



Behind the Masks

While the spectacular icons of Venice are a must to view, yet it is the life of the Venetians that call for stepping off the main streets into little alleys.

Venice is a beautiful old girl, but in her senior years she can be a touch contrary.

You need to be prepared to take her as you find her: in winter, when she's relatively free of tourists, she's also often grey, windy and flooded; in summer, when the sunshine sparkles off the Istrian marble of her churches and palaces, she's often packed to the gills with camera-toting day trippers. My advice is to take your chances in winter (after all a little fog can add to her sense of mystery), to stay in the grandest hotel you can afford (rates are far more reasonable in winter) and to eat in the cheapest osterie and bars, where the food is authentic.

To recover from the cold and experience local fare, visit the bacari (singular: bacaro) or snack bars, which the Venetians frequent. By avoiding anything with a "menu turistico" displayed, and popping into the many little bars scattered throughout Venice, you will have the chance to experience

and taste Venice as the locals do. As it does for all Italians, a Venetian's day starts, ends and is punctuated by, a quick stop in a local bar for an espresso, grappa, and maybe a little bite (singular: *cichetto*; plural: *cichetti*). Some common *cichetti* are deep-fried stuffed olives, deep-fried artichokes, *baccalà* (salted cod) in different forms, fresh seafood (including mussels, baby clams, octopus and squid), pickled sardines and vegetables (in *saor*), *prosciutto* and various other cold meats, assorted *offal* (including tripe and tendons), and a range of local cheeses. As with *tapas* in Spain, they can make a great meal on their own or a good precursor to something more substantial.

Venice has a reputation for being touristy and expensive... well the two often go hand-in-hand. But with a 3-day *vaporetto* pass (which will even get you to Lido, Murano, Burano and the other lagoon islands) costing just 72 euros, delicious 2-course meals in local *osterie* costing 15 - 20 euros and a stand-up coffee and *paninni* in a *caffé* or bar for 5 euros, suddenly Venice becomes affordable!

What follows are a few of my favourite *bacari*. They are everywhere, just keep an eye out for where the locals are eating and for signs that say *bacaro* or *osteria*.

Bar Ducale

A stand-up only bar a few minutes from busy (and touristy) Piazza San Marco, great for a breakfast of coffee and pastries, or lunch of coffee and *paninni*, *tramezzini* (white bread sandwich triangles with deliciously moist fillings), or toasted sandwiches. They also have a good range of local wines, grappa and *digestivi*, and you know it's good when you see the local *gondoliers* throwing down a quick espresso here between fares!

Calle delle Ostreghe, San Marco, tel: +39 041 521-0002

Osteria Carla

Tucked away off fashionable shopping street *Frezzeria*, just west of Piazza San Marco, this crowded *osteria* is a favourite of locals. Come here at lunchtime and you may well find yourself sharing a table with a local on his lunch break, but that's half the charm. The menu, as in many of the *bacari*, is spoken, but the friendly waiter does his best to make sure you understand the offerings, and if all else fails, just point. Good soups and pasta, as well as local specialities such as *sarde in saor* (sardines in a sweet and sour onion marinade) and creamy *baccalà* with fried polenta, are all quick, tasty and filling. They also serve a great *tiramisù* and other daily dessert specials.

Ramo Primo Corte Contarini, San Marco 1535, tel: +39 041 523-7855

Bar Mercà

A real gem just beside the Rialto Markets (past the vegetable stalls and just up from the horse butcher), this little hole-in-the-wall with a couple of stools out the front has excellent coffee, local wine and grappa, and delicious small *paninni* (try the *lardo*-thin slices of fatty pork belly, or the creamy *baccalà*).

Campo Bella Vienna (Erberia), San Polo 213, tel: +39 347 100-2583





Sacro e Profano

Just around the corner from the Rialto Markets is this little bacaro, with a menu written on pieces of paper stuck in the window; otherwise there're the mixed plates of cichetti selected from the display at the front counter, meats, grilled vegetables, cheese and bread. Local wine is on offer, unusually however, coffee is not. If the fuse blows halfway through lunch, it just adds to the atmosphere, they'll have the lights and pleasant 1960s music back on soon. "It's worse", the friendly barman will tell you, "when it happens at dinner." Eclectic art and memorabilia, such as glasses, bottles and an interesting crucifix collection, perhaps give the place its name.

Corner Rialto Vecchio o Parangon & Ramo Secondo del Parangon, San Polo 502

Enoteca Mascareta

This wine bar, just off Piazza Santa Maria Formosa a few minutes' walk from San Marco, offers shelf after shelf of fabulous wines as well as a serious range of grappa and some good cichetti. In an adjoining room, they also offer a short à la carte menu served at wooden tables covered with paper over linen and casual but friendly service. Local specialities such as cuttlefish in tomato sauce with thick slices of white polenta or herb-stuffed ravioli with a little melted butter and Parmesan are a good choice. There's no wine list, so browse the shelves, or tell the waiter what you're after and trust his judgement. For a more extensive menu visit their sister establishment, **Osteria Mascheron**, just a few shops along the same street.

Calle Lunga Santa Maria Formosa, 5183, tel: +39 041 523-0744

Getting away from the tourist attractions around Piazza San Marco and Rialto to more urban areas, such as the northern sestieri (Venice is divided into six ancient administrative districts) of Cannaregio, where over a third of the city's residents live, is an easy way to experience the real Venice. It's a great area for local bars, inexpensive trattoria and artisans' workshops such as that of glass master Vittorio Costantini who produces an amazing array of lifelike glass insects, fish and birds at Calle del Fumo 5311 (see www.vittoriocostantini.it).

Trattoria Ca' D'oro 'Alla Vedova'

A conveniently short walk from the Ca' d'Oro vaporetto stop (straight up Calle Ca' d'Oro, across Strada Nuova, and there's its light shining amiably at the end of the street), this bar is

known by Venetians as one of the best around. It's run by three friendly young men who are happy to try to converse in any language necessary to serve you well. They offer a great range of cichetti (the deep-fried artichokes are so good, just try and stop at one serve). A mixed plate of meatballs, fried eggplant, zucchini, carrots, pepperonata, cheese-topped tomatoes, and caramelised onions could be a meal in itself. More substantial meals include a great selection of local tastes, such as spaghetti vongole, pappardelle with spider crab, artichoke lasagna, and cuttlefish in its own ink with white polenta. And to finish, another local speciality, excellent tiramisù. An accordion player may wander in to serenade at some stage in the evening, and after a few glasses of local wine even the Moroccan-looking boys selling roses won't seem annoying. Despite this bar's reputation, Cannaregio is far enough off the tourist trail, that few visitors find their way here. If you want a table, make a booking or get there early, otherwise join the throng at the bar. Beware the young local red house wine, it's very young—still fermenting I suspect—and may be an acquired taste.

Calle Ca' d'Oro, Cannaregio 3912, tel: +39 041 528-5324

Vini da Gigio

This restaurant consisting several adjoining rooms along the side of a small canal with ancient-looking walls and heavy exposed beams, is packed with well-dressed locals every night. It offers a more formal dining experience than the local bars and osterie, but is still very friendly and reasonably priced and has an excellent wine list. Venice has a passion for crudo (raw seafood), and Gigio's does it very well. Their antipasto of lightly smoked fish is also excellent, as are the razor clams dusted in flour and deep-fried. Pasta such as penne with pistachio and gorgonzola, or gnocchetti with pesto and shrimp, are also delicious, and osso bucco is given a new twist made with cured meat rather than fresh and served with the local white polenta. Desserts such as crostata (pie) with pear and amaretti are also well worth trying.

Fondamenta di Chiesa, Cannaregio 3628/A, tel: +39 041 528-5140

Osteria al Bombe

This is one place to give the cichetti a miss and go straight to the long wooden communal table (fashioned something like a gondola at either end) with paper placemats, basic



tableware and a menu heavy with local seafood. Dishes to look out for include the gnocchi with either creamy zucchini, or the more typical tomato sauce, and soft polenta served with authentic local salami (containing horse and donkey meat) and mushrooms.

Calle Forno (Corner Calle Oca), Cannaregio 4297/98, tel: +39 041 520-5175

Trattoria Cea

This is a real local gem, full of workmen in for the lunch menu: a choice of two courses and a side dish for 13 euros. It's basic with plastic tablecloths, friendly service and great local dishes such as fritto misto of tiny prawns and cuttlefish, spaghetti vongole, creamy-salty-smooth baccalà mantecata, sardines in soar, and serves surprisingly good grappa.

Calle del Fumo (near Campiello Widman), Cannaregio, tel: +39 041 523-7450

Bar la Cantina

A great spot for the Venetian speciality of pasta e fagioli (a soupy bean and pasta stew), as well as small plates of vongole with lemon, prosciutto sliced on the machine at the counter, cheese cut fresh from a large round of grana padano, local wine and grappa. A good find on an otherwise touristy street that has a Body Shop, Lush and a McDonalds along its busy length.

Strada Nuova (at Ponte San Felice), 3689 Cannaregio, tel: +39 041 522-8258

Finally, make sure you splash out a few times, with a drink in the bar of one of the grand hotels such as the Cipriani or Gritti Palace. And a trip to Venice isn't complete without a visit to the definitive Venetian bar started in 1931 by the Cipriani family, **Harry's Bar**. De rigueur is a Bellini (the famous cocktail of prosecco and white peach nectar, developed in the 1930s by Harry's founder Giuseppe Cipriani) and a (very expensive) Croque Monsieur wrapped in a crisp, white paper napkin. Most bacari are closed Sundays and Harry's is open seven days, so if you need an excuse, this is as good as any.

Calle Vallaresso, San Marco 1323, tel: +39 041 528-5777

Skip the gondola ride and take one of the wonderful old wooden speedboats across the lagoon to the colourful island of Burano for lunch at **Trattoria al Gatto Nero**, where owner

Max, the third generation of his family to run the restaurant, makes every guest feel welcome. This restaurant has an old world charm and a menu full of local seafood. The seafood antipasti is so large it comes on several plates and, depending on the season, may contain king scallop in a slightly spicy tomato sauce, tiny black mussels and vongole in garlicky olive oil, poached cuttlefish white roe, steamed mantis prawn, octopus salad with herbs and celery, baccalà of snapper and tiny grey prawns atop a grilled square of white polenta. And save room for the excellent tiramisù.

Fondamenta Giudecca, 88, tel: +39 041 730-120

Where to Stay

Just as eating like the locals works well in Venice, so too does sleeping like the famous. Tchaikovsky wrote his Fourth Symphony while staying at the **Londra Palace**, just past the end of the Grand Canal with beautiful views over Saint Mark's Basin to the Palladio-designed church of San Giorgio Maggiore on the island of San Giorgio. Turn right as you step out of the hotel and you're in Piazza San Marco in a couple of minutes, or turn left and wander along the waterfront to far-from-touristy eastern Castello and the peaceful Parco delle Rimembranze and beautiful public gardens. Sunset and sunrise are particularly beautiful from a balcony at the Londra Palace with the colours reflected in the water, gondolas bobbing at their moorings and people coming and going along the length of the bustling Riva degli Schiavoni. Do Leoni, the hotel's restaurant, has a terrace right on the Riva (perfect for people watching), superbly light gnocchi, a good tiramisù and excellent pastries at breakfast.

Riva degli Schiavoni, 4171 Castello, tel: +39 041 520-0533, www.hotelondra.it

To navigate Venice it's important to have a good map, as finding specific addresses can be difficult. Navigate by street names, bridges and campos (piazzas) rather than street numbers. Best of all, don't worry if you don't find the places listed above, or you arrive on their weekly day off. Just look out for bacari down side streets and wherever you see the locals eating. Most are closed one day a week (often Sunday) and many don't accept credit cards. And don't be afraid to point to what you want or ask what the local specialities are. You'll quickly win the barman's trust if you say you'd like to try a local wine or grappa and let him select for you. **T**