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Travel

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A Day in Treviso: What to Visit and What to Eat and Where

One of the “Little Venice’s” gastronomic specialties is radicchio



Italian Hours

Lucy Gordan



Radicchio tardivo from Treviso. Courtesy of Consorzio Tutela Radicchio Rosso di Treviso IGP

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Treviso isn't a destination on a traveler's first itinerary to Italy, but only a half-hour train ride from *La Serenissima*, it's worth a daytrip especially for medievalists, poets, and foodies.

Originally named "Tarvisium, Treviso became a *municipium* in 89 BC after the Romans added Cisalpine Gaul to their dominions, but, revered in verse by Dante and Petrarch, its heyday and significant monuments date to the Middle Ages: its massive city walls; the Romanesque Cathedral dedicated to St. Peter with its cupola later painted by Tiepolo and its altarpiece by Titian; its diocesan museum next door; the Dominican Church of San Nicola with the first artwork depicting eyeglasses; the Church of San Francesco with the tombs of Dante's oldest son Pietro, who wrote the first commentary of the *Divine Comedy*, and of Petrarch's oldest daughter Francesca; and the splendid *Piazza dei Signori*.

Nearby is the city's unique and humorous monument: the marble "**Fountain of Tits**".

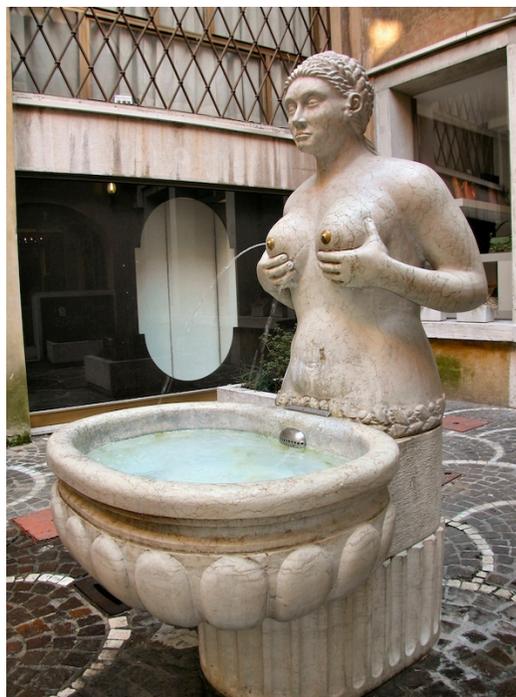
One of Treviso's numerous fountains, it was commissioned in 1559 by Chief Magistrate Alvise Da Ponte after a serious drought. Thereafter, as long as Treviso remained under Venetian rule (until 1797), at every election of a new Chief Magistrate, during the three-day celebration red wine flowed from one of her breasts and white from the other. Then back to water as it is today.

Nicknamed "Little Venice" since the Middle Ages, Treviso has also been home to a network of canals, once a water link to Venice, and to a picturesque fish market on an island in the river Sile. Still a commercial center, today it headquarters Geox shoes and Benetton clothing and accessories, and prides itself as the **birthplace of the ubiquitous dessert tiramisù** and since September 30 of the restaurant, bar, and shop "Treviso Tiramisù".

Another KM-zero gastronomic specialty is *radicchio rosso* or red chicory, a winter vegetable cultivated in 24 municipalities of the Veneto's provinces of Padova and Venice, but mainly of Treviso. Often mistakenly considered a lettuce or cabbage, it's planted in late summer with its harvest starting in October/November and ending in late February/beginning of March.

Rich in antioxidants and salts as well as vitamins A, B, C, and K, there are two types of red radicchio with white stripes in Treviso. One is *precoce*, with wider leaves and a less bitter taste than radicchio *tardivo*, which can only be harvested after two frosts. It's considered "The King of Radicchios" and often called "The Red Flower of Winter".

After harvest both types are tied in bunches, immersed in tanks of spring water held at a temperature between 54°-59° Fahrenheit, and covered with straw, leaves or shredded corn stalks and a tarp so that it's kept in the dark for 15 days. Thus, not being able to produce chlorophyll, they become blanched.



The Fountain of Tits. Courtesy of Servizio Cultura-Turismo, Comune di Treviso



The Fish Market, Courtesy of Servizio Cultura-Turismo, Comune di Treviso

Radicchio's origins are uncertain. Known to Pliny the Elder, who swore by its blood purification and sleep-aid properties, it supposedly first appeared in northern Italy during the 16th century in the town of Dosson di Casier at the gates of Treviso because birds dropped some seed on the bell tower there which the friars found and cultivated.

This could be true because radicchio's first artistic representation also dates to this period: Leandro Da Ponte Bassano's painting *Le nozze di Cana* (1562-3) today found in The Louvre. Its radicchio is in a basket with other fruits and vegetables in its lower left hand corner. Instead, radicchio's first certain northern Italian written documentation dates to much later: the second half of the 1800s.



Leandro Da Ponte Bassano's Le Nozze di Cana, photo credit : Wikipedia

This date coincides with the introduction of blanching in the Veneto by the Belgian park-and-garden designer Francesco Van De Borre, who came to Treviso in 1870 to create an English garden in his Villa Palazzi. The procedure of blanching chicory was already common in Belgium.

Radicchio's popularity grew thanks to the agronomist from Lombardy Giuseppe Benzi who founded the first fair dedicated to radicchio, held on December 20th, 1900 in the Loggia of Piazza dei Signori.

This year the 114th Antica Mostra del Radicchio Rosso di Treviso IGP with cooking shows and tastings will be held nearby from December 6th-11th.



Piazza dei Signori, Courtesy of Servizio Cultura-Turismo, Comune di Treviso

To sample more, head to *Toni del Spin* for *Soppressa con polenta e radicchio* or *risotto al radicchio* or to the birthplace of *tiramisù* Michelin-starred *Le Beccherie* for the *Spaghetto al Vino Raboso* with radicchio. Otherwise, I recommend *Ristorante Antico Morer* or newly-founded next door to the fish market *Med*, both also Michelin-starred and for fish, another local specialty.

Radicchio can be eaten raw like a salad, but if you can't travel to Treviso now, for many cooked radicchio recipes click on www.radicchioditreviso.it.

Be sure to have a bottle of prosecco on hand, the local liquid specialty.

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Italian Hours

Former editor at the American Academy in Rome and at the UN's Food and Agriculture Organization, with journalistic accreditation in Italy and the Vatican, I'm culture editor of the US monthly Inside the Vatica...

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