

FOOD FOR THOUGHT

■ BY MOTHER MARTHA

I recently visited the charming walled city of Treviso in the Veneto region of north-east Italy. Originally named Tarvisium, it became a municipium in 89 BC after the Romans added Cisalpine Gaul to their dominions. Christianity spread to Treviso early. Tradition records that St. Prodocimus, a Greek, who had been ordained by St. Peter, brought the Catholic faith to Treviso and surrounding areas. By the 4th century the Christian population was sufficiently large to merit a bishop. The first documented Bishop was John the Pious, who began his episcopacy in 396 AD.

Today Treviso is home to a medieval cathedral dedicated to St. Peter and the first artwork depicting eyeglasses, a fresco portrait of Cardinal Hugh of Provence painted in 1352 by Thomas of Modena in the magnificent Dominican Church of St. Nicholas, also medieval (see my “Eyeglasses-Made to Magnify God’s Word,” ITV, April 2006). It’s also home to a network of canals that were once a water link to Venice, a picturesque fish market on an island in the city’s River Sile, and the headquarters of Geox shoes and of the clothing and accessories retailer Benetton, as well as the birthplace of the ubiquitous dessert tiramisù (see my “Tiramisù or Pick-Me-Up: Italy’s World-Famous Dessert,” ITV, January 2019).

Another local gastronomical specialty is radicchio rosso, or red chicory, a winter vegetable cultivated in 24 municipalities of the Veneto’s provinces of Padova, Venice, and (primarily) Treviso. Here the soil is fertile and especially rich in water, the summers hot and the winters cold. Often mistakenly considered a lettuce or cabbage and planted in late summer, red chicory’s harvest starts in October/November and ends at the end of February/beginning of March.

Rich in antioxidants and salts including potassium and phosphorus as well as vitamins A, B, C, and K, there are two types of dark red radicchio in Treviso with white stripes. One is *precoce*, with wider leaves and a less bitter taste than *radicchio tardivo*, which can only be harvested after two frosts. *Radichio tardivo* is 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 maintained between 54°-59° Fahrenheit and covered with

TREVISO'S RADICCHIO ROSSO VENETO'S WINTER VEGETABLE



Cooking the *radicchio rosso* or red chicory, a winter vegetable cultivated in 24 municipalities of the Veneto’s provinces of Padova, Venice, and (primarily) Treviso.

straw, leaves or shredded corn stalks and a tarp, and kept in the dark for 15 days, becoming blanched because they don’t produce chlorophyll.

The process was introduced to 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.

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

Radichio’s first artistic representation also dates to this period: a painting by Leandro Da Ponte Bassano (1550-1599) entitled *Le nozze di Cana* or *The Marriage at Cana*, which dates to 1562-3 and today is in the Louvre. Its *radichio* is in a basket with other fruits and vegetables in the lower lefthand corner. The first certain documentation dates to much later: the second half of the 1800s.

We know that *radichio*’s popularity grew thanks to the agronomist from Lombardy Giuseppe Benzi, who moved to Treviso to teach and founded the first fair dedicated to *radichio*, held on December 20th, 1900 in the Loggia di Treviso’s magnificent medieval main square, the Piazza dei Signori. Last year, from December 8-11, 2022, the 113th Antica Mostra del Radicchio Rosso di Treviso IGP, with cooking shows and tastings, took place in the nearby Piazzetta Aldo Moro; this year the Mostra will be held again around the weekend of the Immaculate Conception.

If you’re still hungry after the *radichio* fair, head to the birthplace of tiramisù Le Beccherie for the Spaghetto al Vino Raboso with *radichio* or Ristorante Antico Morer for fish (both Michelin-starred), Toni del Spin for Sopressa con polenta e *radichio* or risotto al *radichio*, or Hostaria Dai Naneti for local color.

Radichio can be eaten raw like a salad, and if you can’t travel to Treviso right now, many cooked *radichio* recipes can be found at www.radicchioditreviso.it. Be sure to have a bottle of prosecco on hand, the local liquid specialty (See my “Prosecco: Pliny the Elder’s Favorite Drink,” ITV, January 2020). ○

Left to right: Treviso’s Cathedral, Piazza dei Signori in Florence, and Leandro Da Ponte’s painting

