

# MAPPING THE GASTRONOMIC HERITAGE

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VENICE

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# The Venetian gastronomic tradition, among gardens and fishing

In addition to being, in the years of the *Serenissima* Republic, a crossroads of commercial networks around the world, Venice was also a place of food production. There are few places in the world where the relationship between the city and water is so all-encompassing, where transport, travel, daily activities depend so totally on tides, wind, climate conditions. The peculiarity of the lagoon is the encounter between water and land, between agriculture and commerce, between everyday life and architecture, between food and culture.

Venetian gastronomic tradition is born from the deep fusion of water and land in a unique and unrepeatable environment. Fish and crustaceans from the lagoon and the nearby Adriatic Sea; vegetables and fruit from the islands of S. Erasmo and Vignole, from the Cavallino and Treporti coasts; the *selvadego*, migratory game that stops among the sandbanks in the tranquillity of the lagoon waters during its autumn journey towards the warm lands: ducks, *cioffi* (wigeons), *salsegne* (teals), coots and many others. The varieties of vegetables are often special, jealously preserved in the island environment: among them the violet artichoke of S. Erasmo (*carciofo violetto*). The Venetian cuisine, however, is not only linked to the peculiarities of local products. The fortune and history of Venice have always come from the sea, from sailing along distant routes, from making the whole world known to its territory. Spices, exotic foods and special preparations soon spread on the tables of the Venetians: nutmeg, cinnamon, cloves, up to the bittersweet which is the basis of the very typical *soar* preparation. A symbolic preparation, the encounter of local fishery products, such as sardines, with onions from lagoon gardens, raisins and pine nuts from the East. The still waters of the lagoon provided Venice with its initial economic livelihood with the salt trade and the unmistakable flavour of the local products of the animal world - fish, crustaceans, birds - and of the vegetable world - fruit, vegetables and vines - which satisfied its primary food needs. From the distant lands of the East, through the waters of the sea, oil, wine and many spices have arrived on the flourishing markets of the city, which have been combined to season fresh food, creating particular tastes and unusual aromas. From the plain, through the waterways, the nutrients of the countryside and the rustic gastronomic styles of the mountain valleys have flowed into the lagoon.

Fishing has been practiced since time immemorial by the men of the lagoon. On the other hand, the fish was for all intents and purposes part of the daily popular diet of the Venetians, who bought

mullet, sea bass, gilthead bream, shrimp, squid, cod, herring, sardines and mussels at the Rialto or San Marco markets at calm prices. The ancient guilds of the nicolotti, Venetians living in the suburban area of San Nicolò dei Mendicoli, the chioggiotti (from Chioggia) and the poveggiotti, inhabitants of the island of Poveglia, but also private individuals or clergy, powerful owners in the lagoon, were soon granted significant privileges about the exploitation of water, whose recognition was given from the end of the thirteenth century to the judiciary of the Piovo.

The conflict that characterized the Venetian magistrates regarding the waters and their exploitation, also with reference to fishing, highlight how the need to defend the natural habitat of the lagoon, and the fish fauna itself, interacted with the opposite need to extend economic activities, or to exercise them in more intensive terms. Various sources, as early as the end of the 1400s, confirm that with time the waters of the lagoon became less and less fished. At the same time, the fishermen were considered the best connoisseurs of the lagoon. Apart from a few happy cases, particularly regarding those who owned the “valleys” (hunting and fishing reserves), fishing was not a profitable activity. It was a livelihood for the poorest inhabitants of the islands of the lagoon, who drew a small income, to the point that they often complemented it with agricultural activities. The separation of fishermen from the fish trade frozen their situation in immobile poverty. In fact, the fishermen had the obligation to let all their catch flow within a few hours to the pole at Rialto in the fishmonger’s (sometimes reference is made to the pole and the fishmonger’s in San Marco, but more rarely), where the fish was sold wholesale upon payment of duty. At that point the fish merchants, often associated in companies and organized in guilds (in a market however calm in prices, limited in quantities and limited in size of the catch) were the protagonists, monopolizing the retail sales with their stalls to the market of Rialto or that of San Marco. On the poverty of fishermen, the great majority who practiced stray fishing, the reports to the Senate of the Podestà of Chioggia are extraordinarily significant since the mid-1500s. It shows how the community was poor and how men were dedicated not only to fishing, but also to seafaring and to the cultivation of vegetable gardens, perhaps the source of the greatest wealth. The cultivation of fruit, herbs, grapes and planters extraordinarily developed and often was an activity carried out by women. In 1736, in the report to the Doge of Giovanni Duodo, reference is made to the female world of lace work and the cultivation of vegetable gardens.

Around an ancient regime city, agriculture is organized in concentric circles. The nearest one is occupied by perishable foodstuffs, in the others are collected the products that best withstand transport and the passage of time. Even if surrounded by water, Venice is no exception. In the first centuries of its history, vegetable gardens and vineyards extended to its edges. Before the black plague there were 427 of them in the city, mainly located in S. Geremia and S. Pietro di Castello, while the vineyards were fourteen. Thanks to a lease of 1511, we can know the production of the vegetable garden at the hospital of S. Giobbe. The variety of crops cultivated is surprising, starting with the fruit trees: apple trees, pear trees, fig trees, cherry trees, pomegranate trees, but also quince trees, pistachio trees, walnut trees and hazel trees. Several grape varieties, from

muscatella to marzemina. Aromatic and medicinal herbs: laurel, sage, lavender, rosemary, mint, basil. Vegetables: pumpkins, cucumbers, fennel, peas, artichokes, spinach, cabbage, lettuce and other salads. The lagoon microclimate favoured the growth of legumes, especially peas. Although important, the quantity of vegetables coming from the margins of the city is not comparable, until the end of the Second World War, to that produced on the islands, brought daily to the Rialto and San Marco markets by boats.

After the fourteenth-century crisis, the demographic increase had increased the demand for agricultural products and at the same time restricted the cultivable areas in the city, now occupied by new buildings. In Chioggia, on the islands, in the shores, there was the same variety of products already found in the garden of S. Giobbe, but to a greater extent. In addition to the products already described, garlic, onions, leeks, cabbages and carrots also arrived from the estuary to Rialto. Already flourishing in the 15th century were the vegetable gardens in the islands of the northern lagoon, Torcello, Mazzorbo, Lio Maggiore, Ammiana, S. Nicolò di Lido. Horticultural production in the southern lagoon was even earlier, thanks to investments made both by the great patrician families and by the major ecclesiastical institutions. Early was the consumption of products imported from the East: citrus fruits, spinach, melons, quinces and artichokes. From Cyprus comes a recipe for vegetables preserved in very salty wine vinegar with cloves of garlic and ground pepper. Armenian is the association of spinach with fish. Germansauerkraut was also found in Rialto. Here, in this universe of exchanges, lies the origin of bittersweet (the famous *saor* recipe), already described in an anonymous recipe book of the fourteenth century. After the conquest of the mainland, the competition of those campaigns led the islands of the lagoon to specialize, as it seems to indicate, for example the toponym Vignole. The cultivation of jujube was even more suited to the lagoon climate, while artichokes became almost a monoculture on the island of Sant'Erasmus.

If the lagoon is traditionally rich in vegetable gardens, there is a lack of cereals instead. However, thanks to its port, both maritime and river, Venice could easily use the market. Already in the early fourteenth century cereals arrived in Rialto's warehouses from the countryside of Padua and Treviso, feudal Friuli, but also Ferrara, Ravenna, Romagna and Istria. The most important supplies, however, came from Marche, Abruzzo and Puglia regions and during periods of famine from Sicily. It was not enough to buy wheat, it had to be transformed into flour. The most productive mills were located at the mouths of rivers that could accommodate hydraulic wheels placed on boats (*sandoni*) or give energy to wheels of buildings built on the banks. Along the Sile river, for example, the milling activity had ancient traditions dating back to the Benedictine reclamations of the eighth century.

Given the great variety of supplies and culture, it is not surprising that the first printed cookbook in the world was imprinted in Venice in 1475, but to have the first Venetian cookbook you have to wait until 1908. In the absence of a strictly Venetian recipe book, it is necessary to go in search of lagoon specificities in the various texts prior to 1908. If the *saor* seems to be the most traditional of the lagoon fish preparations, the meat recipes prevail until the Middle Ages, when the cuisine

of freshwater fish advances. The eel has been very popular for centuries, especially for its ease of transport. The sturgeon came from the rivers that flow into the lagoon. A much more consistent presence of sea fish can be seen in the manuscripts from the mid-fifteenth century (sardines, mullets, walkways, holm oaks). Since the eighteenth century there has been a trace of some well-known dishes still today: tradition has it that the first peas produced in the lagoon islands appeared on the table of the *Doge* on 25 April, with rice and ham. In this period are well present sturgeon, oysters, lampreys, eels, lobsters and spider crabs. At the end of the eighteenth century appear the Venetian rice soup and especially the Venetian veal liver, still a recognized dish. Pellegrino Artusi in 1891 narrated the preparation of *risi e bisi* (rice and peas), the *frangipane* cake, risotto with *peoci* (mussels). Artusi acknowledges the Venetian primacy over coffee imports and the first coffee shops opened in 1645. The first lagoon recipe book of 1908 contains all the traditional preparations: *risotto*, *saor*, *bigoli in salsa*, *castradina*, *frittelle* and *galani*.

Surely much of the Venetian gastronomic tradition was born in the shadow of ecclesiastical institutions. The monasteries contained long refectories, large kitchens, wine cellars, unthinkable green spaces cultivated with vegetable gardens. Historically, the thread that has divided the secular world from the religious one in Venice has always been subtle. The participation of religious in the lively social life of the Republic was not limited to canonical celebrations. From the vegetable gardens that still survive in the city today, a very particular conventual cuisine develops, not always disposed to align itself with the directives of the Church. The ecclesiastical contribution to Venetian cuisine was manifold. Marzipan, a sweet pastry of almonds, egg white and sugar, is part of the monastic heritage and takes the form of a *zalletto*, a "*rizzetto*" or a *calissone*, or it becomes a filling for sweet ravioli. From the eighteenth century onwards, they went into Savoyard fashion, sponge cake and coffee biscuits. Among the breads, in addition to the *papini* or *noalini*, the breads kneaded with gold deserve an exceptional place, a renowned specialty of the nuns of Celestia, prepared during important feasts and banquets. Instead, the tradition of liqueurs belongs to the masculine convent universe. The Capuchin friars of Giudecca were famous for the *mistrà*, based on anise, offered to the faithful on the feast of the *Redentore*(Redeemer).

The feast of the *Redentore*, the most felt, together with that *Madonna della Salute* (Our Lady of Health), mixes sacred and profane and is celebrated on the night of the third Saturday in July: it is the *note dei foghi* (the night of fires). Today, for the Venetians, *Redentore* means the Giudecca canal full of boats of all kinds, decorated with beams, foliage, and the classic "balons of Redentore", very picturesque lights, built with coloured paper lanterns and illuminated by a light, and laid with rustic tables. It also means eating watermelons, cold rice, beans and onions, *bovoleti con agio e ogio* (snails seasoned with garlic and oil) and drinking wine in the sun. Then you wait for the moonlight to consume the two most typical dishes: sardines in *saor* (sweet and sour preparation), and the *anara col pien* (stuffed duck), before the fires, along with those who do not have the boat, placed on the Riva degli Schiavoni and in San Marco square.

Another popular festival is, as mentioned, that of Our Lady of Health, on 21 November. Here the Venetians go on pilgrimage to the beautiful sanctuary to ask, in fact, health to the *Madonna*. The temple was erected for the liberation from the plague, in the seventeenth century. Only on this day Venetians cook a special dish, the *castradina*, a salted mutton that Venetians could eat during the long isolation thanks to the loyalty of the Dalmatians, who supplied the inhabitants with food. The first sources that speak of the Venice Carnival date back to 1094 when the then *Doge Vitale Falier* used the word Carnival in a document. The term Carnival derives from the Latin word “*car-nem levare*”, or “to get rid of the meat”, which referred to the last banquet that was traditionally held the last day before entering the Lent period and then the “*martedì grasso*” (fat Thursday) that preceded the “Ash Wednesday”. We have to wait 200 years and an edict of the Senate of the Republic of Venice of 1296 for the official institution of the public holiday: the Carnival is celebrated the day before the beginning of Lent. But the Carnival in Venice is also culinary tradition and especially confectionery.

Already in the first editions of the Carnival, street vendors sold the population all kinds of merchandise, often with exotic charm. From seasonal fruit to spices, passing through foods coming from faraway countries, especially from the East, where Venice had big trade routes. Still today, after the Christmas holidays, the shop windows and the tables of the families are filled with *frittelle* (fritters), *galani* (or *crostoli*, always fried) and *castagnole*. It was in 1600s that the *frittelle* became the most popular dessert in Venice, so much so that it led to the creation of a real *Fritoleri Corporation* (composed of about 70 people). The *fritoleri* were those who had the exclusive right to produce and market fritters in the city. “*Boccon da poareti e da siori*” (a bite for poor and rich) define the fritters in Venice, and it is perhaps for this reason that it becomes the cake of the Carnival par excellence, a feast that is precisely for the poor and aristocrats. Today the *frittelle* have kept practically unchanged the original recipe, that of “*frittella alla veneziana*”, with raisins, pine nuts and sugar. But also, many variants have appeared on the market, on all those with cream and *zabaglione*.

Even though these culinary traditions are maintained, the Venetian agri-food panorama is undergoing a severe blow, in line with the severe depopulation of the historic centre of Venice, while the number of daily visitors is increasing dramatically. The remaining historical market, the Rialto market, is in decline and we are beginning to talk in the city about a possible closure. Most of the food sold and consumed in the city comes from large-scale trade. However, there are many small activities that pursue horticulture, fishing, direct sales and local restaurants and the path of the Slow Food Central Europe field research will be directed to their enhancement.

## The gardens of Sant'Erasmus

The island of Sant'Erasmus, as attested by a document from 1552 preserved in the State Archives of Venice, used to feed the markets of the historic city. It was inhabited as early as 792 and was abandoned during the plagues until 1820 to be then repopulated with a predominantly agricultural trend. From the beginning of the Nineteenth century was partly fortified and became part of the *Piazzaforte Marittima* to strong detached Venetian lagoon. The fortifications were then abandoned after the Second World War: evidence of this period is the Maximilian Tower. The life of the inhabitants who dedicated themselves to agriculture (and that of a conspicuous seasonal labour force that periodically integrated the activity of the residents) was made of sacrifices and efforts on farms and vegetable gardens that were generally rented from owners who lived elsewhere. It is around these elements and the sharing of events, difficulties and common fortunes that the residents of Sant' Erasmus, while living isolated from each other on a vast territory, have learned to recognize themselves as a small community. The sense of identity and belonging has also been maintained despite the strong economic and social transformations of the Nineteenth and Twentiethcenturies.

Sant'Erasmus has a surface area (over 300 hectares) that is equivalent to two thirds of the city of Venice and until a century ago could not be considered, as it is today, an island inside the lagoon, but a real coastline, both from the legal and from the morphological point of view. Together with the coastal territories of Cavallino, Lido, Pellestrina and Sottomarina it was an integral part of the long coastal cordon that separates the sea waters from the lagoon basin. This remained unchanged until the new breakwaters were built at the Lido harbour entrance (early Twentieth century) to encourage the deepening of the seabed for the passage of large military and commercial ships. The geological origin of the island-shore, the mainly sandy and permeable soil and the mitigating action of the sea that lapped it, also determined the historical, productive and settlement events. In fact, since the Middle Ages, the prevailing vocation was the agricultural one and the horticultural one: vineyards, fruit trees, grasses, broad beans, melons, cabbages and then the introduction of potatoes, tomatoes, peppers, beans and pumpkins. Between the Nineteenth and Twentieth centuries the important niche cultivation of artichokes was consolidated (the variety cultivated on the lagoon has taken its name from this island), and it still characterizes the rural landscape of *sarasmينو*, divided into plots surrounded by a dense network of canals and ditches. Soft, fleshy, thorny and elongated in shape, the artichoke of Sant' Erasmus (Slow Food Presidium) has dark purple bracts. In the old time, they used to fertilize the vegetable gardens of the lagoon with the *scoasse* (rubbish, in Venetian) or with shells and shells of crabs, which were used to correct the acidity of the soil. To protect the plants from the powerful Bora wind, however, they pulled up the *motte*, small heaps of land, at the side facing the sea. The artichoke season in Venice begins at the end of April with the harvest of the *castraure*, the first small, very tender apical artichoke bud, which is cut to allow the most luxuriant growth of the other shoots (from 18 to 20 per plant each season). The harvest continues until the second half of June: the orchards transport the vegetables by boat, the *caorline*, from the island to the markets of *Rialto* and *Tronchetto*. The



*articiochi* (artichokes) were introduced into the Venetian cuisine by the Jewish community. They are consumed mostly raw and the *castraure* are a real treat available only for a few days: no longer than ten or fifteen.

In the Middle Ages, at least until the 12th century, the climatic characteristics and the daily exchange of sea water also favoured the cultivation of salt on the island.

Despite numerous previous testimonies (archaeological; map discoveries; paintings; documents), it was only in the Early Modern Age that documents began to be used to describe in a reliable and systematic manner the properties, the uses or the extension of the cultivated land, confirming the substantial continuity over time of the land subdivisions in the central sector of Sant'Erasmus. For example, a catastrophic analysis of the 1583 allows the amount of rents and land products to be reconstructed in a rural landscape where viticulture still prevailed. Until the beginning of the Nineteenth century the most extensive land properties were those of the Monastery of San Zaccaria. The monastery's records, which show not only the rentals but also the detailed "honours" in nature, remind us of the farming of courtyard animals and of various crops, including the production of native peaches, still remembered by the older residents, which has almost disappeared to this day.

## Aspects of fishing and fish farming in the Venice Lagoon

As mentioned above, fishing and fish farming have been practiced since immemorial time by the men of the lagoon. The fish was for all intents and purposes part of the daily popular diet of the Venetians, who bought mullet, sea bass, bream, shrimp, squid, cod, herring, *sardelle* and mussels at the *Rialto* or *San Marco* Market at tiered prices, to mention just a few of all the species living in the lagoon. The conflict that had characterized the Judiciary of the *Giudici del piovego*, since the end of the Thirteenth century, regarding water and its exploitation, also with reference to fishing, shows how the need to defend the habitat of the lagoon - including the defence of fish - interacted with the opposite need to extend economic activities, or exercise them in more intensive terms. Not only agriculture, but also fishing and fish farming.

The *Valle da pesca* (lit. fishing valley) is a portion of the lagoon embankment, within which several fish species grow under extensive farming conditions, i.e. they are free to grow exploiting the resources they find in nature. In the *Valle*, neither drugs nor feed are used, a practice which would not be economically justifiable given the large areas interested. Fish can find all the resources they need within the mosaic of natural environments of which the *Valle* is composed, such as shallow waters, underwater meadows and canals. Man's interventions are exclusively directed towards the breeding environment, and concern the wise management of fresh and brackish waters; the maintenance of the morphology of the breeding habitat; the annual introduction of new juveniles; fishing and the selection of marketable products and the control of natural predators (birds of prey such as cormorants).



The operation of a *Valle* is simple and is based on several annual growth cycles. Spring represents, for some species with marine reproduction, the period of the whipping, that is the spontaneous migration of the juveniles from the sea to the confined areas of the lagoons. Here the fishes increase during the summer, exploiting the natural richness of resources typical of these environments. In the *Valli da pesca*, between March and May, fry (mostly from catches) of commercial species such as mullet, sea bass and sea bream are “sown”. A pre-growing phase in the tank can be foreseen to bring the young to a sufficient size not to be eaten by the biggest “guests” of the *Valle*. When autumn arrives, with the worsening of the weather and climate conditions, the fish feel the natural call of the sea and the phenomenon of disassembled begins, the opposite migration that leads the animals to channel towards “the entrance of the *Valle*” (*bocca di valle*), in the *lavoriero*. At this point, once the animals are concentrated, it is possible to fish and select them, assigning the animals of a marketable size to the sale and putting the youngest in special winter fish ponds where the deeper waters and the wise management by the head of the *Valle* of the fresh water flows, allow them to survive the rigidity of winter. The following spring therefore begins a new cycle, with the release of these specimens in the valley basins and the sowing of new fish. For example, there are required up to three years for some mullet species to reach the commercial size. The harvesting of new fish from the open lagoon environments is carried out by the “new fish men” (*pescenovellanti*): at the end of the Nineteenth Century this profession was one of the most important fishing activities for fishermen of Burano, Caorle, Cortellazzo, Pellestrina and Chioggia, it took place from the second half of March until mid-June and was very profitable.

Documents from the 11th century onwards testify that the ownership of the *Valli* was in the hands of a few noble families and the Benedictine monasteries, who rented them by means of lease contracts, usually annual, but which were often reconfirmed to the same tenant for decades. In the lease contract of the *Valli* that the Venetian state signed with the tenants, there were clauses that gave the manager the task of providing for the construction of embankments and ditches to protect the *Valli* themselves and in any case, it worked to protect the lagoon environment. The costs incurred by the *vallesani* (people of the *Valle*) regarding the work and the improvements were then to be reimbursed by the customs authorities. Fish farming and hunting were practiced inside the *Valle*, and both these activities constituted for the *Serenissima* Republic a large reserve of food, that allowed a certain food self-sufficiency in case of need.

According to some scholars, the *Valli da pesca* probably existed in the lagoon even before the foundation of the city of Venice. Surely this practice was carried out since the Middle Ages, when the embankments were mobile and made up of cane trellises (*grisiolo*): this technique allowed the capture of juveniles, while now, due to the presence of fixed embankments introduced after the fall of the *Serenissima* (the Republic had always prevented the construction of fixed embankments because one of its principles was to eliminate any impediment to the free expansion of the tidal wave) and the variability in the quantity of fish that comeback naturally, the release of juveniles must be made artificially, as explained above.

Initially there were two types of Valli:

- *Valli a seragia*: the level of water inside the *Valle* depends on the level of the external waters, as the *Valle* is surrounded by a continuous wall made up of poles, *grisoie* and perches tied together with wicker;
- *Valli ad argine*: the internal water level is made independent from the external one thanks to fixed earth banks, keys, gates doors, regulated by the grower of the *Valle*.

The process of closing of the *Valli* began between the Nineteenth and Twentieth centuries following studies and observations made by scholars such as the engineer Giustiniano Bullo, who designed the district canal and applied it to the *Pierimpié Valle*, his property. Later, in the Mid-Twentieth Century, the Italian State provided contributions to encourage the embankment of the *Valli*.

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