

FANCY SOME PROSECCO?



In Venice, the wine flows like water

Venice is one of the most romantic cities in the world, and the beautiful wine region of Prosecco is right on its doorstep, our resident wayfarer Winsor Dobbin samples its wine.

We are sipping on glasses of prosecco matched with rustic Italian dishes like hearty fish soups, prosciutto and cheese platters and spaghetti vongole at the landmark Enoteca Mascareta in the back streets of Venice.

It's a hugely popular spot with a colourful host in Mauro Lorenzon, and a superb wine list. It buzzes until 2am daily – but what many of the visitors do not realise is that most of the wines they are drinking are from the Veneto region, just a short train ride or drive from the city of masks.

It is easy to combine a few days exploring the marvels of Venice with a day trip or side trip to Prosecco country: centred on the nearby towns of Treviso, Conegliano and Valdobbiadene, where grape growing dates back to Roman times.

Venice – actually a group of small islands where art and history combine – is worth several days of any tourist's time. Its waterways serve as the main transport arteries and its myriad of laneways often lead nowhere.

It is a jewel of a destination – unique and endlessly entertaining with a rare artistic vivacity. There are constant festivals, feasts and cultural performances, including the famous Venice Carnevale each February, and the Biennale and Venice Film Festival.

The heart of the city is Piazza San Marco surrounded by a bell tower and the cathedral, with its five portals of marble and mosaic decorations; the Ducal Palace, the clock tower and the Correr Museum.

Not far away is Campo Santo Stefano, with the massive church of the same name.

Venice has been described as an "outdoor museum" with the Grand Canal as its main thoroughfare. The canal begins at Punta della Dogana next to the Palazzo Grassi, a contemporary arts centre.

The Peggy Guggenheim Collection is another must-see, exhibited in the Palazzo Venier de' Leoni; it is considered a key collection of 20th century art.

On the right bank of the Grand Canal – accessible by crossing the Rialto Bridge – it is possible to reach the districts of San Polo, Santa Croce and Dorsoduro. The Rialto Market is a great place to both browse and eat – and Venice is dotted with fine restaurants and small bars serving cicchetti (appetizers) with a glass of prosecco, saove or valpolicella.

Make time, too, to visit some of the outer islands; Burano, renowned for its lace production; Murano for its glassmaking; Pellestrina and Torcello.

But if you want to be at the centre of the action; essentially close to Piazza San Marco and the Rialto Bridge, it pays to choose your hotel carefully.



The gracious M Gallery Hotel Papadopoli fits the bill when it comes to location. Located at the intersection of the Grand Canal and the smaller Tolentini canal adjacent to the Papadopoli Gardens, this grand hotel is just a short walk from the bus station and one stop, or an easy walk across the the Constitution Bridge, to the Piazzale Roma water bus stop and the main Santa Lucia railway station.

Lines 1 and 2 on the Vaporetto (water bus) system take you to the Rialto market in around 10 minutes and St Mark's in 20 minutes. Gondola excursions can, of course, be arranged with the concierge with picks-ups directly at the front door – but be warned, they are not cheap.

There are some excellent wine bars and trattorias within just a short stroll of the Papadopoli, and the Scuola Grande di San Rocco, famous for its frescoes by Tintoretto, is similarly close. Keen shoppers can find Murano glass outlets just around the corner, or hop on a ferry and find themselves in Murano in a few minutes.

Set in an 18th-century mansion, the hotel has a boutique feel with just 97 rooms and suites – some with magnificent views.

The rooms offer all life's luxuries, with both air-conditioning and windows that open, TVs with a range of international channels, a multi-device charger, safety deposit boxes, bathrooms with bathtub and shower, bathrobes, hairdryer and classy Culti bathroom amenities.

There is a rather grand restaurant serving regional specialities for lunch and dinner seven days a week, a bar that makes a pretty decent Bellini (this is Venice after all), served with some snazzy little snacks, and a computer in the lounge area for those keen to catch up on emails. There is also free wi-fi throughout the property.

Prices here start from a very reasonable €155 per night, which seemed very fair to me for such stylish digs.

I also sampled the Hotel Palazzo Giovanelli, facing the Grand Canal, which is another good option with an excellent location. And that day trip to prosecco-land is easily organised. Go by train via Mestre, by bus or by car.

Prosecco is the Italian sparkling white wine that has captured the imagination of drinkers across the world over the past four or five years – and there is no sign of the phenomenon running out of steam. Last year it out-sold Champagne globally.

The appeal of prosecco is easy to understand; whether made fully sparkling (spumante) or lightly sparkling (frizzante), prosecco is refreshing, low in alcohol and relatively affordable. It is all about freshness and immediate drinkability and is often enjoyed as an aperitif.

Anywhere you go in Venice you'll see prosecco being enjoyed as a spritz (mixed with Aperol or Campari). Mixed with vodka and lemon sorbet it is also an ingredient of the Italian cocktail sgroppino.

The whole region today has a gourmet focus, producing an array of table wines (unlike Champagne), cheeses including Asiago and Grana Padano and various salumi and prosciutto.

Wine producers here run the gamut from small farmhouse



makers with just a few rows of grapes on steep slopes to those with historic mansions like Villa Sandi, which dates back to 1622 and is one of the grandest wine estates you'll find anywhere.

The region is now alive with cantinas offering tastings and upmarket hotels and eateries catering for the influx of tourists – including Villa Sandi's boutique Locanda Sandi.

Take detours off the main roads to hillside villages where the odd wild boar still roams wild.

The entire region is dotted with medieval walled towns and cities and beautiful old churches. The rugged countryside is full of abbeys, churches and castles with a mountainous backdrop.

The lovely city of Treviso, known as Little Venice because of its rivers, canals and many churches, barely rates a mention in many guide books but it is a delightful base from which to explore for those who do not wish to commute the 40 or so kilometres from Venice.

Some of the old water mills that dotted the city have been converted into trendy homes but the city retains much of its ancient charm. It's a prosperous place; where locals and tourists alike stroll the ancient streets and piazzas, and walk the river banks and canals in the midst of leafy gardens.

When it comes to accommodation, the Villa Pace Park Hotel Bolognese is an authentic Venetian villa outside Treviso with a swimming pool and its own restaurant, Il Bolognese, while the Carlton Hotel is a clean, centrally-situated but rather basic hotel in the centre of Treviso.

The region is best explored by taking the La Strada di Prosecco (Prosecco Road) – a driving route that passes many of the finest wine estates, vineyards, osterias and enoteccas.

Words: Winsor Dobbin



THE FACTS:

- **M Gallery Papadopoli Hotel Venezia**, Giardini Papadopoli - S. Croce, 245, 30135 Venezia. +39 041 710 400. www.hotel-papadopoli-venice.com.
- **Enoteca Mascareta**, Calle lunga Santa Maria Formosa, 5183, Venezia. +39 041 5230744.
- **Emirates** flies from Australia to Dubai 84 times per week, with daily connections to 35 European destinations, including Venice. Emirates provides 30kg of checked luggage per passenger in economy class and 40kg in business class. 1300 303 777. www.emirates.com/au