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JUNE 2012

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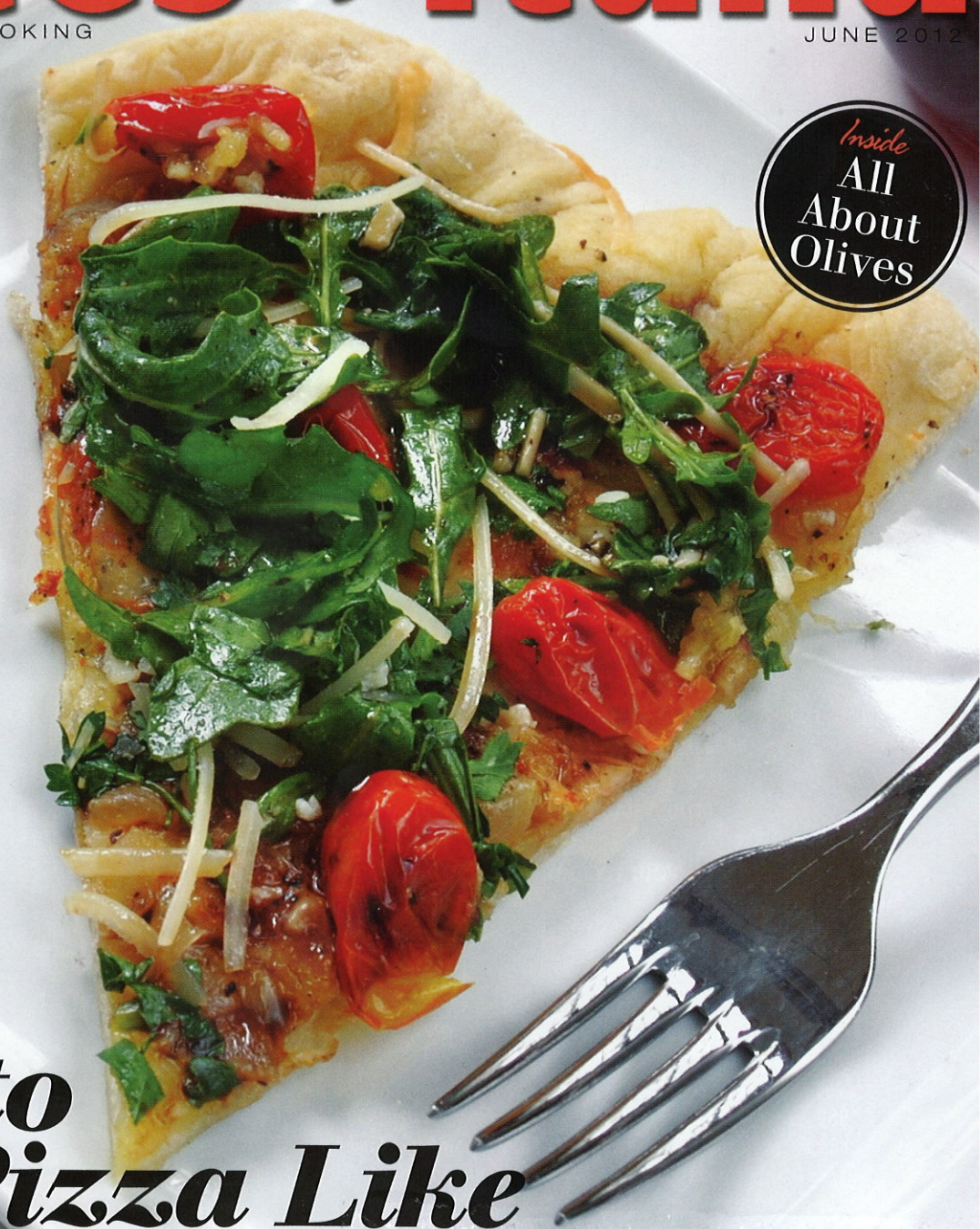
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WINE TASTING

DISCOVER

STEP INTO YOUR GONDOLA AND TAKE A **TRIP THROUGH THE RICHES**



VENICE!

OF VENICE. BY LAUREN BIRMINGHAM PISCITELLI



inding waterways, a gliding gondola on a quay, and blushing palazzos that stand tall in a lagoon of 117 islands. A hidden piazza discovered only by a mistaken turn, Carnival masqueraders hiding behind elaborate Venetian masks dancing until dawn, and a bellini at Harry's Bar. This is Venice.

Known as La Serenissima, the most serene Republic, Venice's past goes way back in time. Its first inhabitants were the Veneti and date back circa 10 B.C. They were originally Roman and had migrated to the Veneto region. Throughout time there have been wars, invasions and Doges that ruled, and then the former Republic joined the new kingdom of Italy in 1866. To date, the city continues to be a dreamy destination with a rich past that seduces everyone.

A labyrinth of never ending waterways, vaporetti, romantic bridges crisscrossing here and there, and candy cane colored poles where gondolas moor, Venice is free from cars. Its interesting Arabic influence comes from its trade ties to Constantinople, make this city a treasure chest of art, churches, palazzi, museums and opera.

It's home to the Gallerie dell'Accademia, La Fenice, Saint Mark's Basilica, Palazzo Ducale, Ca' d'Oro, and Museo Vetrario. It's the birthplace of Antonio Vivaldi, great composer and violinist; Giovanni Bellini, Renaissance painter; Marco Polo, merchant & voyager; and Elena Lucrezia, Renaissance philosopher, to name a few.

Great foreign writers also came to the surreal city to pen poetry and literature, including Shakespeare, Lord Byron, Marcel Proust, Henry James, Edith Wharton, Richard Wagner, Thomas Mann, and Ernest Hemingway. And although this dream-like place offers a plethora of art, history, music and culture, to know Venice you must understand its food and know where to dine. Sure, there are the tourist places with menus written in 6 or more languages; however, the best place to start is at a bacari.

A bacari, derived from the Latin word Bacchus meaning Roman god of wine, is a wine bar in Venice. And right now it's 6 p.m. and time for an ombra! Ombra literally translates to shadow, but means wine, ombra rosso or ombra bianco. There is also Il giro d'ombra, which literally translates to the "round of shadow," meaning a moving feast of wine tast-



VENEZIA is called the Serenissima. Translating to Venice's "most serene republic," it is a magical place that has been dazzling travelers for centuries including Shakespeare, Antonio Vivaldi, Henry James, Edith Wharton, Lord Byron and Ernest Hemingway, to name a few. Gondolas glide along romantic waterways, driven by men in black wearing jazzy hats. Gas-lit lampposts finished in pink Venetian glass gently turn on at sunset. The Rialto Bridge spanning San Marco and San Polo was built circa 1181. It is also home to the world-famous Rialto fish market. Venetian palazzos colored in a palette of pastels stand tall along the Grand Canal and romantic meandering waterways. Radicchio trevisano, a delicious red chicory grown in nearby Treviso, is sold at the local outside markets. Photography by Lauren Birmingham Piscitelli



ings that go from bar to bar. The enchanting dream like sound, o-m-b-r-a, goes back to the days when wine sellers held court on San Marco's square and peddled their wares of vino and cicchetti—wine and small bites of street food—from wooden push carts and barrels at the end of the work day. As the sun moved across the sky, the vendors moved their carts and barrels to keep in the shade of the Campanile bell tower. This is how the word ombra came, and the practice of having an ombra is alive in every bacari throughout Venice. Local Venetians travel from wine bar to wine bar sipping ombra and nibbling cicchetti from approximately 6 p.m. to 9 p.m. while socializing and spilling out onto piazzas and canals. It's an event, an occasion, and a reason to meet. And wine bars go all out in decking their bar tops with the best cicchetti to celebrate the occasion. Elaborate spreads of stuffed olives, Tramezzini, classic mini sandwiches filled to the seams with mayonnaise and artichokes, from tuna to asparagus; Sarde in soar, sardines and onions; Mosardini bolliti, tiny reddish purple baby octopus simply served with olive oil; Baccala mantecato, a creamy cod purée served on toast; Polpette di carne, tiny fried meatballs; Sarde fritte, flash fried sardines, Fondi di carciofi, wine basted artichoke bottoms to name a few. Cicchetti, the classical Venetian wine bar bites, can be fish, meat or vegetarian, are served on small plates and are endless and delicious. This roving feast of sips and bites can turn any cicchetti into a meal.

Bacari were plentiful during the 16th century and were predominately located around the Rialto due to the many banks, workers and ships that were there for trade. It was a meeting place where travelers could have a glass of wine and rent a room during their stay. The authorities controlled the bacari owners carefully. The national authorities told wine bar owners when to dilute the wine with water when it was sour or to stretch it due to the limited production in poor harvests. In the old days there were no soft drinks, so wine was the drink of choice, especially white wines and the trade was profitable. In Venice offering someone a glass wine was a sign of politeness, and merchants practiced this to enforce business relations. At the Rialto there was even a bank called the Bank Of Wine and the wine guild with its sellers met at this bank and at the nearby church. It's not a surprise that the wine merchants met in church, because wine for Christians is a part of their religious service. In fact, bacari were for the most part managed by Benedictine nuns during this era, because it was this religious order who brought back vine growing and wine making to the area after the fall of the Roman empire.



Risotto with Peas

- 3 tablespoons extra virgin olive oil**
- 1 small onion, finely chopped**
- ½ cup pancetta, diced**
- 3½ cups fresh peas**
- 2 quarts vegetable broth**
- 2 cups carnaroli rice**
- 1 cup Parmesan cheese, grated**
- 1 tablespoon butter**
- Handful of parsley, finely chopped**
- Salt to taste**

Heat a good drizzling of olive oil in a thick-bottomed pan. Add the onion, the pancetta and sauté for 5 minutes. Add the peas and a cup of the broth and simmer for 20 minutes.

Add the remaining broth and when it begins to simmer, add the rice. Cook until rice is ready, stirring continuously with a wooden spoon (about 18-20 minutes). When the rice is al dente, add the butter, grated Parmesan and the parsley. Adjust for salt, to taste and serve hot.

Makes 4 servings.



Legend says that the cicchetto goes back to the days when wine was served in a shot glass and was sipped quickly. However, today it's a reference to a little something to eat, because it absorbs the wine, making it easier to have a second or third glass. Therefore the custom is to drink, eat and move from bacari to bacari; drinking and driving is not an issue because there are no cars. Life is more social, as people walk everywhere, therefore an impromptu encounter is more likely to happen. To have an ombra is a way of sharing a Venetian pleasure with someone. Speaking of sharing, I am about to hop on a vaporetti headed up the Grand Canal to meet Sara. She is a native, sommelier, artisan food guide, official cheese taster, and food lover at heart, and she has reserved a table at her favorite bacari, La Cantina. It's located in the sestieri Cannaregio, at the Ca d'Oro vaporetti stop, line 1.

La Cantina, set on the Campo San Felice, Strada Nuova, is a local place. You will recognize it by its weathered wooden barrels outside and a crowd of locals inside. More than 30 great wines by the glass are marked in chalk on the blackboard. I meet Sara and she quickly orders two Valpolicella, a delicate blend of Corvina Veronese, Rondinella and Molinara grapes. "Salute," she says, as she raises her glass and begins to explain the local food trade. "You need to see and experience all the different aspects of the city's culture and understand it to truly appreciate it. Venice has its own culinary style that is based on seafood, because of its location on the largest lagoon in the Mediterranean Sea. The king of our first course is risotto, with rice being the main ingredient. Rice, first grown in Veneto in the 16th century, caught on quickly and made risotto very popular. Today creamy risotto is made with radicchio, asparagus, clams, cabbage, potato, seafood, pumpkin, squash and meat, with the classic risi e bisi, rice and peas. New spices and new ways of combining sweet and sour came from the Arabs and made their way into Venetian cuisine. This style was totally unknown in the Roman age, but with these new spices today we have food like sarde in saor and scampi in saor." She has already given us a food course on the local cuisine.

As we sip, she explains the history of the Rialto Market. "It's a landmark in the heart of the city and has the best quality fish in Venice. It dates back to the time of the trade routes when all the goods were arriving daily from the East and West. It originated as a hub for

wholesale trade where the merchants bought and traded. It was the selling place for fish vendors and a statue of Saint Peter, the protector of fishermen, still remains there. Locals and restaurant owners alike shop there daily for fresh fish, fruits and vegetables."

This area was such a vibrant business epicenter that the government's tax clerks also worked here, circulating huge amounts of money daily. It was an important place where all the merchants of Venice were paid and or collected on, giving it the nickname banco giro.

Aside from fish and seafood, Venice also has lots of pasta with the regional pasta being bigoli. It was traditionally made with buckwheat or whole wheat flour and duck eggs. Cut in long thick strands, it pairs well with regional sauces like slow cooked tomato with duck or rabbit. Bigoli can also be prepared with salmon, sardines and raddichio, for example. Linguine con vongole, prepared with clams, garlic, olive oil and white wine; polenta, grilled, boiled or fried often served with schiè, the tiniest of local shrimp, will have you eating like a local.

Antipasto in Venice could include a saltata di vongole e cozze, clams and mussels sautéed in white wine along with garlic and parsley. Another favorite is a vongole e cozze casino, consisting of very fresh clams and mussels sliced open and sprinkled with bread crumbs, a hint of garlic, parsley and olive oil, and baked.

Main courses are usually seafood based, however, sautéed fegato alla Veneziana, liver and onions, is also a meat lover's favorite. The abundance of fish is evident in secondi like baccala alla Venetiana, salted cod sautéed in onions, seppie in nero, squid stewed in its ink with spices; San Pietro, a delicate white fish-said to have been held by Saint Peter-cooked in white wine; and coda al pomodoro, monkfish cooked with tomato, onion, cloves and white wine.

The dessert tray in Venice features sweets old and new like zaletti, sbriciolona, bussola and cenci, along with crema di mascarpone and zabaione. Usually custard based, the local desserts are made with Marsala wine. Venetian author, Giacomo Casanova, wrote about zabaione in his memoirs claiming that he often whipped eggs, sugar and Marsala and drank it before going out to give him an energy boost before meeting his girlfriends. Tiramisu, for example, was first made in Tre-





viso in the 1960s. The original version was a variation on zuppa Inglese, and instead of using liqueur and biscotti, ladyfingers soaked in café were layered between a creamy blend of mascarpone cheese, eggs and sugar. Crema di mascarpone is a traditional dolce and is served with baicoli, tiny toasts that are a cross between bread and cookie.

Sara explains, "Veneto produces 55 percent white wine and 45 percent red. Prosecco, also produced in the region, is a light and easy drinking wine and is used to make bellini. The classic aperitivo is made with Prosecco and white peaches. The bellini was created by Giuseppe Cipriani, founder of Harry's Bar in Venice, and he named it after Giovanni Bellini, the artist. Our prized red wine is Valpolicello and Amarone. There is also Fragolino, the forbidden wine, made from l'uva fragile which is a strawberry grape."

Il giro di ombre has just begun, and Sara and I are about to head over to Bistrot de Venise by San Marco. She tells me that they have rare regional wines by the glass and the cicchetti are complimentary.

Venetian Seafood Risotto

- 7 ounces prawns, peeled**
- 7 ounces cuttlefish or calamari**
- 7 ounces white fish, such as sea bass or monkfish**
- ½ cup olive oil, divided**
- 14 ounces mussels (or 9 big ones)**
- 1 clove garlic, minced**
- A pinch of parsley, minced**
- 1¾ cups Vialone Nano or Carnaroli rice**
- Splash of Cognac**
- Salt and pepper, to taste**
- 2 tablespoons butter, cut in pieces**
- 2 tablespoons Parmesan, grated**

For the Fish Broth:

- 2.2 pounds of fish heads and scraps**
- 2 quarts water**
- 1 medium onion**
- 1 medium carrot**
- 1 medium celery stalk**
- 1 clove of garlic**
- 2 sprigs of thyme**
- 1 bay leaf**
- Parsley stems**
- 10 black peppercorns, to taste**
- 4 ounces dry white wine**
- ½ medium lemon**

Clean the fish and set aside heads and



scraps to make the broth. Chop the peeled prawns and the white meat fish. Warm a saucepan with 2 tablespoons olive oil, put the mussels in the pan, cover and cook for a few minutes. As soon as they open, turn the heat off and take them out of the shell. Cut the mussels, the calamari or the cuttlefish in small pieces and set aside.

In another saucepan, warm 3 tablespoons of olive oil, add the minced garlic, a pinch of minced parsley, and the calamari or cuttlefish. Let it cook until tender, about 15 minutes. Remove from heat.

For the fish broth, put all the ingredients except the pepper and wine in a large pot. Bring to a boil, skim it, bring to a boil again, then add the pepper and the wine. Reduce heat to low and simmer for 20 more minutes. Filter the broth, and add it

to the risotto as called for below. If there is some left, you can also store it in the freezer, without adding any salt.

For the risotto, in a medium size saucepan, warm 3 tablespoons of olive oil over a medium heat, add the rice and stir until translucent. Add two ladles of fish broth, stir and after 7 to 8 minutes add the calamari. Add more broth little by little as the rice absorbs it and keep stirring.

When the risotto is almost ready, add the prawns, mussels, white fish and mix until al dente, soupy but not watery. The rice will take about 20 minutes total to cook.

Turn off the flame and add a splash of cognac. Lastly, add the butter and Parmesan, and stir until well combined and melted. Serve with a pinch of fresh

chopped parsley on top. Squeeze the juice from half a lemon over the dish, if desired.

Makes 4 servings.

Venetian Cenci

- 1 3/4 cups of flour, plus a little extra for rolling out the dough**
- 1/2 tablespoon of brown sugar**
- 1 whole egg and 1 egg white**
- 2 tablespoons of butter, room temperature and soft**
- 1/2 teaspoon of yeast**
- Zest of 1 orange or lemon**
- 2 tablespoons of white wine**
- Salt to taste**
- Oil for frying, canola works best, and never olive oil**
- Confectioner's powdered sugar for garnishing**

In a large bowl, mix the flour, sugar, egg, egg white, butter, yeast, zest, wine and a pinch of salt. Mix well until the dough has a wet texture. Put the dough on a floured surface and knead well until all ingredients are combined. Wrap your dough in plastic wrap and let rest for 1 hour.

After 1 hour, remove wrap and divide dough into small mounds, about the size of a very large orange. Roll them out flat with a rolling pin, and then cut into the form of a large square, trimming off the extra. Cut the rolled out dough into ribbon like forms inserting 2 slits side-by-side in each one. The ribbons should be 3 to 4 inches.

Prepare canola oil in a deep frying pan and put on medium high heat. Try dropping a small piece of dough into the pan for testing oil temperature. If it sizzles, it is ready for frying. Begin frying the cenci. When golden brown, remove and put on paper to drain. Let cool completely and then dust with confectioner's sugar.

Makes 25 servings.

Bussola

The S-shaped biscotti comes from Burano, an island after Murano in Lagoon. This biscotti is the preferred biscotti among fishermen there.

- 1 stick of unsalted butter**

- 1/2 cup of sugar**
- 3 cups of all-purpose flour, divided**
- 2 medium egg yolks**
- 2 teaspoons of vanilla extract or one vanilla bean**
- 2 tablespoons of lemon zest**
- 2 to 3 tablespoons of milk depending on the humidity**

Preheat oven to 325°F.

Bring butter to room temperature and cut into small pieces. Whisk butter and sugar together. Slowly add 2 cups flour. Mix in egg yolks, vanilla extract, lemon zest and milk, and blend well. Let stand for 5 minutes. Sprinkle 1/2 cup flour on a work area. Roll out dough and make a flat, 10-inch long log. Wrap the log in plastic wrap and let set in the fridge for 1 hour.

Line two cookie sheets with parchment paper. Pour remaining flour on a rounded plate to use while working the dough. Remove the dough from the fridge, cut the log into slices about 1/2 inch thick. Roll out into the shape of a capital S. Place on a cookie sheet, space about an inch and bake for 12 to 15 minutes or until lightly golden.

Let cool. Serve with flutes of Prosecco, if desired.

Makes 40 cookies.

Zaleti - Venetian Cornmeal Cookies

- 1/2 cup seedless raisins**
- 4 ounces dry white wine**
- 1 cup yellow cornmeal**
- 1 cup all-purpose flour**
- 1 tablespoon baking powder**
- 1/4 cup unsalted butter, at room temperature, cut in pieces**
- 1/4 cup sugar**
- 1 large egg**
- 1/4 cup pine nuts**
- 1 teaspoon pure vanilla extract**
- Pinch of salt**
- 2 tablespoons Marsala or sweet wine**
- Confectioner's sugar for dusting**

Put the raisins in a small bowl, cover with the white wine and soak for one hour. Preheat oven to 350°F.

In a large bowl, combine the cornmeal, flour, and baking powder and mix well.

Add the butter, sugar and egg, mix with your hands to incorporate.

Drain the wine from the raisins. Add the drained raisins, pine nuts, vanilla, salt and Marsala to the flour mixture and blend until you have a soft dough.

Roll small pieces of dough with your hands into small ovals and place them on two baking sheets covered with parchment paper. Flatten the cookies a bit with your fingers.

Bake in a preheated oven for 25 to 30 minutes until golden. Remove from oven and allow to cool on wire racks until completely cooled. When cool, dust with confectioner's sugar and serve.

Makes about 30 servings.

Fried Cod

- 7 ounces dried or 14 ounces fresh cod**
- 1 whole egg**
- 2 teaspoons all-purpose flour**
- 1 cup whole milk or sparkling mineral water**
- 4 cups peanut oil, for frying**
- Salt and pepper, to taste**
- 1 lemon for garnish**

If you buy dried cod, soak it for 3 to 4 days in cold water and change the water every day.

Drain the cod, take off the skin and remove all the bones. Place the cod in a pot filled with cold water and bring to a boil, let it cook for 7 minutes, then drain, cut in medium pieces and pat dry in a paper towel.

To prepare the batter, mix the egg with milk and flour in a bowl, whisk with a fork until smooth and creamy. Let stand for a half hour.

In a large saucepan heat the peanut oil over a medium heat—it should give off a haze and smoke when it is at the right temperature, but you can test it by dropping in a small piece of food. If it bubbles all over, the oil is ready. Adjust the heat to prevent overheating.

Dip each piece of cod in the batter, shaking off any excess, and fry until golden. Drain on a paper towel. Add salt and pepper to taste and serve with lemon quarters.

Makes 4 servings.