

MY TOP FOUR VENICE EATERIES

A top Italian food critic hails Venice's culinary tradition and picks his favourites from the wealth of restaurants hidden throughout its sestieri. By **Marcello Coronini**

Over the past few years, the number of high-quality restaurants and *bacari* (a Venetian *osteria*) in the city has grown. Their strength lies in combining a dash of creativity with the Venetian lagoon's twin culinary strengths—fish and vegetables. Once the gateway to the Orient, Venice dominated the trade routes for salt, sugar, spices and aromatic herbs, coffee and chocolate, while simultaneously exporting local culinary traditions. It was the Venetians who first swapped honey for sugar, and who first introduced coffee and chocolate, in establishments such as the Florian and the Quadri, which have since become world-famous.

The Venetian lagoon and its islands offer a wide variety of outstanding produce that is native to the area and cannot be found anywhere else, such as a variety of soft crabs that shed their exoskeleton, known as *moeche*, or *castraure*, the small, purplish artichokes from the island of Sant'Erasmus. The Rialto market is a must-see; dating back to the 13th century, it is the oldest market in Venice. It specialises, of course, in fish and vegetables.

LA MASCARETA

Calle Lunga Santa Maria Formosa, 5183

TEL: 041 52 30 744

www.ostemaurolorenzoni.it

Closed: Wednesday and Thursday

Average price without wine: €40



• At La Mascareta, you will find great-quality wines and an unusual and entertaining brand of hospitality. An old restored *bacaro* that exudes charm and history, La Mascareta is run by Mauro Lorenzon, the founder and president of the International Association of Enoiteche (the word "enoiteca" comes from the adjective "enoico", which means "related to wine"). Among the controlled chaos of the place, with books and wine bottles scattered around, he serves a selection of simple and hearty dishes as well as more refined plates, such as oysters brought in fresh from Brittany every day. The selection of raw fish, cheese and charcuterie is excellent, as are the *crepelle* (savory crepes) with asparagus and capesante scallops, the stuffed quail and the lamb. The real highlight, however, is the wine. Lorenzon's cellar is stocked with almost 600 different wines, many of which are served by the glass, and a vast selection of champagnes, which can be opened with the spectacular *sabrage* technique, using a sword to cut the bottle's neck. To sum up La Mascareta: good food and good wines in a friendly, down-to-earth atmosphere.



The cellar in Mauro Lorenzon's La Mascareta is stocked with almost 600 different wines and a wide selection of champagnes

CONTINUED ON P14

WHERE TO EAT IN VENICE
CONTINUED FROM P13

DA FIORE



Calle del Scaleter, San Polo, 2202

TEL: 041 72 13 08

www.dafiore.net

Closed: Sunday and Monday
Average price without wine: €100

• The Martin family have transformed the small and slightly cramped rooms of this Michelin-starred restaurant into a light and airy space that seats 50 people. A small entrance with a red sign leads you into Da Fiore, which splits its seating between a main room, a smaller second space and a romantic balcony for two overlooking a canal. Mara and Maurizio Martin bought the premises from the previous owner (who was called Fiore) around 20 years ago and were among the first to revolutionise Venice's culinary scene. Mara is a masterful chef and Maurizio a master of hospitality—

the couple, who have known each other since they were children, both love their jobs. Mara's passion for food comes from her grandmother and she can remember handling pots and pans at the age of nine. As a result, her cuisine harks back to the smells and flavours of her youth; for example, her lemon sorbet with grated liquorice is a modern twist on the old childhood ritual of soaking a liquorice stick in lemon juice. The key ingredients are local seafood and the vegetables that they grow themselves on the mainland. Some choice selections are balsamic-vinegar sea bass with baked vegetables, tuna steak with rosemary, risottos, fried *moeche* (soft crabs), slipper lobsters, shellfish and *schie* (tiny prawns) with polenta. The restaurant is now run by the couple's son, Damiano.



Mara and Maurizio Martin were among the first to shake up Venice's culinary scene

AL COVO



Cesare and Diane Benelli serve local produce from the lagoon and the nearby mainland

Castello, 3968

TEL: 041 52 23 812

www.ristorantealcovo.com

Closed: Wednesdays and Thursdays, Mondays and Tuesdays, lunch only
Average price without wine: €58

• Discreetly tucked away, this restaurant is perfect for those who are looking for some peace and quiet without straying too far from the centre of town. Original works by Italian artists hang on the walls, adding a touch of style to the two air-conditioned rooms, which can seat up to 45 people. Set up in 1987 by husband-and-wife team Cesare and Diane Benelli, Al Covo offers a selection of excellent dishes made using local produce from the lagoon, the neighbouring islands and the nearby mainland. The menu includes the freshest fish from the Adriatic, fruit and vegetables from nearby Treporti, Sant'Erasmus and Vignole, and prized meat from the Piedmont region (Venice does not produce its own meat because of the lack of grazing land). Fresh pasta, desserts, fruit jellies and pickled products are all homemade. The tastiest dishes? Local mussels with baby courgettes, bigoli pasta with sauce, monkfish with potato and leek fondue and Sant'Erasmus artichokes, and "bagatin" cod with potatoes, plums and rosemary. Wine lovers can choose from 200 Italian and foreign wines. The restaurant offers an à la carte menu as well as a tasting menu for €58 (which includes a starter or another dish from a selection, a main course, and dessert or cheese).



VECIO FRITOLIN



Calle della Regina (near Rialto), 2262

TEL: 041 52 22 881

www.veciofritolin.it

Closed: Monday and Tuesday lunch
Average price without wine: €50



Irina Freguia and her chef, Daniele Zennaro

• The Vecio Fritolin is housed in a historic 16th-century building and has a sober, poised and elegant atmosphere. The heart and soul of this restaurant, however—and its touch of joy—is Irina Freguia. This Venetian lady from the island of Giudecca has always been passionate about her city, its traditions and its cuisine; so much so that she began to work with food in 1985 and bought the current premises in 2001. The Vecio Fritolin was one of the many 18th-century "fritolin" restaurants where the Venetians could buy freshly fried fish. Freguia's mission is to offer "the best of Venetian cuisine revisited with a fresh dose of creativity", as she puts it. She enriches traditional recipes with well-researched additions and accompaniments with help from her chef, Daniele Zennaro, and she personally chooses the produce from the nearby Rialto market. Some of the highlights are chickpea purée and tagliatelle with squid sauce, crab soup with ricotta gnocchi, fried *moeche*, grilled baby squid with sautéed vegetables, capesante scallops with crescione herbs and popcorn, and tagliolini pasta with squid ink, oysters and sesame.



Marcello Coronini

The author is a food and wine critic and the creator of *Gusto in Scena*, an event that gathers together chefs, fine food and wine producers and the best Venetian restaurateurs. He also has an eponymous publishing house that has produced numerous books on food and wine.