



Venice is most magical of all during Carnival, a vibrant, playful festival which comes to a peak the week before Lent, when the Venetian gift for intrigue comes into its own. Join the local revellers in the sestieri of Cannaregio or Castello or the masked crowds in St. Mark's Square. To buy the best masks go to Mondonovo or Ca' Macana in Dorsoduro or rent a costume by the day from Venetia on the Frezzeria near St. Mark's. Photo by Fulvio Roiter

VENICE: EATING IN THE MAGIC KINGDOM

by Lucy Gordan

Named for Venus, the goddess of love, Venice, the world's most romantic city, was also born out of the sea and pays homage with a cuisine that will steal your heart. Nestled along the canals of this floating city nicknamed "most serene," local restaurants proudly serve seafood specialties — their birthright — from the nearby lagoon and deep Adriatic.

The sea has always been the life's blood of fish-shaped Venice, nicknamed "La Serenissima" because of her unrivalled maritime and commercial importance from her conquest of Byzantium in 1204 to Napoleon's betrayal in 1797. With 177 usually-narrow and often-sinuous canals instead of streets, this original Magic Kingdom, the only city in the world without cars, is built on 117 islets connected by over 400 footbridges. Although no longer a world power,

this pedestrian's paradise, where the past is more important than the present, still casts her spell over more than 12 million visitors a year.

Naturally, flamboyant and overwhelmingly romantic Venice could only be named after Venus and, like the goddess of love, was born out of the sea. Around 420 or in 811 A.D. (depending on your history books) mainlanders took refuge here in the lagoon from the Goths or Franks who were looting and burning their way southward to conquer Rome.

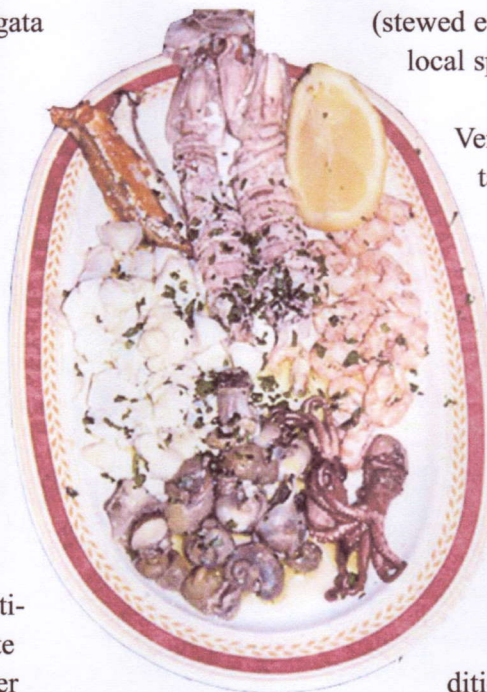
In recognition for the haven she provided, every year since Pietro Orseolo, the Doge or Chief Magistrate, established the custom in 1000 AD, Venice, definitely a prima donna past her prime, is wed to the Adriatic Sea on the Sunday after Ascension at the

end of May. Several other annual Venetian feste or celebrations are regattas: on April 25, the feast of St. Mark, a gondola race between the lagoon island of Sant'Elena with its pretty Gothic church and the Punta della Dogana once the sea customs post; in May Vogalonga or the "Long Row" from Piazza San Marco to the lace-making island of Burano, and back — a distance of 32 km. (20 miles); and the first Sunday in September the Regata Storica down the Grand Canal.

Thus, it should come as no surprise that, except for *carpaccio*, *fegato alla veneziana* (thinly-sliced calf's liver smothered in onions) and *risi e bisi* (a risotto made with bacon and fresh peas), Venetian cuisine features a wide variety of seafood from the lagoon and Adriatic Sea beyond. Five mornings a week (Tuesday-Saturday) the daily catch is sold by thirty-or-so fishmongers at La Pescaria. This porticoed retail fish market is a favorite haunt of legendary cooking teacher and indispensable author Marcella Hazan. It's on the Campo de la Beccarie, near the covered store-lined Rialto, the only bridge across the Grand Canal until 1854. Though you should always beware of restaurants with a "Tourist Menu," a visit here should help erase the common, but unfair, misconception that you cannot eat well in Venice.

These ingredients and more: Clams galore, *capasante* (scallops not usually found on menus elsewhere in Italy), *schie* (minuscule sweet grey shrimp), *zotoleti* (the tiniest of cuttlefish), *moscardini* (little purple-red octopi), *peoci* (baby mussels), *soaso* (light-skinned turbot), mullets, eels, dogfish, *passarini* (a cousin of the sole), and *pagamei* (bony little gobies) are a Venetian's birthright. At the table *baccalà mantecato* (dried salted cod, mixed to a paste with olive oil, parsley, and garlic), *antipasto di frutti di*

mare (fish hors d'oeuvres including *grancevola*, local spider crab), *sardine in saor* (fried sardines in a sweet and sour sauce with onions, raisins, and pine nuts), *brodetto di pesce* (a kind of *bouillabaisse*), *risotto alle seppie* (cuttlefish ink blackens the rice), *spaghetti alle caparossoli* (a red-tailed clam found only in the lagoon), *bigoli in salsa* (whole-wheat spaghetti with anchovy sauce), *anguille in umido* (stewed eel) are just a few of the delectable local specialties.



Antipasto di Frutti di Mare which includes small squid, mussels, prawns, and spider crab all fished in the lagoon. Photo by Lucy Gordan

Venetian *cicchetti* resemble Spanish tapas. Meaning "nibbles" in local dialect, they can be small portions of the above-mentioned specialties as well as marinated *scampi*, *folpetti* (tiny octopi), tuna croquettes, anchovies buried in fried mozzarella, and *musetto* (pig-muzzle sausage), just to name a selection. Usually chosen by pointing (no menu) and consumed standing at a counter, they are washed down by *un'ombra de vin* or shadow of wine (traditionally a hearty merlot from the

nearby Friuli region) in a *bacaro* or informal, wood-paneled and dimly-lit wine bar. Not

unexpectedly, the oldest (since 1462) and very atmospheric — with copper pots hanging from the ceiling — Cantina Do Mori (San Polo 429, tel. 39-041-5225401; Closed Sundays. 10 euros (US\$9) is near the Rialto market.

For local flavor, a typically Venetian evening well-spent is *cicchetti*-tasting at several. In a *bacaro*-league all its own for its home-cooking and the most extensive cantina in Venice is cozy (thanks to the courteous hospitality and expertise of sommelier-owner Paolo Lazzari whose mother Colette and sister Laura run the kitchen) old-fashioned Vini Da Gigio (Cannaregio 3628, tel. 39-41-5285140; Closed Mondays, three weeks in January and three weeks in August. 40 euros (US\$35) without wine). Almost



Although it's often faster on foot, Venice is meant to be seen from the water--most romantically of all from a gondola, the very soul and symbol (along with St. Mark's lion) of Venice. Cost: a negotiable 62 euros (\$70.00) for 50 minutes. Photo by Rebecca Rastelli

hidden down the Calle de la Stua from the Ca' d'Oro, the finest example of Venetian Gothic architecture, once home to Romantic poet Robert Browning and now a municipal art museum, it's the only *bacaro* to offer *masorini* (wild duck from the lagoon) and "*moeche*" (soft-shelled crabs in spring and fall only) along with all the other fish-based classics. From here *cicchetti*-hop to nearby Osteria ai 40 Ladroni, Osteria Anice Stellato next door, and Osteria dalla Vedova, all in Cannaregio, near the railroad station and ghetto, Europe's oldest. Mayor Cacciari's favorite *sestiere* or borough, a third of the city's population lives here.

Named for the "vine-covered hidden courtyard," where the characters created by the founder/cartoonist Hugo Pratt, begin their adventures, Corte Sconta

is a former *bacaro* near the Arsenale, the city's historic shipyard. Off the tourists' beaten track, in Castello, the other *sestiere* still inhabited by Venetians, Corte Sconta is difficult to find. So here's how to get there: from the Arsenale vaporetto (waterbus) stop, cross the bridge to the Riva degli Schiavoni and take the third right onto Calle del Forno, which leads into Calle del Pestrin.

Well-worth the labyrinthine hunt, everything about this place is low-profile: the worn counter at the entrance, unsteady wooden tables, butcher-paper table mats; that is, except the attentive service and the out-of-this-world quality of the fish. The array of antipasti: marinated salmon with arugula and pomegranate seeds, spicy spider crab paté on home-made toast, clams with ginger sauce, a warm seafood

salad of sea snails, *calamari* roe, *schie*, sardines *alla livornese*, *alla greca*, and *in saor*, and *baccalà mantecato* on a bed of *polenta* is more than a meal, but who can resist the homemade black spaghetti with scallops and artichokes, delicately-fried *cavasso* (mullet), and homemade biscuits to dip in *zabaione caldo*? Castello 3886, Calle del Pestrin, tel. 39-041-5227024. Reservations recommended. Closed Sundays and Mondays. Vacation: January and two weeks in July or August. 45 euros (US\$40) per

Ever since Patricia Wells, food-critic for The International Herald Tribune, called this former *bacaro*, Osteria da Fiore, the fifth best restaurant in the world, it's been hard to get a table here. Impossible to find unless you take a left at the shop "La Corte" on Campo San Polo, don't listen to anyone who tells you it's been surpassed by Al Covo, a dreadfully over-rated half-Texan dive, or pretentious Ai Gondolieri, the only establishment in town to pride itself on not serving fish.

A nineteenth-century British tourist, Robert Benchley, cabled home: "Streets Full of Water. Please Advise," for Venice is said to have 177 canals, with a total length of 28 miles. By comparison, Amsterdam, appropriately nicknamed "Venice of the North", has 160 canals for a total length of 47 miles, while New Orleanians rely on 172 miles of canals to control the city's 60 inches of rain annually. Venice's canals are regularly dredged to keep them from silting up with mud and rubbish.

person without wine. A special thank-you to Corte Sconta's brother/sister present owner/chefs Claudio and Rita Proietto for teaching the tricks of their trade to their former assistant. Bruno Gavagnin is the talented, if a bit smug, young chef and co-proprietor with witty sommelier Luca di Vita of nearby Osteria Alle Testiere, meaning "headboards," thanks to this ubiquitous decoration. They've transformed this tiny *bacaro* into a 20-seat gem, a local favorite and of Julia Child. Their menu changes daily depending on what's available at La Pescaria. Start with a selection of the day's, usually fish-based, *antipasti* followed by Gavagnin's *gnocchetti* with baby squid and his *scampi alla busara* (shrimp in red pepper and cinnamon sauce) which are not to be missed. *Tiramisù* is Venice's ubiquitous dessert, but Gavagnin turns this cliché into a minor masterpiece. Di Vita's cantina is especially noteworthy for its family-produced small vineyard labels mostly, but not exclusively, from north-east Italy. Castello 5801, Calle del Mondo Novo, tel. 39-041-5227220. Reservations essential. Two seatings: 7:30 or 9 PM. Closed Sundays. Vacation: Christmas-mid-January, and August. L70.000(US\$35) per person without wine. House wine: Cechetto Incrocio Manzoni, 10 euros (US\$9) a liter.



Spaghetti alle seppie. Here the black ink of the cuttlefish colors the pasta. When this dish is made with rice, it's called *risotto alle seppie*. Photo by Lucy Gordan

Da Fiore's self-effacing chef/owner Mara Zanetti Martin, whose menus change daily, inherited her passion for cooking from her caterer paternal grandmother. Her partner and husband Maurizio is master of hospitality and of their extensive top-quality wine cellar. He's graciously assisted by their charming son Damiano, who spent a 2-year hands-on stint at Barbetta, The Doge, and La Laguna in Manhattan.



At the height of the Venetian Republic, in the 15th and 16th centuries, more than 15,000 gondolas plied the lagoon. Today their ever-dwindling number is less than 400. Photo by Fulvio Roiter

Recommended choices: for *antipasti* — marinated hot baby squid on a bed of riced celery, and fried *schie* and zucchini; for pasta — *bigoli in salsa* and the risotto of the day (for two); for main dishes — fried *moeche* (soft-shelled crabs with white polenta), mullets with *radicchio* (red chicory), and *branzino* (sea-bass) with thinly-sliced *puntarelle* (locally-grown curly green chicory). To-die-for: Mara's chocolate cake or apple tart with cinnamon ice-cream, accompanied by Tokaji 6 Puttonyos Betsek or Moscato Fiore di Arancio Alpiene. San Polo 2202, Calle del Scaletter, tel. 39-041-721308. Reservations obligatory. Closed Sundays and Mondays, and the months of January and August. 68 euros (US\$60) without wine and well-worth every euro.

Opened in April 1998, Cip's Club at the heavenly Hotel Cipriani is the newest noteworthy restaurant in Venice. This brainchild of the Manager Director Natale Rusconi, a Doge among hoteliers, is located on the ground floor of 16th-century Palazzetto Nani-Barbaro. Above are four exquisitely-restored junior suites and a mansard for Cipriani guests who want extra privacy. The breath-taking views directly across the Giudecca Canal to Santa Maria della Salute, St. Mark's Square, and the Doge's Palace are

Canaletto at his best, especially in warm weather from "Cip's" floating wooden terrace.

A totally new concept of gastronomy — "Cip's," where witty food-thematic contemporary water-colors elegantly blend with original engravings hung on gentle "Bellini" peach walls, is a first-class restaurant, a pizzeria with wood-burning ovens (hand-built by artisans flown in expressly from Naples), a grill, and Dolci bar, all in one.

After a melt-in-your-mouth house-special *pizza alla pescatora*, the risotto with red chicory from Treviso and red wine sauce is a must. Then it's a toss-up between the *friotin* (fried Adriatic seafood and zucchini with horseradish sauce) and the breast of duck "*peoarada*" (chicken liver sauce). Punch line: savor an unforgettable bitter chocolate mousse perfumed with Sicilian oranges to the strum of Stefano Scutari's splendid nightly guitar. Giudecca 10, tel. 39-041-522408575. Reservations necessary, and welcome aboard the hotel's complimentary launch (a 5-minute ride from St. Mark's Square). Open every-day. Vacation: January. 86 euros (US\$75) without wine.

Also on the island of Giudecca, but at the far end is Harry's Dolci, founded like the hotel and Harry's Bar by Giuseppe Cipriani. With a slightly different fine view, what started as a bar and tea room fuori porta is now a restaurant serving many of the specialties of its main establishment, world-famous but resting-on-its-laurels and over-the-top expensive Harry's Bar downtown, Hemingway's favorite after a duck shoot in the lagoon and birthplace of *carpaccio* and the *Bellini* (a cocktail of fresh peach juice and prosecco). Instead, at dream-like Harry's Dolci the *pasta e fagioli*, the *sformato di melanzane* (eggplant

pie), “*castraure*” (local artichokes when in season) tuna tartar, curried chicken, and the house chocolate cake are all to-die-for. Also for sale is a wide range of home-made preserves and sauces. Giudecca 774. Fondamenta San Biagio, tel. 39-041-5224844. Reservations recommended. Closed Tuesday and from November 1 to mid-March. 69 euros (US\$60).

A welcome break from the densely packed streets of the city and only short vaporetto ride away (a matter of minutes on the no.52 from San Zaccaria or 13 and 23 from Fondamente Nuove) is a visit to Murano, a cluster of small islands in the lagoon connected by footbridges. It’s been the center of the glassmaking industry since 1291, when the furnaces and glass craftsmen moved here from the city. The main attraction of course, is a demonstration of the glass-blowing technique followed by shopping at showroom prices, but leave time to enjoy a fish-feast elbow-to-elbow with the artisans at the rustic, wooden-beamed trattoria “Busa alla Torre,” owned by the roly-poly, bearded extrovert Gabriele “Lele”



Busa alla Torre on Murano. Photo by Lucy Gordan

Masiol (Campo Santo Stefano 3, tel. 39-041-739662, open only at lunch time in front of the splendid Romanesque church of St. Peter) 46-51 euros (US\$40-45).

It is impossible to feel lukewarm about Venice. D.H. Lawrence called it an “abhorrent, green, slippery city;” Thomas Mann “half fairy-tale, half snare.”



Livio De Marchi's wooden vehicles have included a Fiat cinquecento, a Jaguar, Cinderella's "glass" slipper, her coach, a Mercedes and a Ferrari. Two are in Barnum and Bailey's "Believe it or not Museum" in Florida. His wooden Ferrari is, appropriately, at The Venetian in Las Vegas. Photo by Lucy Gordan

Others — Dante, Goethe, Byron, Browning, Dickens, Turner, Monet, Renoir, Whistler, and Woody Allen, not to mention both Churchill and Hitler — have loved her dearly. Certainly Venice is at its most magical during Carnevale, a vibrant, playful festival that peaks the week before Lent and lets the Venetian gift for intrigue come into its own. Join the local revellers in Cannaregio or Castello or the masked crowds at the elegant, smokey-mirrored historic 18th-century coffee houses Quadri's or Florian's in Piazza San Marco dubbed “the finest drawing room in Europe” by Napoleon. • • • •