

# Doge's Dinner

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*The vino, the vermicelli, the verdict – Christopher Silvester on Venice's best restaurants*



Venetian restaurants have improved immeasurably over the past twenty years, though the old reliables still figure prominently and the rule-of-thumb that you should escape the San Marco district still serves.

Of the six establishments included here, all but one are in outlying districts, yet only one, the Locanda Cipriani on the island of Torcello is any distance.

My first stop on this tour affords what I consider the best view from a restaurant in the city. Linea d'Ombra has a terrace projecting from the bank of the Zattere, in the Dorsoduro district, its wooden structure decorated with flowerboxes containing bright red geraniums.

You can look towards the Riva degli Schiavoni, the main stop for vaporetti close to St Mark's Square, and give thanks that you are sitting here rather than there. Looking towards the Giudecca, you see a couple of churches, spaced at intervals, then to your left, on the promontory of the Giudecca, is the magnificent San Giorgio Maggiore.

Bask in the sun with a glass of prosecco – the dry, sparkling wine, which is superior to the most expensive champagne on a hot day – and gaze at the glorious panorama. I enjoyed scallops with a saffron sauce, followed by spaghetti with lobster (served in its half-shell), and finished with a plate of cheeses. I've not visited Linea d'ombra in the evening, but it has a very modern interior with a Japanese feel to it.



After lunch, take a vaporetto to San Giorgio Maggiore and ascend the tower (there is a lift) for the best view of the city (far better than from the campanile in the Piazza San Marco). You can also peer down on the Hotel Cipriani, just next door.

A short walk from the Rialto market, in the San Polo district, you will find Osteria da Fiore (San Polo). This has been a much-loved Venetian institution ever since Maria Martin started cooking there in 1978 (husband Maurizio Martin was in charge of the cellar). There is so much to savour on their menu, but their soups are not to be missed and their sorbets are sublime.

I am fond of their oven-baked oysters, scallops in their shells with thyme, fried soft-shell crabs on arugula and orange salad, chestnut-filled calamari, and their gratin of tagliolini with radicchio and shrimp. Try one of dishes that features their fine white corneal polenta, which is quite unlike the coarser, more yellow variety.

Another short walk, this time from the Riva degli Schiavoni (nearest vaporetto stop: Arsenale) is Trattoria Corte Sconta, one of the most delightful restaurant premises in the city. Away from the cramped, shopping-obsessed alleyways of the main commercial districts, this restaurant with its unassuming shopfront nestles in the residential Castello quarter.

Corte Sconta has been around since the mid-1980s, but it never loses its allure. I always eat their tasting menu, which starts with carpaccio of various regional fish (the one with pomegranates is especially piquant), a platter of mixed seafood antipasti, and a selection of different pasta.

After that, if you can manage one of their main courses you're a better man than me. I invariably skip forward to dessert.

Bistrot de Venise is to be found in a street on the most direct route from the Piazza San Marco toward the Rialto Bridge. There are usually some tables in the alleyway outside, but I prefer to dine on one of the red leather banquettes inside.



Unlike many Venetian restaurants, Bistrot de Venise stays open late, until 1 am, so if you have had a long lunch and decide to go to a concert of chamber music in the evening you should have regained your appetite by 10 pm. Try the brangere (€16), an old-fashioned white soup made with rice flour, chicken and almond, flavoured with cloves and pomegranates.

It is served lukewarm, the better to enjoy the subtle flavours. The price may seem expensive for a soup, but it definitely offers an unusual taste experience. This restaurant specialises in historic Venetian recipes. You may be surprised to learn that sweet-and-sour flavouring (saor) is not a recent Chinese import, but has been a feature of Venetian cuisine since Marco Polo returned from the Orient.

Try the baked lamb with sweet-and-sour orange sauce, carrot and sweet spices quenelle. If your curiosity is piqued by these historical recipes, try the sampling menu at €65.

Located on the island of Giudecca, between the church of St Euphemia and the Molino Stucky factory (with its distinctly northern European appearance), Harry's Dolci consists of a single, wood-pannelled room, with a terrace of tables outside under a pleated white awning.

You look across the wide waterway to the church of Santa Maria del Rosario at Zattere. Look to the right and you will see a couple of churches by Palladio, the great Renaissance architect Palladio, including San Giorgio Maggiore. Indeed, Arrigo Cipriani once said of Harry's Dolci that 'Palladio is my exterior decorator'.

Harry's Dolci is about half the price of Harry's Bar (though still expensive), but the atmosphere is less knowing and pretentious. As for the food, it is light and fresh, with the emphasis on seafood: risotto primavera, tagliolini with scampi and zucchini, or scampi al forno with rice pilaf.

Needless to say, the signature Cipriani items, Bellinis and carpaccio, are both available. They also serve excellent pastries and desserts, such as zabaglione, but I prefer to finish my meal with a limoncello or grappa. Sunday lunchtime is a good time to visit (arrive at around noon), or any evening around sunset.

Back in the 1950s and '60s, the Agli Alboretti restaurant (within the three-star hotel of the same name) was frequented by Peggy Guggenheim, whose home and collection are but a five-minute walk away, as well as by various artists and art dealers.

Thereafter it was closed for some years until the hotelier Anna Linguerra decided to re-open it. The dining room is small and cosy, perfect for winter evenings, but the delight in the warmer months is the rear garden with its American-vine covering. There are also some outside tables at the front of the hotel, in the wide alleyway that leads along the left-hand wall of the Accademia towards the Zattere.

Since last year the kitchen has been under the direction of a young chef, Pierluigi Lovisa, who has won awards in various international cooking contests and already gained a reputation for innovation and



humorous flourishes. My seafood ravioli came with a small, stoppered glass tube of warm mollusc water, to be poured over the pasta at the table.

Another starter consisted of some seared tuna dangling from a metal spike on a sort of mini-gibbet. His selection of Italian cheeses was arranged on a wooden fan and his selection of miniature desserts was presented on a clear Perspex double-shelf unit. Were the quality of the cooking so high, these features of presentation might seem more like annoying gimmicks than the jeux d'esprit he intends.

Visitors to Venice often overlook the island of Torcello, with its cathedral so beloved of Ruskin. It is worth a day trip (half an hour by water taxi from Venice) and the Locanda Cipriani is an excellent place to have lunch. Giuseppe Cipriani founded it in 1938 and allowed his sister-in-law to run it.



A guesthouse as well as a restaurant – locanda means inn – it played host to Ernest Hemingway, who stayed there in the autumn of 1948 while writing *Across the River and Through the Trees*. It is now owned and managed by Bonifacio Brass, Giuseppe Cipriani's grandson.

Chef Renato Ceccato serves Cipriani family classics such as carpaccio of raw meat and John Dory alla Carlina (after Carla Bonifacio, Brass's mother, who ran the Locanda in the 1980s).

I prefer to take lunch outside on the patio, beneath trellises covered in wisteria and vines, though be warned – you will need to douse yourself in mosquito repellent before leaving your hotel and I advise spraying any areas of exposed flesh again once you get there.

(This is true of anywhere in Venice, except in the coldest months: no sooner have you emerged from Marco Polo Airport and walked towards the boat station than you are bitten, unless proper precautions are taken.)

Once again, a bottle or two of prosecco offers the ideal accompaniment to your meal. *Primi piatti* include gnocchetti di patate all mediterranea (with a pesto and tomato sauce) tagliolini verdi gratinati al prosciutto (a favourite of mine: pasta cooked in the ordinary way, mixed with a rich sauce, then baked in the oven), and verdure al forno (oven-roasted vegetables).

There is a selection of cold main courses, such as salad and carpaccio alla Cipriani (of course), and the hot main courses include grilled seabass, salmon, monkfish, and spezzato di pollo, a half chicken braised in a rich reduction of stock, with country-style vegetables, herbs and wine, served on polenta. Other dishes to savour are scampi all'Armoricaine and trippa alla parmigiana.

Master pastry chef Lucio Frater prepares exquisite desserts, which arrive on a trolley, but I find that one between two is usually sufficient. Lunch in the garden is a summer treat, though you need to be smothered in mosquito repellent.

Before lunch, climb the tower of the cathedral for a superb aerial view of the Locanda Cipriani's patio and garden (see my photograph) and an enlightening panoramic view of the lagoon, looking south towards Venice proper.

The climb is demanding, as there is no lift and the gradient is punishing on the knee joints, particularly on the way down. You may not have sufficient energy after lunch.