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THE ISLANDS OF *VIN SALSO*

HOW SOME VENETIAN WINES COULD SURVIVE VENICE

BY DILETTA SERENI
PHOTOGRAPHY BY ALESSANDRO DE RE

THERE'S A FAMOUS BOOK I usually suggest to friends going to Venice, it is by Tiziano Scarpa and is titled *Venezia is a fish*. As Scarpa says, Venice is a fish if you look at it on a map. "It's like a vast sole stretched out against the deep," he writes, "the bridge connecting it to terra firma looks like a fishing line: Venice looks as if it's swallowed the bait."

I follow this image to say that, as a fish, water decides its rhythms and predicts its future; through the water you can tell its story. Let's take the recent past: In the spring of 2020, as international travel and tourism ground to a halt, the nearly boat-free waters of the Venice canals suddenly became cleaner—if not transparent, less turbid and stinky. The canals attracted a new population; seahorses and octopuses were sighted, even dolphins, just outside the city. The measures to contain the Covid-19 epidemic have changed the face of many cities, but Venice in a more dramatic way, due to a well known disproportion. The tourist wave of about 77 thousand people a day (where the historic center has about 50 thousand inhabitants), which nurtures a large part of the city economy, disappeared, making void not only in the streets but also behind the windows.

May 2021: I'm visiting Venice again for the first time in a while. As I walk through the cobblestone streets, the canals are turbid again and the first tourists are back wandering through *calli* and *fondamenta* (alleyways and streets bordering the canals). My first stop normally when visiting Venice is at Osteria al Cicheto, a cramped and crowded tavern, where, on good evenings, you soon end up sharing bottles with strangers. The sense of camaraderie is thanks to the renowned *oste*, as we refer to the owner of an osteria, whose name is Simone Salin and whose family owns the place since 1986. This time, however, Cicheto is still closed for safety norms (it will reopen in June), like many other restaurants. To meet Simone, this time, I have to take a boat to an island in the lagoon, where Venetian wines are made.

Simone, besides working behind the counter for thirty years now, is the cellar master of *Laguna nel Bicchiere*, an association created in 2008 by a group of people who dedicate their free time to take care of some tiny vineyards scattered across the Venice lagoon. Despite the high urban density, Venice has always had small vineyards hidden in private gardens, especially those of churches and convents. And more often this occurs on the islands around Venice, where there's more land available. In recent times though, many of these vines ended up being abandoned, and that's where Laguna nel Bicchiere came in.

Out of these many different parcels they put together a small production: from 300 to 1600 bottles, depending on the vintage, made by hand using archaic instruments. Over the years these wines have gained a certain mysterious charm, partly because they are very good, and partly because only few people manage to drink them, because they are not sold commercially and are reserved for members of the association, their lucky friends (here I am), and the rare tastings that pop up over the city.

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On the ferry, usually crowded, there's plenty of space to sit, but I prefer to stand on the deck and watch the profile of Venice as we move away from the shore. I am heading to the island of San Michele, largely occupied by a 19th-century monumental cemetery, with some illustrious graves such as Igor Stravinsky, Ezra Pound, and Joseph Brodsky. The cellar is in the only cemetery-free corner of the island, inside the cloister of the Renaissance church of San Michele. It has been used by the friars to make wine for centuries and still preserves the atmosphere of a place where time has stratified without stiffening.

When I get there, Simone is tasting the last vintage from aging barrels. He has a slightly frowny expression even when everything is fine, and the frank and hasty manners of the typical Venetian oste. He greets me without ceremonies or smiles, as he always does: "Hi Diletta, how are you doing, come and try this." I join him to see how it goes with the 2020 "San Michele Bianco," a light orange coming from the vine on this same island. The pergola row runs around the church's garden and blends some typical white varieties from the Veneto region such as Glera (the queen of Prosecco), Garganega, and Bianchetta; then a bit of Malvasia and the mythical Dorona, a rare grape, historically cultivated in the lagoon and well suited for its loose sandy soil and brackish environment.

The "San Michele Bianco" still has a slight reduction but already shows some features which appear clearer and more developed in the same wine of 2018, which we uncork shortly after. It has a fruity brightness but especially a salty note, which I love. This is a constant of these wines, through different grapes, vineyards or vintages, and explains why the lagoon wines are often called with the dialectal term of *vin salso*—salty wine.

"If you think this is salty, well, try this other," Simone says, tapping some white from a steel tank. This wine, which comes from a vineyard in the Malamocco district of Lido island (where the Venice Film Festival is held) is in fact much saltier, tasting almost like pickled olives. And this brings us back to the fish-city thing, whose fortunes are so tied to water.

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A few months before the pandemic crisis, in November 2019, the lagoon reached the record level of 187 centimeters (nearly six feet high), the second highest ever recorded after 1966, when the water reached 194 centimeters—all measured above medium sea level. Venetians are used to occurrences of *acqua alta* (high tide), which sometimes during the winter forces everyone to wear tall rubber boots or even walk on improvised wooden walkways—or, in the absence of boots and walkways, get stuck for hours waiting for the water level to come down. But that of November 2019 was a series of successive floods that paralyzed the city for days, causing a victim and serious damages to lower floors and basements, including of course the cellar where we are now. Acqua alta, usually caused by a combination of astronomical, geological and metereological factors, was worsened that year by a

situation of low atmospheric pressure on the whole planet and, locally, the Scirocco wind from the South-East pushing waters through the Lagoon inlets.

"Not only has the Malamocco vineyard been flooded," Simone tells me swirling his glass, "but the brackish water must have seeped deep into the soil, or at least it's our guess, because in August when the vineyard takes what it can from underground to quench the thirst, the berries became salty."

If the events are impressed so clearly on these wines it is also for the minimal intervention work that Simone does as winemaker. During the harvest, several boats converge to the cellar, bringing the grapes picked from other islands. Bunches are crushed with feet and destemmed by hands of a diverse and chaotic group of people—I was there during harvest in 2018 and took part in a day of this joyful chaos. The grapes then ferment spontaneously with the skins, and sometimes with stems too, in large open vats, and then are racked off at the end of fermentation, which on average lasts a week. After this, the only interventions that Simone does before bottling are to move (rack) the wine a few times, with batonnage or decanting, using the lees as protection.

"I keep the lees until they are fruity," Simone tells me. I am convinced that part of the delicate depth of these wines comes precisely from keeping the lees—in other words, the spent yeasts and skins that separate from the juice—a long time with the wine. "They protect the wine from possible degeneration. I throw them away only when they start to smell like sand," he adds.

Preserving the lees and doing skin-contact fermentation are both traditional practices, but also respond to a "modern" logic, widespread in natural winemaking: keep the different components of the grapes as long as possible, to preserve the health of wine and enhance the shades of its taste.

"The rest is done by the rich ecosystem of

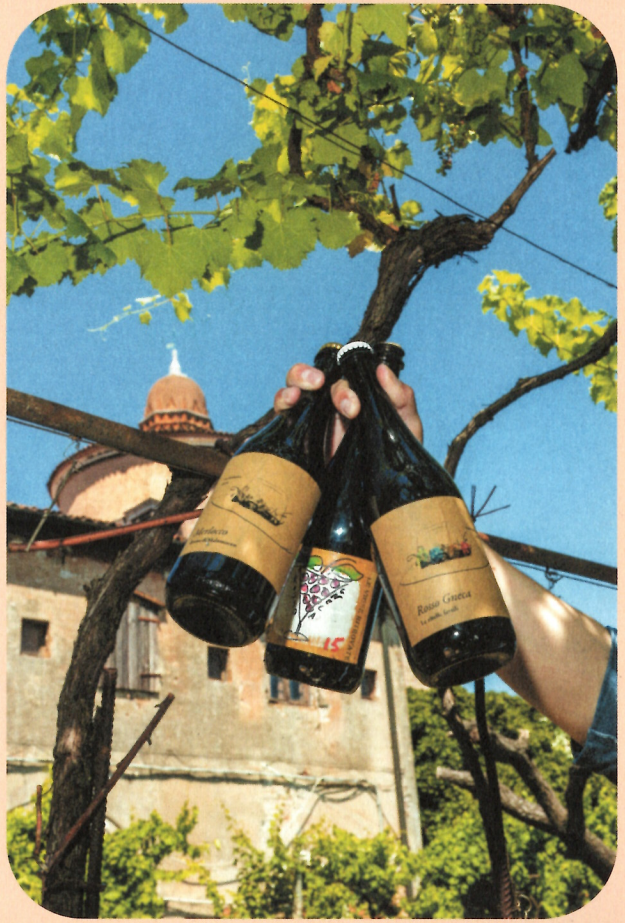
microorganisms living in this cellar since hundreds of years. Also because," he tells me while fishing for a few more bottles to drink, "it is hard to clean: we don't have a pressure washer or even hot water. Other members of the group are more passionate about this romantic aspect, they say it is in such environments that grow the best yeasts, maybe they are right, who knows." He had some work experiences in different cellars before, both natural and conventional, and the first time he saw this place he thought: it's impossible to make wine here.

Yet, Simone has been in charge of the cellar since 2015 and has to admit that despite the amateur group and the rudimentary means, the wines rarely come out with flaws. "I added sulfites in a wine in 2017, but I regretted it," he says, "volatile acidity was rising and I was afraid. But I saved a zero sulfites sample and when we tasted it two years later the volatile had well integrated with the rest."

We move outside, where others are taking a break from working the vines and we all gather around a few bottles. Simone uncorks the 2018 "Rosso Gneca," a multi-varietal red from the island of Giudecca. Cabernet Franc, Carmenère, Lambrusco Marani, Raboso, Merlot are harvested all at the same time, which brings a mix of different stages of maturation. The result is a light red that smells of unripe cherries, herbs and pepper and goes down in large sips, with its saline acidity.

The delicate search for a good blend is also what has made the association work. Over the years many people took part in it, including some who had a major role in the extraordinary diffusion of natural wine in Venice. The first names you get hearing this story are Mauro Lorenzon of La Mascareta and Cesare Benelli of Al Covo, two restaurant owners who introduced natural wines in their wine lists since the early 2000s and were also among the founders of Laguna nel Bicchiere. The city welcomed natural wines before and better than any other place in Italy, building the way for the lively landscape of wine bars active today [see our Venice city guide in Issue 5]. In the meantime, Laguna nel Bicchiere gathered people around wine culture and winemaking, free from any commercial logic, as a way to be active and involved in the city life and fate.

In fact, the meaning of the association goes from wine to something broader, showing that resident Venetians are still there, few but struggling, cramped in the narrow spaces left free by tourism. That Venice has not become a huge theme park, that there is, for example, an agricultural dimension, vineyards and vegetable gardens that must be farmed or just lived, like places where people can meet without becoming customers.



And that's where every good Venetian conversation ends: complaining about tourism in front of a row of open bottles. "During lockdowns," Simone says, "what kept cities alive were essential shops: bakeries, groceries, hardware stores. But in Venice there are five hardware stores in the whole city, submerged by an avalanche of restaurants and souvenir shops. We walked through phantom roads. It was beautiful, but showed how far tourism has shaped us."

"Without tourism," he adds, "we all end up failing, because we all depend on tourism, to varying degrees." Venetians would not be enough to keep Cicheto and other *osterie* open: inhabitants in the city have reduced by 50 percent since the 1970s and continue to decrease by almost 1000 every year. People and offices have moved away to the mainland, making room for the colossal Venetian fun machine.

There's nothing new about this. It's just that during the pandemic, the water in the canals was still enough to force the city to mirror itself and see live what numbers already told in the abstract. A glimpse into a hypothetical alternative future that we will soon forget, while tourists will return, taverns will reopen, and we will once again meet at Cicheto to share bottles with strangers.

Wine alone cannot heal the city but can make us more optimistic or fatalistic as we watch it drown. Or maybe leave, like a real fish-city, breaking the hook that keeps it tied to the mainland. As Tiziano Scarpa writes in the book where I started: "we fastened it to the lagoon so that it wouldn't suddenly get it into its head to weigh anchor and leave, this time forever." But if that happens, here on the satellite island of Venetian natural wines, we would be in the right place to see it go, and we will shout good luck, toasting full glasses of our *vin salso*.