

## 6. IL MERCANTE

**I**l Mercante is an elegant cocktail bar directly opposite the façade of Santa Maria Gloriosa dei Frari, just across the little *rio*. Under its red canvas awning it still preserves the name of its former incarnation, the Caffè dei Frari O. Toppo, a famous and much-loved coffee house founded in 1870. The new owners have taken care to preserve key elements of the old Belle Époque interior, so the arrangements are still as pleasing as they used to be in the old days, especially thanks to the swish old staircase leading to the mezzanine. The new cocktail bar is very forward-looking—indeed whenever I scan the innovative list I feel sure the shade of the Futurist poet Filippo Tommaso Marinetti must have had a hand in it: a preoccupation with creating new and startling pairings of food and drink, as part of a general drive toward overturning the old world, was a fascinating Futurist sideline. Thankfully, Il Mercante does not go quite as far as Marinetti did in his 1935 masterpiece, *La Cucina Futuristica*, in which he proposes such unsettling combinations as steak in Eau de Cologne. Nonetheless the Mercante cocktail list, beautifully designed and illustrated,



An artisanal cocktail from Il Mercante's ever-evolving list.

is a poem in itself, cleverly stimulating one's curiosity. The menu changes regularly, as the bartenders strive for ever more exotic innovations, but the cocktails are always excellent and never disappoint. Last time I was there I was offered 'Three Apples of Concord', 'Seven Witches' and 'Saint



## 13. BA'GHETTO

**B**a'Ghetto is a kosher bar-restaurant in the Campo del Ghetto Nuovo in Cannaregio. You can enter its secluded courtyard garden from the *campo*, or arrive by taxi at the water-gate on Rio della Misericordia. In late spring and throughout summer and autumn, the garden is an enchanting place for an early evening drink and what tempts me when I come here is a lightly chilled, sparkling dessert wine, Bartenura Moscato d'Asti. Bartenura wines take their name from a 15th-century rabbi, Obadiah ben Abraham, who lived in Bertinoro ('Bartenura') in Emilia-Romagna, west of Rimini. The Moscato d'Asti is best served cool and drunk young. My invariable ritual, at Ba'Ghetto, is to raise a glass of it to Michelangelo Guggenheim (1837–1914), a prominent and glamorous figure in 19th-century Venice and one of the most successful and flamboyant art and antique dealers of his day.

The answer to the first question most people ask when his name is mentioned is 'No': there is no evidence to suggest any family connection with Peggy Guggenheim. Peggy's grandfather, Meyer Guggenheim, emigrated to the



'...the friendly crowd of Venetians clustered on the jetty, a few of whom will have arrived in motorboats....'.

## 18. TAVERNA AL REMER

**T**averna Al Remer is a superb bar-restaurant overlooking the Grand Canal and the Rialto. It would be difficult to contrive a more enjoyably 'Venetian' experience than this. To begin with, it is quite hard to find, a small network of alleys, courts and archways protecting it from the tidal wave of passing trade between Campo Goldoni and Ca' d'Oro. It is difficult to describe the pleasure to be had from taking a friend here for the first time. First, a trudge through crowded streets; then, an unpromising turn into what appears to be a dank, depressing alley leading nowhere; finally, a glimmer of light and a triumphant entry into one of the most attractive courtyards in Venice. Usually, the charm of the courtyard itself will distract the visitor's attention first; then he or she will catch sight of the jetty on the Grand Canal, and the view of the market and the Rialto Bridge. One might join the friendly crowd of Venetians clustered on the jetty, a few of whom will have arrived in motorboats which they moor alongside. Alternatively one might pause to admire the late-Romanesque well-head at the centre of the courtyard before venturing into the



Spritz Hugo at Sottovento.

### SPRITZ HUGO

Ingredients: Prosecco and elderflower cordial in a relationship of about 7 parts to 1. A dash of soda water. Fresh mint leaves and a slice of lemon to garnish

Method: Pour the elderflower cordial into a glass on top of a few cubes of ice. Add the Prosecco and then a top of soda water. Garnish with a sprig or two of fresh mint and half a slice of lemon.



ultimate little retreat. If there is space there, I settle down to consider the development of the Murano glassblower's art from the 15th century onwards. This was as much a triumph of science as it was of art, having all the mystery and ritual of alchemy but with little of the attendant disappointment. One contemplates the failed experiments and landmark eureka moments that led Angelo Barovier's perfection of *cristallo*, a glass so light that a mere whisper of wind could set it trembling, chiming and singing.