

June 14, 2004: In the distant past, travel writers would send their dispatches by telegram, and the words would appear on a ribbon of paper. For instance, "ARRIVED VENICE. STREETS UNDER WATER. ADVISE." Now, I home in on a Wi-Fi hotspot near the Rialto bridge to send my tasting notes from lunch in The Most Serene Republic of Venice.

Since I can only stay for a couple of days, I'm determined not to get stuck with my nose in a guidebook when it could be in a wine glass instead. One of those itty-bitty wine glasses called ombre, literally shade, because the real wine bars are found in cool arcades and dusky corners just around the corner from the tourist traps.

At Florian, on the Piazza San Marco, it's \$20 for a Bellini, with a \$6 entertainment surcharge for the tuxedo-clad orchestra playing Viennese waltzes to an audience of Japanese school girls sipping Cokes and indigenous pigeons pecking at kernels of corn. Onward.

I get myself "lost" on purpose and find myself at a tiny bacaro, or wine bar, some-



where in the Cannaregio neighborhood. First off, a new drink, Prosecco Bitter! It starts with two or three ounces of a lightly sparkling wine made from the local prosecco grape. Add an slug of Campari, that viscous

Serenissima Now!

by Ronald Holden

bitter aperitif beloved by Italians. (I'm not Italian but I love it, too.) Result: something akin to the ubiquitous kir royal, only less



claying. And cheaper, too, about 2 euros, under \$2.50.

Cicchetti are Venice's contribution to the Mediterranean tradition of small plates. Choices at this bacaro include two sorts of lasagna, gnocchi, risotto, potatoes, polenta, chicken breast, chicken thighs, tomato salad, melon, calamari salad, shrimp salad, and a Venetian specialty, seppie in tecia. Strips of cuttlefish in a black sauce of anchovies, capers and garlic. An enormous portion, zapped for a couple of minutes in the convection oven and served with a side of creamy polenta, it's the most expensive item I could have picked, but \$10 was ne'er so well spent. A glass of bright red refosco, another local variety, goes very nicely.

To wrap things up, a beverage I've heard

about but never actually ordered: caffè coretto. "Corrected" coffee. A single shot of espresso enlivened with a shot of grappa, making a more concentrated and bitter version of Irish coffee. The volatility of the grappa enhances the rich coffee aroma, which I savor for a few seconds before draining the cup in one gulp. Now it's the coffee's turn to tame the fiery brandy, turning its flame into a gentle glow.

I pay the tab (less than \$15 altogether) and head out into the warm Venetian afternoon, bouncing without a map and without a care along calle and fondamento, gliding across campo and ponte, watching the passage of a traghetto, listening to the cries of seagulls and calls of gondoliers, feeling as serene as La Serenissima herself.

VENICE IN BELLTOWN?

June 24, 2004: I think that if I lived in Venice, I'd visit Seattle just for happy hour at Cascadia.

Belltown's not known for its wine bars, but this is a great alternative. From 5 to 7 every evening, chef Kerry Sear's signature drink is reduced from \$8 to \$3.50. It's the Alpine Martini, and you haven't lived until you've sipped a couple. Absolut Citron, shaken with ice, served "up" with an iconoclastic scoop of creamy "Douglas fir" sorbet and garnished with a sprig of pine. Surprisingly refreshing.

Accompany this with a couple of \$1 mini-burgers: they're so tasty you'll gobble them down in two bites, but I promise you'll never eat anything as satisfying from the 99-cent menu at McD's, DQ, BK or Wendy's. And should you feel an urgent need for deep-fried seafood, Cascadia's attitude adjustment hour also offers a \$2 cone of calamari with a zesty aioli.

Here's the best part: as long as the viaduct remains standing and feeds into the Battery Street tunnel, nothing will obstruct the view of sunset over Elliott Bay from Cascadia's sidewalk tables. ♦

DEAF IN VENICE

—June 17, 2004—

Deaf & dumb, actually. Mute. Not just sotto voce but completely voiceless. And yet, I came so close ...

The scene: a hotel lobby in Venice. The hotel offers wireless access from an outfit called Megabeam. I crank up the laptop, fill in the required credit card information and hit "send." Long pause. Very long pause. Finally, a screen that says my username and password will be sent to me by email.

Of course, to get my email, I have to go online. And to go online, I have to log on. And to log on, I have to type in my username and password.

The absurdity of the situation hasn't penetrated Megabeam's psyche.

Eventually I was able to read my email on a public computer and I did, in fact, find the promised email. Megabeam thanked me for my patronage and provided, no, not the actual username and password ... but a link to a web page where, it said, I would be able to retrieve them. But the link, it warned, would only remain active for a limited time ... and by the time I got there, it had expired a full day earlier.



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