Liquid Lunch

How does Nardello & Co, renowned for its investigative work, manage to steer so clear of controversy? Its founder, **Dan Nardello**, tells *Edwin Smith* about the tricks of the trade

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DAN NARDELLO, THE FOUNDER of US-headquartered private investigations firm Nardello & Co, has suggested we meet for lunch at Claridge's.

We met here once before, so I know where he'll be: his usual spot in the 'Reading Room', a secluded part of the hotel that adjoins its 'Foyer' restaurant.

When I get to the table, I see he's accompanied by a representative from the firm's London communications agency, Hawthorn Advisors, the outfit co-founded by Ben Elliot, former Tory Party chairman and co-founder of concierge company Quintessentially. We get the greetings out of the way and begin the interview.

Would it be OK if I turn my recorder on? 'I'll have to mind my P's and Q's,' Nardello says. Surely something a man in his line of work is used to, I reply. 'Yeah, I'm used to it,' he says, with a New York twang. 'But I'm never very good at it.' Perhaps that explains the PR.

Early in his career Nardello, 68, worked as a public prosecutor in the Southern District of New York, but ended up in his current line of work, he likes to say, because he 'fell in love with a Roman woman who became my penultimate wife'. Quickly, he adds that his 'third and final' wife is 'a keeper'; the pair recently celebrated their 20th wedding anniversary.

In 1994, looking for a move to the Italian capital to be with said penultimate wife, he landed a job at a risk consultancy and managed to convince the business to locate its first international office there. By 2003, the company had changed hands and he had relocated to London. Then he set up his own venture, which has since become one of the most important firms in the sector.

The waitress arrives. 'I know the menu by heart,' Nardello says. He's been a regular for years and will be back at the hotel around Christmas. While I opt for the wild mushroom and truffle risotto, he tells the waitress he has already given his order to her colleague: 'My usual.'

'A glass of wine?', he suggests, then turns back to the waitress. 'I'm just gonna have a glass of your Chablis, which I have imbibed in industrial quantities.' I'll have one too.

'So what can I tell you?' Nardello asks. We start with his firm's ongoing work for the Macrons, who have launched an action in Delaware against the right-wing influencer Candace Owens in response to her claims that French president Emmanuel Macron's wife Brigitte was born male.

Nardello & Co was brought in by Tom Clare, the Macrons' American lawyer, who Nardello calls 'the best defamation lawyer in the United States', to do two things. First, document the 'various defamatory statements' and 'memorialise them' in a way that sets the legal team up for the trial. 'The other mandate,' Nardello says, 'was to find out who [Owens] was. I had never heard of her, but I'm sort of ignorant. In the course of that, we were able to evidence all these connections to the far right in France and elsewhere.' Much of the material was in the public domain already, 'but putting it together, teasing out inferences, making connections, corroborating – that's an important part of what we do.'

Another high-profile instruction saw the firm play a crucial role in the unmasking of the man behind defamatory celebrity gossip website Tattle Life. Nardello was 'shocked' to

learn that the case, which resulted in an award of £300,000 for the firm's clients, was the largest defamation payout in Northern Irish legal history. 'In a case that Tom [Clare] brought in New York' – between Dominion Voting Systems and Fox – 'the [settlement] was $787 million!,' he laughs.

Before long, the food arrives. 'They insist on giving me these condiments,' he says, mock-exasperated. 'Somebody, steal my fries!' Nardello describes his main dish as 'their club sandwich without most of what is in their club sandwich. I ask them to take out the mayo, the egg, the lettuce, the tomato and substitute white bread for whole grain bread. So, it's essentially a chicken and bacon sandwich.'

A former resident of London, Nardello has affection for the city. So what does he make of the recent tidal wave of negative sentiment, and the supposed exodus of HNWs and businesspeople? 'It's a dynamic city. It's an international city. There's so much to do, it's so rich culturally. You know, it's hard to defeat it.'

In any case, much of the work generated in London leads to investigations that take place elsewhere. 'I mean, some of it is in London, but it's a family office that's considering making an investment in Dubai, or an arbitration dispute involving Kyrgyzstan, or the work we did on FTX.

'That's a matter of public record,' he adds, referring to the company's efforts to recoup funds in the wake of the downfall of FTX founder Sam Bankman-Fried. 'That was here, throughout Asia, all over the United States, various parts of Eastern Europe. Our work is a little different in that it's typically complicated. It's typically cross-border.'

He expects London to continue to be an important source of mandates. 'Even though the end-client may be an ultra-high-net-worth individual or family office, a lot of our instructions will come through their lawyers. London is the most robust and sophisticated legal centre in Europe, and the law firms here are very active.'

He's been in the business for more than three decades but, back in the nineties, it wasn't clear how smooth the transition from prosecutor to investigator would be. 'When I first started, I'm thinking, "How do I get information if I don't have FBI agents with a badge, a gun and a subpoena pad?!"

'We can't compel people to do things, but it turns out there are enormously rich ways of getting information.' Dealing with the open-source information 'with a lawyerly discipline' is effective, but 'what I also didn't realise is that when we go out and talk to people – much more often than not – they will talk, if they're approached in the right way.

'Whether it's a disgruntled former employee, an adversary, a former spouse, a spurned business partner – or even people who don't fit into the "disgruntled" category – if you approach them in a very straightforward, honest manner, and you know how to talk to people... People like to talk and tell stories, and sometimes they do it when maybe they shouldn't.'

However, Nardello clarifies, his firm is fastidious about what it doesn't do. It has

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'bright lines' that mean no political work, nothing related to 'blue-collar crime', or for anyone accused of anything to do with drugs, harming a child or anyone who's sanctioned. 'I used to prosecute mafia guys,' he says. 'I have no interest in defending them.'

He adds: 'We've turned down people that you know of who've been accused of all sorts of me-too violations.' Nardello himself developed an ethics course that teaches best practice for lawyers engaging private investigations firms.

The firm has been notable among its peers for an absence of controversy, though its name did come up earlier this year in relation to a dispute between tech companies Rippling and Deel. Nardello's client, Rippling, brought a case against Deel, but the latter has responded, filing in Delaware and alleging that Rippling carried out a smear campaign and hired Nardello to obtain confidential information about the business.

Nardello won't comment on this specific case, but he does say that he and his colleagues 'pride ourselves in colouring within the lines'.

But, I say, when there is pressure from a client to get a result, and when so much work is done by contractors in foreign countries who aren't employed full-time by the company, perhaps it's possible for things to slip through the cracks.

He stands firm. 'I've seen a lot of investigative firms who've done all sorts of inappropriate things in order to obtain information. Most of the time, it just blows up in their faces and, more importantly, in their client's face. As a client, you're responsible for what your investigator does. In the US it's a legal matter: lawyers who engage us are responsible for our conduct. So we're really careful.

'Yes, there is pressure to get results. The best results, I've seen time and again, are from smart people doing hard work, being rigorous and creative. Plus, I spent seven years of my life putting people in jail. I don't ever want to see me or any of my employees on the wrong side of it.'

So far, it's an approach that seems to be working. Nardello & Co has eight offices around the world, with a ninth, in Paris, opening. The business is privately held and does not reveal its revenues, but Nardello will say that it has been 'robustly profitable from the beginning', is up around 15 per cent on last year and has 'been on a relentlessly upward trend'.

The waitress comes to clear the table. As a journalist, I venture, the work he does seems self-evidently fascinating. 'Right?!', he says, smiling broadly. Then he tells me one last story.

'When I was a young prosecutor, there was an investigator in the US Attorney's Office who had been a New York City detective.' The guy in question, Nardello says, had been the inspiration for the TV detective Kojak. He was getting on, and had already had a stellar career. 'I said to him one day, "Carl, why are you still doing this? You have a wonderful wife, all these grandkids..." He said to me – and I'll never forget it: "Kid, every day is a free ticket to a show." And that's exactly how I feel about what I do, every day.'