

Untold Italy Episode 148 - Dishes to try in the Lagoon city

This is the Untold Italy Travel podcast, and you're listening to episode number 148.

Ciao a tutti and Benvenuti to Untold Italy, the travel podcast, where you go to the towns and villages, mountains and lakes, hills and coastlines of Bella Italia. Each week your host Katy Clarke takes you on a journey in search of magical landscapes of history, culture, wine, gelato, and, of course, a whole lot of pasta. If you're dreaming of Italy and planning future adventures there, you've come to the right place.

Katy

Ciao everyone. Welcome to your weekly escape to beautiful Italia. Today we're heading north to my favorite city. Venice. It's been a while since we chatted about the lagoon city so I invited my friend Valeria Necchio back onto the show to tell you about some of the delicious dishes you can eat while you're there, how the history of Venice and its cosmopolitan past shaped the city's cuisine and some wonderful places to eat to discover traditional and modern Venetian dishes.

You're going to learn There's no better guide on this journey than Valeria who lives in Venice has literally written the book on the cuisine of the Veneto region and is passionately involved in her city's food and wine culture. So without further ado, let's get started.

Katy

Bentornata Valeria. Welcome back to the Untold Italy Podcast.

Valeria

Thank you, Katy. It's great to be back.

Katy

Oh, it is so great to have you. How are things in beautiful Venice these days?

Valeria

Actually, really lovely right now. We're having some warm temperatures, so it's a lovely, lovely fall season, so you can still enjoy walking around and going to the Lido. So it's perfect. It's really nice.

Katy

Oh, I miss it so much. And I'll definitely be headed there on my next trip. It's been way too long since I wandered along the canals, and I just miss Venice so much. Now, Valeria, we chatted earlier this year about the islands of Venice and the unique characteristics, but today I wanted to delve into the food culture there, which I know you are deeply passionate about. Before we get started, though, can you remind our listeners about your background and your cookbook and what draws you to Venice?

Valeria

Of course. Yeah. So I studied food because it's always been an interest of mine. So I grew up in the countryside about half an hour from Venice. That's where my family still is. So that's my background in terms of culture and also food. Then I went on to study food culture and then have been working in the food industry for pretty much my entire career - in London and then back in Italy. And all the while I've been writing and photographing because that's truly where my passion is, like recounting stories about people, food, artisans, landscapes, cultures. And a lot of this writing and this research went into my first book, which came out in English in 2017. So it's been a while, but still being appreciated. The book is called *Veneto*, and it includes 100 recipes with stories from past and present, so family background and new recipes and stories that I have collected along the way. And recently, about two years ago, I moved from London to Venice because I wanted to rediscover a bit of my heritage. And I've been living and working here since, still in food. Still with food, and exploring the city in the lagoon as I go. - And it's been amazing. It's been truly, truly fantastic to be back.

Katy

Oh, you're so lucky. I'm so jealous. There is no other place in the world like Venice, is there? And I think people - I was saying to Valeria before, people, I get upset when people say it's a tourist trap. I mean, there are definitely touristy places and areas, but they tend to all sort of congregate in the same place. And you just need to go a little bit further to discover what is truly magical about that city, because there's no other city that's built on water, like you said, it's just completely unique.

Valeria

Very, very true. Yeah. And the amazing thing about it, like you said, is that you have these very crowded parts of the town, parts of the city center, and then you have these buckets of quiet that is where the magic is. It makes the place very special. And that's usually also where the locals are - trying to hide. For example, I live in this quainter part of town and it's magical to go out in the morning. It just feels really, really quiet. And then you go, of course, in the center and you have all the business, and that can be enjoyable at times. It's nice to have both.

Katy

Yeah, you can choose if you want. I like it. There is something fun about having everyone's excited and like the atmosphere in Piazza San Marco with all the music happening. It's definitely an amazing atmosphere. But, yeah, you can have that contrast, which I think is really delightful. But the thing I love about Venetians, like all Italians, is they do love their food and wine. So today we're going to talk about some of the dishes that we should try when we're in Venice. Maybe you can just start us off, just start us with an overview of the food culture that is in Venice.

Valeria

So Venice has this amazing heritage that involves trading with the Mediterranean and the Middle and the Far East. And so the food culture that build up through the centuries and that makes what Venice is today, in terms of food and wine, really, really is the result of these centuries of exchanging goods and cultures. So truly, the cuisine of Venice as an island is made of these influences coming from far and left, and this involves a lot of spices, and that's truly something unique to the city. A lot of combinations of sweet and sour and sweet and savory that is also quite special to Venice. And of course, a lot of fish and seafood and a ton of things preserved in salt or vinegary marinades also, because then it had the availability of having salt and trading with salt at one point, and also because it was like a gateway to Europe, they introduced a lot of things to the mainland and the Europe itself. So, for example, coffee. So there's a really interesting cafe and coffee culture, lots and lots of things. Some of the main and most classic dishes involve preserved fish. So baccala would be something you would find in every sort of fashion. So bacala is actually salt fish, and as an ingredient, it's dried cod and it comes from the north. So it's an ingredient that Venetians would bring to Venice from the northern part of Europe. So Norway, the Lofoten Islands, and it's prepared in very many ways. The most classic of them all is like fluffy Baccala Mantecato. And it's basically just salt fish that has been softened in water for very many hours, about 48 to 72 hours. And then it's simply cooked in water. So boiled, skinned and then deboned. And then it's turned into these, like, fluffy moons, as it were a mayonnaise. So we just like it's basically just fish beaten with oil and oil is poured in a very thin stream and that turns into like this airy thing. As I said, the concept is similar to mayonnaise. So oil emulsifies with the fish and creates this delicious fluffy spread. So that's Baccala Mantecato, a classic and a must-try in the city. Baccalai is also found with red sauce or ala Venezia. So, yeah, all sorts of cod in all sorts of manners. So that's definitely a must-try. We also have lots of dishes with sardines, because that's a lesser fish that can be preserved quite easily and very abundant and flavorsome. Really, really nice pasta. Bigoli con salsa - again, strong flavors begun salsa are fresh, thick spaghetti cooking these very deliciously unctous oily sauce made with anchovies and onions that are turned into a cream, basically, that coat to the pasta and make it very rich and flavorsome and delicious. So these are all the savory. But then, of course, we have classic vegetables, so carciofi, all manners of artichokes in season, which is spring. We have this delicious variety that grows in a lagoon that's called carciofo violetto. And so carciofi are a big classic around Easter and then later in the season.

Valeria

And then all the sweets and all the sweets involved, as I said, spices and dried fruits, and they tend to be like dry sweets - so biscuits or dry bread with dried fruits and nuts. And these are served at the end of the meal with sweet wine. So sweet malvasia, which is, again, another big slice of the culinary culture of Venice. So wine.

Katy

I think it's really quite surprising, isn't it? I think people are always surprised to hear that there's a big wine culture in Venice because they wonder, where can the grapes grow? But there are actually places they can grow on the islands, aren't they?

Valeria

Yeah. So, in fact, Venice had a very big tradition in growing grapes and making wine. So all of the satellite islands of Venice would be devoted to growing grapes and making wine. Many of them would be occupied by monasteries, and monasteries would, of course, have a vineyard because they were self sufficient, but also they would produce wine for the city of Venice. Come to think of it, the squares in Venice are called campi, so they're not called piazza, like everywhere else in Italy, but they are called campi, which really means field. And we know by historical and archival research that this campi would often be planted with a variety of plants, but mostly with vines. And so they would all host a small vineyard. And in fact, you have places in Venice, for example, the Campo of San Francisco de la Viña, which is a church with a cloistered part, and the cloistered part of it still hosts a little vineyard, like a historical vineyard. And you would have islands called Le Vignole, which means the little vineyard. Or L'isola San Francesco del Deserto, which has been hosting a monastery for centuries, would in the past be called L'isola dela Viña.

Valeria

So you have a ton of reference to wine making and wine growing in the lagoon. And that is a testament to how important it was. Aside from these islands, which were de facto the gardens of Venice, you would also have all of the Balkans and like, part of the Serenissimo dominations, who would very much be used for wine making because then the Serenissimo would trade in wine and consumer and trade it and so make a huge part of its income as a self sufficient little country by dealing with wine. So there was a lot of making, of drinking and of trading, and that love still survives today. Very much so.

Katy

Are there any great Venetian wines that we should know about that are still being produced today? What can we try?

Valeria

So there are a couple of places that make wine in the lagoon. Now, the challenge of doing it comes from, of course, the fact that you have to deal with high tides, and that can be quite unpredictable. But you have a couple that are continuing with this tradition. One of them is called Venissa. It's on the island of Mazzorbo, and there's like a tiny vineyard, less than an acre of this native grape variety called Dorona. So that's a really nice place to do a vine yard tour to hear about wine making traditions in the lagoon and taste the wine. On Sant'Erasmus Island, there is another place making really interesting wine from international great varieties, and that's called Orto di Venezia. They produce a wine that's also called L'Orto di Venezia, and that's also really interesting just to taste how these international grape varieties like Chardonnay and Sauvignon behave in the lagoon because they give way to a wine that's quite different from any other blend of these grapes you would taste, because the lagoon gives the soil, the salty soil gives very unique aromas to the wine.

Valeria

And then there is another project that's not a commercial project, but more like a research and a non profit that's set on the island of San Michele. That's the island that also hosts the city cemetery. So that's quite special. The Monumental Cemetery is beautiful. And next to it there is this project called Laguna nel bicchiere, and they have all sorts of great varieties that are historical to Venice Malvasia, Dorona and others, and they do experiments. And also you can go and visit and hear more about winemaking traditions. You can taste the wine. You can also participate in the harvest if you book early enough. So there's quite a few wine-related experiences that can be done in Venice and lots of wine to taste.

Katy

Absolutely. And I think one of the things about Venice is that there is, like a different way of tasting wine, isn't there? Obviously, in Italy, wine goes with food everywhere. But I love the tradition of cichetti in Venice and jumping from bacari to bacari and just trying all these little different snacks that you make there. It's really exciting. How can you tell us a bit more about cichetti? Because it is really different to the rest of Italy in that sort of snack culture.

Valeria

Yeah, absolutely. The snack culture is still very much present. And so, like you mentioned, there are so many bacari in town that dish out these very tempting bite size snacks. So cichetti traditionally would be small portions of whatever. They could be small portions of meatballs or little squids or hard-boiled eggs, but again, they would be more like I make the parallel with Spain - more like pinchos and tapas, in a way. So like small portions of things. And then you also have the crostino. So a slice of bread becomes a vessel for all sorts of things, from salumi to cheeses to now that you have some really interesting bacari and wine bars getting very creative with their combinations. So, yeah, it's a really fun activity and a really great way to sample various things and try various bars and at the same time getting

involved in this very convivial atmosphere that's very unique to Venice and that involves this bar hopping and sampling and snacking around. It's a very great thing to do, going from one bacari to the next, find them all having a glass of wine here and there. And that makes the experience very varied and very convivial, and at the same time also rather inexpensive because you get to try a lot of things and usually these bitesize things don't come at a very expensive price. So it makes the eating experience in Venice also very affordable and fun.

Katy

Well, I can't wait to get back to Venice and go cichetti hopping. I love it. It's one of my favorite things about Venice. But what if you want to have a proper sit-down meal, Valeria like, is that possible in Venice too? Because I think sometimes a lot of people get so excited about cichetti that they forget that they might want to sit down and have a lovely meal too.

Valeria

That's true. That can be the danger of bar hopping that at one point you're like, oh, I'm full, and maybe at one point it would be nice to actually sample some pastas or some secondi. So, yeah, that's definitely possible. There are a few great traditional osteria and trattoria, where you can have all of the traditional foods that we mentioned earlier, so bigoli con salsa, baccala and all the classics. And then there are also some great places that are being a bit more experimental and contemporary, where you can have an experience of a more modern style of cooking. In Venice, lots of places are taking tradition a little further. They are using local ingredients and creating something truly unique. So you can have both, depending on what you're interested in. And you can find really excellent places doing either styles of cuisine. That said, there are maybe, let's say, ten great traditional places and five great contemporary places. So it's not super easy to find a place in either of them, but when booked ahead, it can definitely be done. But that's their recommendation - booking ahead, for sure.

Katy

That's amazing. Ten? Wow. That's not a very lot of restaurants. And in fact, I think it's really worth pointing out, I think people think that Venice is this huge city, but it's not. It's a tiny little city and there's how many? I think it's less than 50,000 permanent residents. So it's really interesting that you say that because I just hadn't even thought that there would be so few restaurants. But it kind of makes sense, actually. But obviously, there are a lot more restaurants. But to be put in Valeria's list of top ten or top five, they have to be pretty special. Are you prepared to share one of your favorites of each?

Valeria

Yeah, absolutely. Okay, maybe I don't remember all of them, but like, let's say amongst the traditional, my favorites are Al Covo, which is amazing, Antiche Carampane, great for seafood as well. I truly love Pensione Wildner, which is actually the only (I mean, not the only one),

but like the really good one on Riva Degli Schiavoni, which would be that very busy larger alley that faces the Canal de la Giudecca, and that's like between San Marco and del Leoncini. So it's dotted with great grand hotels and you have like this tiny Pensione amongst them that really makes fantastic foods. Then we would have amongst the traditional, La Zucca, which is lovely also for vegetable dishes. Vini da Gigio is also very nice. That's in Cannaregio. So these are a few good names to try, as I said, from Bicoli to Gnocci with wild duck and all of the classics in between. Whereas amongst the contemporary ones I really like L'Anice Stellato which is in Cannareggio, and they have seasonal fare with natural wines, they are doing an amazing job. Also really good is Wistèria and they have recently won a Michelin star and their cuisine is truly amazing and I also really like what Stappo is doing. Stappo is a natural wine bar with small plates and they are doing an amazing job with their food. So a few of each, hopefully.

Katy

Oh, that's very generous of you. I think, as Valeria said, really think about booking well in advance. It's really hard to underestimate how busy all of the major cities in Italy have been this year. And so I will be making your bookings two months out if possible. Because I know my favorite restaurant in Rome. I've nearly been in tears because I missed out. I've managed to sneak in every time, but I've really had to be flexible with my booking. So if you really want to try some of these amazing restaurants, then make sure you're really organized and get onto it very quickly because otherwise you might be having to go Cicchetti hopping, which is not such a bad thing, really. I don't think that's very true.

Valeria

That's always the greatest alternative.

Katy

Exactly, that's the alternative. It's a wonderful thing, really. Okay, so you mentioned briefly about the sweets. And I think everyone does love to try the different sweets in Italy. What are some of the ones that Venice is particularly famous for?

Valeria

Definitely all of the biscuits. Dry biscuits in general is Venice's specialty. You would have the buranelli, which are biscuits, vanilla-scented biscuits, really buttery, and they are shaped either in a circle or in an S. And these are just delightful at the end of a meal with some sweet wine. Not unlike Tuscany in the sense where you get the biscuits and your sweet wine. That's very similar. Of course, Tiramisu being a Venetian classic hailing from this part of the country. So for Tiramisu lovers, you would have a lot of options to try. And then there's the Focaccia Veneziana, which is a personal favorite because I really like leavened sweet bread. And Focaccia Veneziana is not unlike panettone without all of the raisins and candied fruit inside, but it's that fluffy and very buttery. And then you have your sugar glaze and your

almonds on top and that's something that you now find all year round. But traditionally it would be made like for the holidays, so Christmas and Easter, and there are a few institutions still producing it and being really famous for making the best. For Focaccia Veneziana in town, one of them would be this bakery called Dal Nono Colussi. For holiday season, Venetians would book there for Focaccia Veneziana two weeks ahead of time so that they can go and pick it up, because the demand is through the roof and it's a very small enterprise, so it's a family-run bakery. And the best part of experience is that you walk in there and you see this ceiling of Focaccia being hung upside down, truly like on like long batons hanging from the ceiling so that they get to cool down. They pick them up from up there and then they wrap it in paper and they hand it to you and it feels like sort of cooling down and it's like the most delicious thing.

Valeria

So, yeah, biscuits or Focaccia Veneziana. And then in season, so during Carnevale, you would have all manners of Frittelle, which are like the custard filled doughnuts or Zabaione. So I feel like these three things would be like the three factors of Venetian sweets. For sure.

Katy

This Focaccia - I think I need to have that in my life. I had life-changing Focaccia in Bari that's obviously very different to this one, but it just sounds delicious. And the way you described it - amazing. Do you have a photo of that, Valeria? Because I know that you takes beautiful photos. I can imagine you've got a really good one of that.

Valeria

Yeah, absolutely. I'll share a photo - that'd be amazing. I'm lucky enough to live very close to Nono Colussi, so I can actually go there and hopefully find a ceiling of Focaccia hanging and I'll try to take a picture of that.

Katy

Amazing. Yeah. I love that these traditions just endure throughout the years and it's really special part about usually is that no matter where you are, there's those food traditions that just continue year after year in the seasons, you know, what time of year it is, by what food's being produced, and it's got a special meaning as well. I think it's just wonderful. So you did mention coffee before, and I love coffee, and Venetian coffee is actually really especially delicious. Is there a particular reason why - that I would gravitate towards Venetian coffee?

Valeria

Well, I mean, now, of course, the rest of the country has caught up. Plus, if you think of Naples, they have this pride in their coffee culture, but it's Venice actually that introduced coffee to the country through trading, like I mentioned before, and had the very first cafe in

Europe. Not very many people know that Caffè Florian in Piazza San Marco, is actually the very first cafe in Europe. And that sort of like created this whole culture of having coffee, which, of course, in the very beginning was something just for the upper and higher classes. But of course, now it has become very democratical. In fact, the experience of walking to the counter of Caffè Florian and just enjoying a coffee, even just standing at the counter, feels truly magical and very quintessentially Venetian. So I really recommend doing that.

Valeria

And then in town, you would have a couple of really great roasting and like, Torrefazione coffee roasters, really. One of them is located in Castello and they only do the grinding and the selling. So you cannot have coffee on the premises, but you can take their amazing coffees with you and they have a selection of Arabica, which would be like the very priced type of coffee. And you can have a taste of, as I said, like various plants. So that's called Torrefazione Girani, and it's in Castello. And then a more modern roaster would be located in Cannareggio and they're called Torrefazione Cannaregio and in there, you can also have coffee on the premises. So you can take your ground coffee with you or your coffee beans. They have very many types, very many blends, and you can have all the types of coffees on the premises as well. So from espresso-based coffees to all of the different types of extractions to also milky coffees, they happen to have really nice pastries to go with the coffee as well. So for a big taste of Venezuelan coffee culture, I would recommend going to Torres Cannareggio because it's really nice.

Katy

Oh, you're so full of great ideas. I love it. Well, we covered everything here. We didn't cover breakfast, but like, breakfast is pastry, so I guess we just did that just now. But we have gone through everything - all our snacks are delicious dishes and our sweets. That's part of what makes Venice so very special. And Valeria, I really feel like you capture its spirit with your beautiful words. And I know that our listeners love your insights, how can they find you online and learn about some of the experiences you mentioned? I know you offer some experiences for people to try this part of Venice when they're there.

Valeria

Yeah. In terms of experiences, I've just recently started doing wine and cheese tastings because of course you have some really delicious shops selling cheeses as well. And these wine and cheese tastings are just really convivial moments to talk about the food and the wine like we've been doing. And then, of course, you start from food and wine and you carry on talking about everything else, which is the fun part of it. And then also custom tours and doing some bacari hopping and also fitting in some boutiques, like some artisan food shops in between. So that can be a fun activity to do in Venice. And other than that, I share my Venetian adventures on Instagram. My account is valerianecchio, so my name and then my surname, and I have a website which is also valerianecchio.com, and sometimes I share some

more in depth stories in there and that's pretty much it. I think like these two places would be where I share most informations about Venice. The Veneto food and all that.

Katy

Everyone should definitely check out your Instagram. It's just a dreamy peek into the life of the lagoon city. And you know what you're going to get with Valeria's Instagram is it's not the highlights, it's not the usual stuff that you would see about Venice. It's definitely from a local's perspective, like just little nooks and just corners of the city that are just so beautiful and it's modern as well, that's the thing about Venice, we have all these traditions, but there's also a modern side to it where Valeria was talking about some of the innovations people are doing around wine and food. And I think that's really exciting that they draw on those traditions and they bring it into the future so we can have a different perspective on life in the lagoon city. Valeria, thank you so much. Love chatting with you.

Valeria

Thank you.

Katy

And everyone should stay tuned because Valeria and I might have an announcement soon, but you'll just have to wait and see. But anyway, thanks for that, Valeria. I really enjoyed having you on the show and you're welcome anytime.

Valeria

Thanks. It's been great chatting with you.

Katy

I find Venetian cuisine extremely interesting and exciting. I can't wait to go back and try some of the dishes Valeria mentioned with her as my guide. There's nothing better than connecting with a true local expert to experience not only the tastes of a city but also the stories and origins behind them.

We've put all Valeria's details into the post show notes at untolditaly.com/148 for episode 148 as well as the names of the dishes and restaurants she mentioned. Make sure to look her up on Instagram for a beautiful peek inside her life in the definitely non-touristy parts of Venice.

Grazie Mille. Thanks for your ongoing support of Untold Italy. I hope you enjoyed today's show. If you did we would love it if you shared it with your Italy-loving friends and family. Grazie to those of you who have already done this. Untold Italy is now in the top 10 travel podcasts in the United States, Canada and Australia which is so exciting. And it's all thanks to you. Grazie Mille! Thank you

Untold Italy travel podcast transcript. [Visit our website](#) for show notes and all episodes

That's all for today, on next week's episode we're talking about pasta but until then it's "ciao for now".

Untold Italy travel podcast transcript. [Visit our website](#) for show notes and all episodes

© Untold Italy 2020