

FOOD TOUR

VENICE

ITALY



Venice

WHERE ON EARTH

# *In Search of Venetian Fare*

*by* CATHERINE VAN BRUNSCHOT



## WHEN YOU VISIT THE MAGNETIC city of Venice, two things are for certain:

1) You will get lost.

Wander just a few steps off the tourist trail, and soon you'll be mired among the tangle of tiny bridges and meandering canals. GPS is marginally useful here (notice the number of visitors staring mystified at their phones) and paper maps become a test of both puzzle-solving and visual acuity. This, despite the city's efforts to label every bridge, canal and alleyway and to post periodic arrows pointing toward Piazza San Marco or the Rialto Bridge.

But embrace the bewilderment and wander anyway — it's part of the enchantment. You'll find your way eventually. It's an island, right?

2) You will be hard-pressed to find quality Venetian food in the company of locals.»

PHOTOS FROM LEFT *Canal in Venice; Gondola at the dock.*





SERVES 4–6, AS AN APPETIZER

## Sarde in Saor

### Sweet & Sour Sardines

*FOOD WRITER and cookbook author Emiko Davies makes a habit of delving into historical Italian cookbooks and here she shares the recipe for this classic Venetian dish. Raisins and pine nuts were later additions to the original 14<sup>th</sup>-century recipe; then, as now, the dish is best served a day or two after preparation.*

**Fresh Sardines** 12, cleaned, heads and backbone removed, butterflied

**Flour** for dusting

**Vegetable, Seed or Olive Oil** for frying

**White Wine**  
¼ cup

**Raisins** a handful

**White Onion**  
1, finely sliced

**White Wine Vinegar**  
250 ml

**Whole Clove** 1, ground or crushed

**Coriander Seeds** 1 tsp, ground or crushed

**Freshly Ground Black Pepper**  
to taste

**Pine Nuts**  
a handful

- 1 DUST** the sardine fillets in flour and deep fry in plenty of oil until golden and crisp. Season with salt and set aside on some paper towel to drain until needed.
- 2 SOAK** the raisins in the white wine to soften them. Meanwhile, sauté the white onion gently in some olive oil until transparent, then add the vinegar, pepper and spices. Let it cook for a few minutes then remove from the heat.
- 3 IN** a small terrine or deep dish, place a layer of sardines, top them with some of the onions, some of the raisins (drained) and pine nuts, and continue layering until the sardines are used up, then top with a layer of onions, raisins, pine nuts and finish with the vinegar sauce poured over the top. Cover with plastic wrap and allow to marinate at least 24 hours before serving.
- 4 SERVE** as part of an antipasto. These are best eaten at room temperature, removing from the fridge a couple of hours before serving.

Recipe courtesy of [www.emikodavies.com](http://www.emikodavies.com). Watch for Davies' next cookbook *Tortellini at Midnight* to be released in March 2019.



## ...Casanova is said to have been a regular here...

«Venice's perennial magnetism means that tourists outnumber city residents vastly for most of the year. The result is a proliferation of restaurants attempting to cater to the masses — a culinary goal that rarely results in good cuisine. Consider the high price of shipping all ingredients from the mainland — along with the Venetian predilection for eating much later than the average tourist — and you'll understand why you're eating expensive generic food among strangers speaking everything but Italian.

Enter **Urban Adventures' Cicchetti & Wine Tour**.

It probably won't break your habit of eating unreasonably early (in fact, this tour celebrates that habit, with starting times of 11:30 am and 5:15 pm). But it *will* lead you to tasty and authentic Venetian food where you're likely to rub elbows with a few locals.

The tour zeroes in on that most persistent of Venetian culinary traditions: cicchetti (pronounced chee-keh-tee), savoury bites of finger food akin to Spanish tapas. Typically accompanied by a small glass of house wine called an *ombra* or 'shadow,' cicchetti are served across the city from the counters of cubbyhole stand-up bars known as bacari.

It's a social institution that dates back to the Middle Ages, when fishermen coming ashore would duck into a bacaro for a bite and a drink. Now they're sought out by vendors and shoppers for a quick lunch, students in search of a cheap meal, and workers looking for a pre-dinner nibble and drink at the end of the day.

The tour begins in Campo della Maddalena, a quiet square just off the crowded Strada Nuova artery. Here, our guide, Iole, outlines what we might expect of our midday adventure: a three-hour amble to five different bacari that's to begin with a *traghetto* ride across the Grand Canal.

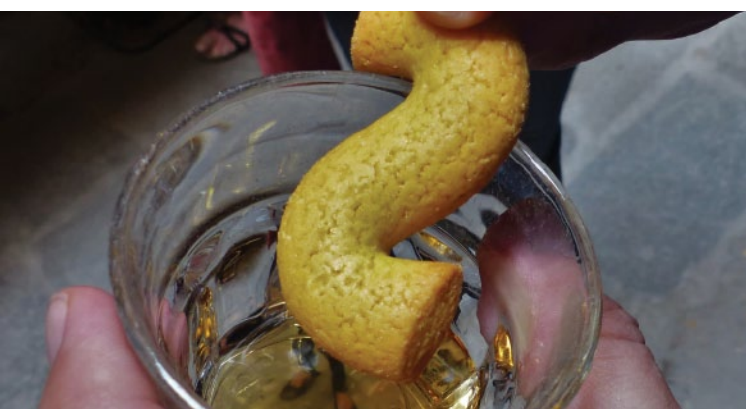
*Traghetto* means 'ferry' in Italian and it's these spartan workhorse gondolas that shuttle locals back and forth in the gaps between bridges along Venice's main waterway. Compared to their more elegant and romantic counterparts, *traghetti* are a steal at two euro a ride (70 cents for locals), a small thrill for those unwilling to shell out 80 euro for a private gondola float, and a four-minute reprieve for flagging feet.

We disembark at the Rialto market, where Venetians have been purchasing their produce and seafood since 1097. Several bacari are tucked nearby, for ready access to fresh market ingredients with which to craft their daily cicchetti. Many bacari have a long history in Venice, but as the popularity of street food has surged in recent years, new cicchetti vendors continue to pop up.»





PHOTOS FROM TOP Osteria al Sacro e Profano; Cicchetti tasting from All'Arco; Cicchetti and takeaway at WENice; Classic Venetian finish at Sacro e Profano — Esse Buranei and sweet wine.



Cook



ITALY

SERVES 4-6, AS AN APPETIZER

## Baccalà Mantecato

### Cod Mousse Antipasto

*THIS RECIPE dates to the 1400s when dried Norwegian cod became a common import in Venice. While baccalà in other parts of Italy refers to salt-preserved cod, in Venice this term describes cod that is air-dried (also called stockfish). Both need to be soaked for two or more days, with frequent water changes, before commencing this recipe. Fortunately, stoccafisso and baccalà may often be bought pre-soaked. Purists will whip the cod and oil together with a wooden spoon and will prepare their own polenta; others may prefer to use a mixer or an immersion blender (although the texture will be different) and purchase tubes of cooked polenta from the supermarket. The mousse may also be served on crostini.*

**Air-Dried Cod**  
(stoccafisso  
or stockfish)

500 g,  
pre-soaked

**Bay Leaf** 1

**Garlic** 1-2 cloves,  
peeled

**Olive Oil** ½ cup

**Salt and Freshly  
Ground Black  
Pepper** to taste

**Crostini or  
Grilled Polenta**  
to serve

**Chopped  
Parsley**  
to garnish

- COVER** pre-soaked cod with fresh cold water. Add the bay leaf and 1 garlic clove and bring to a boil.
- COOK** the fish until tender (test with a fork), about 20 minutes.
- DRAIN** the fish; discard the bay leaf and garlic. Allow to cool slightly.
- REMOVE** any skin and bones. Break the fish into small pieces in a mixer bowl. Add another clove of minced garlic, if you like.
- BEAT** the fish with a mixer, gradually adding the olive oil in a slow drizzle, until the mixture is creamy. Season with salt and pepper to taste.
- SPREAD** over crostini or grilled rectangles of polenta. Garnish with chopped parsley, if desired.



THIS PHOTO *All'Arco* patrons spill into the street.

## Why Ombra?

EXPLANATIONS VARY as to why Venetians call the small glass of local wine that accompanies *cicchetti* an *ombra*, or 'shadow.' Some say it refers to the historical practice of wine vendors setting up shop in the shadow of the bell tower in Piazza San Marco. Over time, the expression *Andiamo a bere all'ombra del campanile* ("Let's go drink in the shade of the bell tower") became abbreviated to *Andiamo a bere un'ombra* ("Let's go drink a shadow"). Others suggest the term is a reference to the small serving being just a 'shadow' of a regular glass of wine.



«Our first tasting stop is one of the latter. Opened in April 2017, WEnice Gastronomia is a bright, contemporary space that business partners Luca Franchin and Matteo Finotti like to refer to as a 'Bacaro 2.0' for its 21<sup>st</sup>-century spin on traditional Venetian recipes. Its large glass case is a jewel box of small bites, salads and takeaway items, and its gleaming walls sometimes serve as a canvas for street and graphic artist, Zentequerente.

Here, Sommelier Franchin greets us with flutes of sparkling Veneto prosecco, then offers squid cooked for three hours in its own ink, served over prized white Venetian polenta. The grainy goodness is the perfect foil for the tender morsels of squid — but in anticipation of those who find its appearance a mite daunting, Franchin is quick to offer a variety of alternative bites.

Plunging deeper into the San Polo district, we wind our way to a small square spanned by a brick archway, where shoppers, market vendors and stroller-pushing millennials spill out of Osteria All'Arco ('Tavern at the Arch'). The crowd squeezing up to the counter helmed by father-and-son-team Francesco and Matteo Pinto leaves no room for tables or embellishments in this bacaro — but ambience is not the point. They're here for the quality cicchetti that range seasonally from stuffed zucchini flowers to *fegato alla veneziana* (calf's liver with parsley and onion), and the excellent salumi (cured meats) piled high on large crostini slices. We dive into a platter of the latter along with a glass of Merlot, the most popular wine variety consumed by Venetians.

Most bicari close mid-afternoon, then reopen from around 5:30 to 8:30 pm for the aperitivo crowd. All'Arco shuts down daily at 2:30 pm, and the wise know to get there early before the selection thins out.

Just down the street, Cantina do Mori ('Cellar of Moors') keeps more traditional hours. And well it might, as Venice's oldest bicaro, reputed to have operated continuously here since 1462. Casanova is said to have been a regular amid the empty wine barrels that serve as stand-up tables. Copper pots dangle from the ceiling, and the long bar groans under the weight of platters of toothpick-speared delectables: sausages, pecorino cheese, melon and prosciutto, and seafood that ranges from tiny squid to fresh oysters to sea urchins.

The wine list is long, too, some dispensed from wicker-sheathed demijohns arrayed against the wall. We sip the house Pinot Bianco, a perfect pairing for crostini topped with *baccalà mantecato* — cod whipped with olive oil and garlic according to a Venetian recipe that's as old as Do Mori itself.

During a brief lull, the pair manning the counter school me in the best way to order cicchetti: simply point to what looks good and they'll put your selections on a plate. You'll be charged by the piece (around 1.5 to 2 euro) — and you won't be limited by your knowledge of Italian.

Around the corner, Osteria alla Ciuma ('The Crew's Tavern') has been operating for a decade in an old Rialto storeroom that's been renovated to look like a boat's interior. The crowd here includes a couple of *ombristi* — elderly Venetian men who make regular rounds of bicari for an *ombra* and a chat

— a sort of informal social club, and a sure sign of quality and good value cicchetti.


Manager Marco Paola and his team are best known for their exceptional *frittura*: fried cicchetti that might include artichokes, prawns, stuffed zucchini flowers and anything seasonal — and always includes *polpette* (balls of meat, veg, or fish). But their marinated offerings are popular too, and appear on our crostini platter in interesting combinations with cheeses and salumi.

The chalkboard wine list includes a hand-drawn map coded with the origins of the wines available by the glass. They're all from the Veneto, including our pour of refreshing Raboso *frizzante*, a semi-sparkling red.

We head next toward the Rialto Bridge, stopping just out of sight of the iconic span for our final tasting venue. Osteria al Sacro e Profano ('Tavern of the Sacred and Profane') is owned by musician Valerio Silvestri, formerly of Pitura Freska, a popular Venetian reggae band — and the trumpets that hang on the walls are his. It's quiet here, save for a couple of diners finishing their lunch, but the takeout window speaks of a large night-time following spilling through the lane (which our guide, Iole, confirms).

Silvestri pours a fresh, dry Manzoni Bianco — a good accompaniment to his attractively composed crostini (featuring artichoke spread or olive tapenade along with cheese or meat, tomatoes, olives and a balsamic drizzle). And because this is our last stop of the tour, he provides the classic Venetian finish: a glass of dessert wine (in this case a sweet Malvasia) along with *Esse Buranei*, the S-shaped butter cookie from the Venetian island of Burano.

Drawn by the clutch of cozy red-clothed tables and a menu fleshed out with pasta and dessert, my husband and I stash a business card and vow to return for a meal and the *sarde in saor* (fried sardines with marinated onions, raisins, and pine nuts). But in the end, I need to look elsewhere for this medieval Venetian standard.

Sad, but true — I'm afraid we got lost. 

The **Cicchetti and Wine Tour of Venice** is offered by Urban Adventures, a division of Intrepid Travel. The 2.5 hour tour is conducted twice daily by local guides, with midday programming varying slightly from evening programming due to venue opening hours. Check out other Venice food tours offered by Urban Adventures at [www.urbanadventures.com/destination/Venice-tours](http://www.urbanadventures.com/destination/Venice-tours).

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