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**C**OPPER-COLOURED SAILS are furled on two red-painted masts. The sturdy old sailing boat makes a slow but dignified progress towards us along the Giudecca Canal, picking its way between ferries sailing purposefully to the Lido and *vaporetti* darting across its path. As the boat approaches the dock its name becomes visible, painted on its snub nose: *Eolo*, the Italian name for Aeolus, god of the winds. This 32-ton, 16-metre vessel is a relic of an age when the hard work in the Venetian lagoon was done by boats driven by the wind. The *Eolo* is not elegant, but it is a splendid vision of Venice past in Venice present.

The boat is a *bragozzo* (a broad-beamed fishing vessel) that was bought and lovingly restored by a stocky, warm-hearted Venetian named Mauro Stoppa, who takes visitors to parts of Venice other boats do not normally reach. He and the *Eolo* explore the lagoon, the crescent-shaped inland sea that imparts to Venice its life, its health and its prosperity.

Stoppa belongs on the lagoon. He was born on its shore. He first hunted for duck there when he was a boy, and he returned to it after university in Padua and years selling farm machinery. Now he shows the lagoon to travellers who want to know more about the city's maritime setting. But the *Eolo* is not only for those wishing to further their education. It is a well-appointed pleasure boat and a very fine floating restaurant.

Stoppa takes the *Eolo* on lagoon cruises lasting from one to three days. We are

## See Venice and dine

**Venice** A cruise around the city region on a traditional sailing boat is all the more enticing if there's a restaurant on board. Stephen Fay embarks on a gastronomic voyage of discovery.

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On the page 27 of  
the book "Venice"  
there is a list of  
restaurants in  
Venice. You can  
find it in the book  
"Venice" by  
Cristina Lombardi



### The emphasis is on seasonal tastes, the freshness of the raw materials and the simplicity of the cooking

► on a one-day cruise. We wait on the yacht harbour by the graceful Palladian church of San Giorgio Maggiore. Comfortable chairs are arranged neatly on the *Eolo's* deck between the forward cabin and the helm. In the stern are two window boxes, one growing sage, the other basil. As we are about to cast off, a young man approaches and hands over a plastic bag. It holds a substantial sea bass, about 3kg, just caught by him in the lagoon. Our lunch.

Our course is north, into the wind. The autumn morning is so clear that the Dolomites are visible in the distance, and Venice's Istrian stone looks as if it has been cleaned the day before yesterday. We head for the Fortezza di Sant'Andrea, which once guarded the wide entrance to the lagoon at the Lido, past the gun emplacements that deterred invaders for hundreds of years – until Napoleon came in through the back door in 1797.

We turn to port into a channel that takes us past the island of Le Vignole and on to Sant'Erasmo. Our course is marked by clumps of stout wooden posts called *bricole*, which mark all the channels in the lagoon. Sant'Erasmo is Venice's market garden, where crops of beans and courgettes grow, full-flavoured in the salty soil. There are vineyards, too. A distinguished Friulian winemaker named Maurizio Felluga, who is along for the ride, tells us the wine produced here is similar to what the Romans would

### Villas on the Brenta Canal

The Brenta Canal is another fascinating stretch of water for visitors to Venice, and Stoppa makes it the focus of a five-day cruise (£3,500 per person, all inclusive). The boat is a *caovina*, a light, flat-bottomed vessel once used to carry freight. It holds 10 people in an open cabin. The canal – misleadingly known in Venice as the 'Riviera del Brenta' – links the lagoon with Padua. It is lined by more than 300 villas built over a couple of hundred years by rich Venetians escaping the heat and disease of the city in summer.

Stoppa concentrates on two of these. The *Villa Foscari*, built by Andrea Palladio about 1563, is known as the *Mascolanta* because the first lady of the house had been exiled from Venice. The grand reception rooms have painted ceilings and comfortable furniture. I'd more in tomorrow. But not into the *Villa Pisani* at Silea, built in

the 18th century by the 114th Doge of Venice – which is why it has 114 rooms. Only one of these is memorable, for a ceiling brilliantly painted by Giambattista Tiepolo. This vast pile is a relic of the dying days of Venice's gorgeous republic, a fascinating monument to decadence.

Guests spend three nights in the agreeably eccentric, 17th-century *Villa Selvatico* in the post-volcanic countryside of the Euganean Hills, where the Romans took the waters and Plinarch died. The stay includes a day spent in Padua, home to Giuffrè's famous frescoes in the Scrovegni Chapel and the world's first public garden. The last night is spent on the bank of the Brenta Canal in the comfortable *Villa Franceschi*, and supper is taken at the *Villa Margherita* nearby. It has the longest list of brands of Borsari whisky I have ever seen.

From left: Mauro Stoppa, the *Eolo's* owner, with a bowl of scallops; the boat is docked and its tables are set for dinner near San Giorgio Maggiore

have drunk: cloudy and slightly sweet, with a taste of the earth.

We sail on across the lagoon, through the shallows and flats that Shakespeare refers to as a danger to shipping in *The Merchant of Venice*. Egrets and grey heron tread carefully through the reeds and across the mud that appears when the tide is low. Sunlight shimmers on a small swell in the lagoon as we pass the tall cypresses on San Francesco del Deserto. (St Francis slept there, they say; not many do so now.) On to Burano, famous for its lace and instantly recognisable by the bright pastel shades of new public housing, so utterly at odds with the pink brick and white stone of Venetian itself. All the islands are low-lying and seem to float on the water.

Stoppa, who looks as if he enjoys his food, pokes his head up from the galley and beckons. I follow him below. He is an accomplished sailor and a good cook, having learned by watching his parents and five sisters; but today he is neither helmsman nor chef. Massimo Colombo, who studies architecture when he is not cooking for Stoppa, is already sweating over the stove. Stoppa is sous-chef for the time being, spooning the flesh from a large pumpkin that has been baking for 90 minutes. There are four in the galley, working at the stove or at a long, wooden preparation table that runs down the middle. Sea snails are soaking in salt water, and the scallops that will end up in the pumpkin soup lie on a plate. The sea bass is lurking, waiting to be served.

STOPPA ORIGINALLY INTENDED this fore-castle to contain three cabins and a galley, until he decided his real priority was the cooking space. The boat sometimes makes three-day trips to the far north and south of the lagoon, where mudflats and marshes mark the limit of the tide. Guests on these cruises stay at a hotel in Toccoleto or Chioggia; Stoppa says this is a lot more comfortable than spending the night on board. Anyone who has ever shaved, showered and all the rest on a converted fishing boat will agree with him.

What do we talk about? Food, for a start. Fulvia Sesani, who is also on board, runs cooking courses for guests of Stoppa's who stay for six days – three on the lagoon, three on land in Chioggia and Venice. She teaches pasta-making because the guests expect it – 'but it's



► not really Venetian'. They also learn about polenta, the bread and potatoes of Venice, made from cornmeal.

Sesani is a daily visitor to the Pescheria, the fish market by the Rialto. 'A fish has 24 qualities and it loses one every hour of the day,' she pronounces. Stoppa talks about finding *schia*, tiny shrimp from the lagoon, *anguilla* (eel) and squid. He provides us with a gloomy progress report on fishing stocks in the lagoon. When he was a boy there were five varieties of *vongole*, the little shellfish that are forever associated with spaghetti. Now there are only three, and one of those is an import from the Philippines. Cowboys from the south scour the bed of the lagoon to make a quick buck, and it takes time to restock.

Sesani complains about Venice's restaurants. She contrasts the public and private faces of Venetian cuisine: great at home and lousy for tourists, who pay large sums for second-rate food. I ask where she eats. She recommends a fish restaurant, the *Trattoria alla Madonna* near the Rialto, and the local wine bars known as *bacari*. (She directs me to one called the *Osteria al Portogallo*: 'From the Campo San Lio, pass the pharmacy on your left. Turn left after 30 seconds, cross the small bridge, and 30 seconds later you arrive.') The *bacari* have changed little since the days when merchants met for a mid-morning gossip about whose ship had come home and whose had gone missing, and to have a glass of wine and a snack – perhaps of small fish cakes named *cecchetti*, or hard-boiled egg with anchovy. Stoppa agrees that



Venetian restaurateurs exploit tourists, but he speaks up for the *Osteria di Santa Marina* in the *campo* of that name.

On board the *Eolo*, as we sail, we eat spiky-shelled sea snails as our appetiser. They have to be tapped hard to dislodge the meat, and they taste delicious: like Burgundian snails but with the added tang of the sea. Stoppa, a bit of a wine snob, does not approve of Prosecco. He serves an excellent, faintly sweet, sparkling wine from Franciacorta, near Brescia.



### Booking the Eolo

A one-day cruise costs €306 per person and includes lunch or dinner on board. A three-day cruise including meals and accommodation costs €1,000 per person. A six-day cooking

itinerary, at €3,600 per person, includes lagoon trips, a visit to the fish market, cooking lessons, all meals and hotel accommodation. To book, call 00 39 0429 777037 or visit [www.usingvenice.com](http://www.usingvenice.com)

From left: at the helm of the *Eolo*; a pasta dish with squid ink prepared in the galley

We drop anchor in a back canal on Mazzorbo, where soft-shell crabs (*moleche*) are bred in nets alongside fields in which baby artichokes grow. The table is assembled. The pumpkin soup with scallops starts us off, followed by baby squid in a sauce of grapes and pomegranate seeds. The sea bass is baked with bread-crumbs and herbs. The emphasis is on seasonal tastes, the freshness of the raw materials and the simplicity of the cooking. The wine is from Friuli, a fine Pinot Blanc from Livio Felluga's vineyard, where Maurizio now makes the wine. To Sesani's delight, I revise my view of Venetian cuisine. At last, I'm becoming a fan.

The anchor is weighed and the helmsman turns north towards the coastline that separates the lagoon from the Adriatic. The north wind is with us now and the sails are unfurled, their irregular geometry like sailboats on the Nile, where this rig originated. Two white circles on the boat's prow – a pair of eyes enabling sailors to foresee risk – are another ancient legacy, from the Phoenicians.

Under sail, the *Eolo* can manage six knots. As we drift in near-silence, without the noise of the engine, Stoppa begins to talk about the lagoon. By the 19th century, he says, the mainland rivers – the Piave, the Brenta and the Sile – had been diverted so that they emptied directly into the sea instead of the lagoon. This prevented the lagoon from being destroyed by the silt they carried, and it allowed the sea tides to scour the shallow lagoon and clean it out.

In the 20th century, big business invaded the mudflats in which fish and birds bred. Small, outlying canals were ignored and silted up, and the principal shipping canals were dredged so they could take great oil tankers, cruise ships and container ships. These deep channels have dangerously increased the scouring effect of the sea. Stoppa has a simple solution to the problem, and one that is often heard in Venice: get rid of the mainland industry and ban the big ships from the lagoon. It is a rational and sensible solution that is much too radical for the politicians.

We reach the main shipping lanes again, where the *Eolo* is an object of curiosity and envy. The talk among the passengers is now of the exclusivity of sail, the freedom to roam through the beautiful desolation of the lagoon, and the privilege of being able to reach places where Venice's excellent waterborne transport system does not go, while eating like a Doge. **1**