





CICHÈTI

Bàcari are the closest thing that Venetians have to the British pub or the downtown New York bar. They are meeting places for locals, social hubs where you go for a drink or two. You will find politicians rubbing shoulders with market traders, gondoliers chatting to university professors, and the conversation will range from politics to football, nostalgia to gossip. Although they are unashamedly working-class, the bàcari differ from British pubs and New York bars in every other respect. In a pub the food tends to be dry and processed: potato crisps, roasted peanuts and pork scratchings. In Manhattan you'll get pretzels and nachos. In a bàcaro you will find cichèti.

Cichèti (the spelling is Venetian, in the rest of Italy they spell it *cicchètti*)* are small snacks, usually prepared in advance, that sit in a glass cabinet on the bar counter. They are often speared with a single toothpick to allow the barman to pick them up easily as you point to what you want. It's as simple as that. You wash your cichèto down with an ombra (literally a 'shadow', the word dates from when wines were placed in the shade to keep them cool) – a small glass of local wine.

These snacks can often be somewhat proletarian in their execution: a single anchovy from a tin wrapped around a single pickled onion stabbed with a toothpick, for example. Or they can be sublimely subtle like *Baccalà Mantecato* (boiled and flaked salt cod, infused with garlic and creamed with olive oil) on a lozenge of toast. Cichèti are not so far removed from what aspirational dinner party hostesses would call canapés. They are perfect to accompany a glass of wine or two, or to offset the seductive effects of a Spritz. They are also perfect as a way of whetting your guests' appetites. There is nothing like a little of what's to come to get the digestive juices flowing and the brain (and stomach) in gear for eating. As the Italians say: 'L'appetito vien mangiando' – with eating, comes appetite.

Often, cichèti use bread as their delivery mechanism. All the bàcari I have visited use a bought French stick sliced at an angle, sometimes toasted, often not, as the base for most of their cichèti. Some of the more serious modern osterie might use Pugliese (also bought) cut the same way. For the purposes of clarity, cichèti using little toasts as a base are referred to in the following section as *crostini*.

Crostini really are very simple indeed. The toasted discs of French stick, ciabatta, Pugliese (your choice) can be prepared in advance and you can add your topping twenty minutes or even half an hour before serving. This is so typically Venetian: bàcari have these hanging round in glass cabinets for half a day sometimes. You can 'reactivate' your little cichèti by adding a few drops of olive oil on vegetable and meat *crostini* or a few drops of lemon juice on the fishy ones.

** Throughout the book, I have used Venetian dialect spellings where an ingredient, dish or term has a particular relevance or significance to Venice or the region.*

GOAT'S CHEESE, ROASTED GRAPE & WALNUT BRUSCHETTE

You will find the combination of cheese and fruit in many areas of Italian cooking and with good reason: they work so well together. There is even a proverb about not telling the peasants how sublime this combination is (see page 207).

This bruschetta is a delicious marriage of deep flavours and contrasting textures. It is very easy to make and incredibly impressive when presented and eaten. You should use a mild, soft goat's cheese, such as Italian caprino, and any type of seedless grapes that you like.

For two bruschette:

10 grapes – any seedless variety
1 small handful of picked thyme leaves
Extra virgin olive oil
Flaky sea salt and black pepper
10 walnut halves
2 thick slices of good sourdough or soda bread
½ garlic clove
1 large handful of soft, crumbly goat's cheese
Runny honey

Preheat the oven to 190°C/Gas 5. You need two separate baking trays; one for the grapes and one for the walnuts. Scatter the grapes on one with almost all of the thyme, a little olive oil, salt and pepper. Shake the tray a few times to coat the grapes and place in the oven for 10–15 minutes until they are starting to colour. Shake the walnuts with a little olive oil only and pop those in for just 5–6 minutes. Remove both from the oven and set aside.

Toast or grill the slices of bread so that they are crunchy on the outside but still have a good degree of give when squeezed. Rub one side of each slice a few times with the cut side of the garlic clove. The clove will melt into the bread's hot surface. Drizzle with some olive oil.

Crumble the goat's cheese onto the grilled bread. Add the roasted grapes and walnuts. These should still be nicely warm. Drizzle with a little good quality runny honey. Cut each slice of bruschetta lengthways, scatter over the remaining thyme leaves and serve.

