

EATING

top picks

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EATING

The visual blitz that is Venice tends to leave visitors bug-eyed, weak-kneed and grasping for the nearest *panino* (sandwich) or plate of *risi e bisi* (risotto broth with peas). But there's more to La Serenissima than simple carb-loading. For centuries Venice has gone far beyond the call of dietary duty, and lavished visitors with wildly inventive feasts. Europe's most outrageous dinner party was held in Venice back in 1574 in honour of Henry III of France, featuring 1200 dishes, 300 bonbons, and napkins made of spun sugar. Unless you're a visiting head of state, you probably won't be required to eat that much in one sitting in Venice – but you'll have your pick of vast, impressive *cicheti* (traditional Venetian bar snacks) spreads at happy hour, decadent pastries at Venetian bakeries, and hot chocolate rich enough for French monarchs and Aztec gods, at Caffè Florian (p199).

'Local food!' is the latest foodie credo, but it's nothing new in Venice. Surrounded by garden islands and a lagoon's worth of seafood, Venice offers local specialities that never make it to the mainland, because they're served fresh the same day in Venetian *bacari* (old-style bars) and *osterie* (pub-restaurants). A strong sea breeze wafts over the kitchens of the lagoon city, with the occasional meaty dish from the Veneto mainland and traditional local options of rice and polenta in addition to classic Italian pastas. But side dishes of Veneto vegetables often steal the show, and early risers will notice Venetians risking faceplants in canals to grab *radicchio trevisano* (bitter red chicory, a ruffled red leafy vegetable) and prized Bassano del Grappa asparagus from produce-laden barges.

Venice's cosmopolitan outlook has kept the city ahead of the locavore curve, and makes local cuisine anything but predictable. Don't be surprised if some Venetian dishes taste vaguely Turkish or Greek rather than strictly Italian: with trade routes bringing imported tastes to Venice for over a millennium, Venetian cuisine is a highly refined fusion of flavours. Spice-route flavours from the Mediterranean and beyond can be savoured in signature Venetian recipes such as *sarde in saor*, traditionally made with sardines fried in a tangy onion marinade with pine nuts and sultanas. The occasional exceptional ingredient from another part of Italy sneaks in, such as Tuscan fillets, Campania *mozzarella di bufala* (fresh buffalo-milk mozzarella) and Sicilian blood oranges.

But no matter what's on the menu, many Venetians remain fiercely loyal to local wines. No Venetian feast would be complete without at least one *ombra*, or glass of wine; for best local choices, see the boxed text, p200. *Ombra* literally means 'shade', and the nickname apparently comes from wine stalls in the shade of the Campanile di San Marco where gondoliers once took breaks between fares. Lunchtime is a fine excuse to pop a cork on some *prosecco* (sparkling white wine), the Veneto's beloved bubbly, and start working your way methodically through the extensive seafood menu: tender octopus salad, black squid-ink risotto, and *granseola* (spider crab).

WHERE TO EAT

Bad advice has circulated for decades about how it's impossible to eat well and economically in Venice, which has misinformed day trippers clinging defensively to congealed and reheated pizza slices in San Marco. Little do they realise that for the same price a bridge away, they could be dining on *crostini* topped with scampi and grilled baby artichoke, or tuna tartare with wild strawberries and balsamic reduction. Luckily for you, there's still room at the bar to score the best *cicheti* and reservations are almost always available at phenomenal eateries – especially at dinner, after the day trippers depart.

Once you know what to look for, Venice becomes a foodie treasure hunt. To find the best Venetian food, get lost down side alleys and hidden *campi* (squares), and dodge restaurants immediately around San Marco, near the train station and along main thoroughfares. Beware any menu dotted with asterisks indicating that several items are *surgelati* (frozen). Lasagne, spaghetti Bolognese and pizza are not Venetian specialities, and when all three appear on a menu, avoid that tourist trap.

Look for places where there's no menu at all, or one hastily scrawled on a chalkboard or laser-printed in Italian only, preferably with typos. This is a sign that your chef reinvents