



Island life: Benvenuto Puricelli and Michael Winner

RESTAURANT WATCH

Scoop of the day

My introduction to Benvenuto Puricelli did not go smoothly. I was walking out of his restaurant, **Locanda dell'Isola Comacina**, when he followed me onto the terrace. This is on the only island in Lake Como, opposite the exquisite village of Sala Comacina. It's ugly, rebuilt in 1963 like an East Grinstead roadhouse. A barn of a place divided into two. The good bit faces the lake, the back bit faces the front bit.

When we arrived from Bellagio on our rented speedboat we saw the dreaded Villa d'Este tourist boat moored. We had seen it leave in the morning full of d'Este-ites, who waved and smiled up at Vanessa at the balcony window of our suite. As well they might. She was stark naked at the time. There they were again, now inhabiting the front room of the Locanda. I surveyed the table offered in the back, turned and did the Winner-walk-out. Benvenuto took it well. "I'll lay a table up on the terrace for you," he suggested. I considered the matter. The terrace was far the best place to be. A lovely view of the lake, but was it warm enough? It was early October and ... "Early October?!" I hear you say. "That's weeks ago!" Correct, it is not necessary for you to

be told the second anything happens to me. I make little notes as I travel through life, write them up into literary gems and then put them in a drawer. Later I open it and make a choice. "Eeny-meeny-miny-moe ..." This week out popped Benvenuto and his island.

The sun came out so I decided to stay. There is a set menu, unchanged since 1948. They do exactly the same for lunch and dinner every day. Weddings, receptions ... all get the same menu. "Suits me," I said to Vanessa. "They must have got it right by now." That was an understatement. It was superb plus.

First you get seven dishes of veg and fruit as hors d'oeuvre plus some incredible bresaola and ham. The baked onions were memorable. The ham is fragrant, cooked, baked and slightly smoked. Benvenuto puts olive oil and lemon on the bresaola. The white wine was Soave 1985 Paesaggi. Very pleasant. Then you get salmon trout, fresh as anything, delicious. Benvenuto scoops rough salt from a dish, flicking it out with a spoon, then he pours lemon, olive oil and pepper over the fish. "Can I

have a knife?" I asked. "You have the bread," ordered Benvenuto. So I scooped up the sauce with the bread and he was quite right. He's a tall, thin man, wearing a tartan waistcoat, black trousers, a white shirt. He worked in the Penthouse Club in London and in Chigwell, Essex, and the Palace in St Moritz.

The fried chicken that followed was brilliant, with a lettuce salad delightfully flavoured with some dressing or other. There's a technical description for you! Then he produces this enormous parmesan and cuts a bit off. After that, ice cream with pears and banana liqueur. At this point, I was satisfied and ready to go.

"You wait for my fire act," said Benvenuto. That sounded a load of non-fun. "When is it?" I asked. "In 15 minutes," he said. "Make it five and I'll stay," I replied. So Ben went into the interior room, clearly visible through the plate-glass windows. There he put on a bobble hat of striped green, yellow, white, red and blue. A large number of glasses were laid out in front of him. He delivered a history of the island in an

undulating Italian, at the same time pouring sugar from a great height into the glasses and then setting something on fire, flames leaping up all over the place. Vanessa said it sounded like a horse-race commentary. When he finished, a waiter standing beside him started clapping, so we all knew what to do. "Which horse won?" asked Vanessa. Benvenuto made his way out, rightly ignoring the d'Este travel group and handed us his "product", coffee with brandy and sugar.

I think Ben has a terrific idea. I'm fed up with seeing enormous menus none of which I understand. I'm bored to death with waiting while everyone orders, then changes their mind and orders again. I hugely like the idea of each restaurant perfecting its own menu and serving nothing else. Then we could all move from place to place depending on what we feel like at the time. I doubt it will catch on. People like to delude themselves they are capable of choosing correctly. They aren't and they're exceptionally tedious as they try.

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