madonna have helped catapult the Dolce & Gabbana empire into the fashion stratosphere. But their designs dance across a broad age range. Sophia Loren and Helen Mirren love the label. Younger celebrities such as Peaches Geldof and Blake Lively are also crazy about their clothes.

Domenico Dolce and Stefano Gabbana have come a long way since they worked side by side in a small fashion house in Milan 30 years ago. They came from opposite ends of the country. Dolce was born in the small town of Polizzi Generosa near the Sicilian capital, Palermo. As a child he began sewing beside his father, in his tailor’s shop, but dreamed of escape. Gabbana grew up in cosmopolitan Milan and began his career as a graphic designer. “We come from two different cultures and from that ideas and energy were born,” says Dolce of their relationship. “When you are opposites you can come together and discover something special.”

Dolce & Gabbana caused a sensation when they made their debut at a Milan fashion show featuring “new

talent” in 1985 and they opened their first store in the city a year later. Their collection quickly evolved to include knitwear, lingerie and beachwear and they added menswear in 1990. The designer duo held their first overseas womenswear show in Tokyo in 1989 and made their New York debut the following year.

Their romantic relationship ended some years back but their business relationship has gone from strength to strength. “We love our work. We are always in the office working on our next collection,” says Gabbana, breaking into Italian in his enthusiasm. “We look at everything. We are so lucky because we do something we love.”

The designers have been dubbed the kings of bling for their use of lace, leopard print and glitz but they have proven they have a lot more to offer. They are currently working on simultaneous collections for the northern and southern hemispheres from haute couture to ready-to-wear and their ever-expanding empire is also filled with store openings, athlete endorsements, Madonna advertising

campaigns, fragrance launches and new lines of sunglasses and wristwatches. A couple of years ago they dropped diffusion brand D&G and embraced haute couture. Top clients are invited to view one-of-a-kind designs at private soirees in stunning locations such as Taormina and Venice, far from the prying eyes of the media.

Banking revenues of more than €1 billion in 2011 and with plans to expand their network of 250 stores to Latin America and South Africa, Dolce and Gabbana confess it was not until their third collection they discovered a talent for capturing the essence of Italy — and in particular Sicily — that made them a global sensation.

Paola Bottelli, editor-in-chief of *Moda 24*, produced by financial daily *Il Sole 24 Ore*, says that approach has been a recipe for success.

“They have created a successful identity based around Sicily, but they also draw on Domenico Dolce’s family tailoring tradition,” Bottelli says. “Whether it is a classic suit for a man or a woman, the clothes are a perfect fit as

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The new Dolce & Gabbana store in Melbourne carries a comprehensive range of clothing and accessories



if they are made to measure. This is really their strength.”

“If Australian people want to buy something very Italian, maybe they will try Dolce & Gabbana because it is a modo di vivere, a way of living,” says Dolce. “Dolce & Gabbana is about Italianness — the sensuality, the cut, the tailoring, the glamour. If you are Australian or Latin American or wherever you are, you can experience an emotion that our clothes make you feel. They make you feel Italian. We make clothes that make you feel, make you dream an Italian dream.”

This year that dream soured when the designers were given a 20-month suspended sentence after being found guilty of hiding millions from Italian tax authorities. They were ordered to pay a hefty fine of €343.3 million (\$490m) and are now appealing the sentence.

“We are in Italy and we need to wait,” Gabbana says cautiously. “We will see.”

Prosecutors argued that the sale of the Dolce & Gabbana and D&G brands to Gado, the holding company they created in 2004, enabled the designers to pay a lower tax rate in Luxembourg, thus defrauding the Italian state. Two years ago, a judge threw out a tax evasion and fraud case against the pair but the high court later ruled that the designers could be prosecuted for tax evasion.

They are the latest victims of a highly publicised clampdown on tax evasion by Italian authorities that has targeted big names including fashion designer Roberto Cavalli and motorcycle champion Valentino Rossi.

In August the high court upheld the tax fraud conviction of former prime minister Silvio Berlusconi after a lengthy legal process.

“We are not Berlusconi,” Gabbana says curtly. “We make clothes. We are just fashion designers.”

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Their plight degenerated into a damaging public spat with the city of Milan in July after a local councillor said “we do not need tax evaders to promote us”.

The designers closed their nine Milan stores, bars and restaurants for three days in indignation and ran full-page advertisements in Italian and foreign newspapers defending their action and emphasising their contribution to the industry. At the height of the drama they said they were “being crucified like thieves” and threatened to close their fashion business.

“All the people attack us and I think it is just envy,” Gabbana says. “I don’t think the customer cares.”

While Dolce and Gabbana were initially concerned about the impact of the legal battle on their business, their recent 2014 spring-summer collection was well received in New York in September and one veteran said they deserved greater recognition for promoting their country.

“Italy can hardly complain that Domenico Dolce and Stefano Gabbana don’t play their part in glorifying their

nation: its life-affirming embrace of womanhood, la famiglia, the monuments, the sunshine, the culture,” wrote veteran fashion writer Sarah Mower in a review published in *Vogue* magazine. “If there’s an Italian tourist department award, by rights these two should win it. What with their depictions of signorine and mamme, lotharios and curates, ragazzi and bambini, their advertising campaigns (let alone the inclusive attractiveness of their clothes) double as Italy’s most visible promotion.”

Dolce and Gabbana have so far withstood the mergers and acquisitions that have swallowed up many of their rivals, but industry insiders say they may not survive without investment partners in the longer term, even though they say it’s not a priority.

For now their motivation is simple. “We didn’t start this job to make money or to become famous,” says Gabbana. “We started this job because we love to do it, to make clothes. We have not changed from the beginning. We are still in love with fashion with clothing.” 