

## On ice: life and lunch at Mercato di Rialto

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# On Ice: Life and Lunch at Mercato di Rialto

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**Abstract** Visitors consume Venice's Mercato di Rialto most often with their eyes. Venetians, in contrast, consume it with their mouths. During the week they voice their orders gently, but on Saturday mornings shopping lists become full-volume announcements that compete against the market noise. By analysing the history and role of the Pescheria at Rialto Market and its culinary and cultural representations, this article considers the entanglement between seafood and people, ice and freshness, life and lunch.

**Keywords** Seafood. Multispecies. Foodways. Culinary knowledge. Markets. Venice.

**Summary** 1 Introduction. – 2 Portrait of a Market. – 3 A Market and its Fish. – 4 Smells Fishy. – 5 The Early Bird Gets the Fish. – 6 Conclusion: Life and Lunch.



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## 1 Introduction

The wind keeps wrinkling the sign's readability. Bold capital letters dominate a white background that sways and then stands still to announce: "VENEZIA È VIVA". These signs decorated Venice's Mercato di Rialto on March 25, 2021: the city's 1600th birthday [figs 1-2].<sup>1</sup> Stories about Rialto Market – just like the ones about Venice – routinely feature words like 'dying' or 'sinking'. But on this day, Rialto dressed up in red and pink balloons to declare that Venice is alive.

Unlike visitors, who usually experience Mercato di Rialto with their eyes, as well as their cameras, Venetians experience the market with their mouths. From Tuesday to Friday their mouths gently voice their orders, but come Saturday morning their shopping lists are loud announcements that are in competition with the market's other sounds – hungry seagulls, the spinning wheels of shopping trolleys, and seafood slapping against paper and sliding into plastic bags as fishmongers pack orders. This article considers the entanglement between seafood and people, ice and freshness, and life and lunch at Mercato di Rialto. It analyses culinary and cultural representations of the market and weaves this together with accounts of personal experiences. Drawing from Food Studies and Environmental Humanities scholarship, this article is an example of what I call the 'culinary Environmental Humanities'. It asks: how does shopping at Rialto help Venetians and visitors alike feel connected to the lagoon? And to the foods they eat? I spent one year shopping at the market, which informs my methodology: a 'frontstage' approach. But it took me a while to find a cooking rhythm in Venice; for weeks I ate sandy shellfish because I was not used to seafood that remembers the sea. Nonetheless, I kept going back in hopes of eating my way to a closer understanding of Venice and its foodscapes.

My approach also highlights Venice and its lagoon as a liminal space. Right on the edge of the Grand Canal, Rialto Market, I argue, is one as well. It blurs neat distinctions between land and water. Stalls rely on forms of water to keep their bounty fresh: the ice that props up shellfish and the water buckets that prevent freshly trimmed artichokes from browning. The fish and fruit that become food arrive by boat. Both in the past and the present, Rialto depends on its proximity to the water. In a city where swimming is often a crime, I relied on rowing – *voga alla veneta* – to experience a view from the water, instead of the water. A *batela*, just like its fancier sibling the gondola, is a way to "see what the water sees" (Brodsky 2013, 126). *Voga* is an example of "going back to water" and in a city where mo-

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<sup>1</sup> There is no historical evidence for the foundation date of Venice (Cavallo, Vallarani, Visentin 2021, 4).



**Figure 1** Signs at Mercato di Rialto announce that the city of Venice is alive. Photo by the Author



**Figure 2** Signs at Rialto Pescheria narrate Venice's foundation myth and celebrate the city's 1600th birthday.  
Photo by the Author

tor boats dominate rowing has become “a form of civic resistance” (Cavallo, Vallerani, Visentin 2021, 12). During my second lesson I graduated from the canals to the lagoon, which was when I realised just how shallow the water is. Another lesson reminded me of interconnections – the subject of this article. The gentlest of wakes can throw your oar off course. But even on land, the tide keeps Venice on its toes, always informing the city of its presence. It especially keeps Rialto on its toes – the area is often one of the first to flood. Living in Venice means always thinking about the lagoon, its rhythms and moods, and its aches.

Federica Cavallo, Francesco Vallerani, and Francesco Visentin point out in their aptly titled article “Heart of Wetness”, that Venice “is among one of the most studied urban and environmental systems in the world” (2021, 2). But because this environment is also personal, weaving itself through individual, family, and community memories, its meanings are multiple. They, therefore, argue: “we need to comprehend not only politics and grand narratives but also personal memories, reflections, local traditions and vernacular practices” (2). I do not speak the same language as Rialto. My weekly Italian classes, similar to my rowing lessons, have prepared me to keep my balance but I am not yet able to confidently steer. My orders come out as fragments. Being a native English speaker fluent in German and rusty in French, languages that sometimes mask my accent in Italian, has contributed to my market interactions, of the vernacular practices that inform how I experience and, thus, know, Rialto, and the market that this article serves forth.

Rosa Maria Rossomando Lo Torto believes it is possible to get to know Venice and its history through food and especially through food that is fish. This is what I attempt here. “[I]nevitable in a city built on water”, she writes that “an old saying of the local fishermen was ‘dove ghe xe l’acqua ghe xe anca pesse’ (where there’s water there’s fish)” (2020, 22). The article begins with the history of Mercato di Rialto and then zooms in on its seafood section, navigating the smell of shellfish, the appetite of seagulls, and the sight of hand-written signs that inform – as well as confuse – shoppers about the biological and geographical origins of their lunch or dinner. It concludes by considering what Kelly Donati calls ‘multispecies gastronomy’ and the connection between life and lunch.

## 2 Portrait of a Market

Writer Tiziano Scarpa begins his cultural guide to Venice by repeating the book's title. "Venice is a fish", he writes. "Just look at it on a map" (2008, 1). Joseph Brodsky describes its shape with a more obvious appetite: "On the map this city looks like two grilled fish sharing a plate, or perhaps like two nearly overlapping lobster claws" (2013, 45). If Venice is a fish, then its Pescheria (fish market) is located in its stomach, or perhaps its liver.

Rialto signifies multiple things. A market, bridge, and city district all share this name, which emerged from *Rivo Alto*, meaning high bank. The island of Rialto is also Venice's legendary birth place (Calabi 2021, 31). Since the ninth century, it has hosted a fish market, but it was not always the only one in town. What is now a handsome park tucked behind Piazza San Marco – Giardinetti Reali – was once the Republic's granary and, before that, a market peddling fish (Agostini, Zorzi 2004, 14). However, in the sixteenth century Venice reformed its mercantile system and designated Rialto and Saint Mark's, located on opposite sides of the Grand Canal, with separate functions. Donatella Calabi, an architectural historian, has chronicled these reforms in detail. Between 1537 and 1578 Venice issued provisions to clear out Saint Mark's Square "in an effort to push the uses incompatible with the prestige of the surroundings of Palazzo Ducale back into the market at San Giacomo" (Calabi 2004, 27-8). The magistracies wished for Saint Mark's to be *spedita e libera* of the mess and noise of market activities. But it was only in the late sixteenth century when the two squares were redesigned that Rialto became the commercial core and Saint Mark's the government centre.

In addition to these reforms, Rialto's Pescheria also moved. City planners selected a "separate" and "suitable" location (Calabi 2004, 122). Adjacent to the Fruttaria e Erbaria (fruit and vegetable markets), the Pescheria "was transformed into a more 'decorous' space to serve as a landing place for the nobility in 1459" (131). It was moved further away to neighbour the Beccheria (meat market) in an effort "to avoid an unpleasant stench in the heart of the island" (58). Rialto as a site for selling fish may be over a thousand-years old, but its neo-Gothic Pescheria was built only in 1907 by Cesare Laurenti and Domenico Rupolo. Column capitals both support and decorate the building, showing off carvings of fish and sea monsters, clam shells and crustaceans. Tucked into the staircase that leads to the top floor are two iron gates. The larger of the two bears the inscription *Piscis primum a capite foetet* (fish begins to stink from the head). From Tuesday to Saturday fishmongers set up their stalls as early as 6:30 am on the ground floor's loggia.

The Venetian Republic divided the selling of fish into three categories: *pescatori* (fishers); *compravendi* (wholesale fish merchants); and *pescivendoli* (fishmongers). The *pescatori* delivered their catch to

Rialto, where the government inspected the quality and set the maximum price (*calmiere*) and duties to pay (Spector 2020, 124-5). *Compravendi* were authorised to sell at Rialto and Saint Mark's, whereas *pescivendoli* could also sell elsewhere in the city. But no matter the location, vendors could only sell fish outside in the open, a practice that continues today.

In 1173 Venice introduced an edict outlining the minimum length of fish that could be sold, an example of an early environmental policy aimed at preserving fish stocks. Plaques across the city remember this history. At Rialto's Pescheria there is one. Another hangs in Campo Santa Margherita and another in Castello on Fondamente della Tana. These are historic examples of seafood size rulers – a method that is still in use today (see Koldewey, Atkinson, Debney 2009, 76). The one at Campo Santa Margherita lists that a mussel must be at least three centimetres and an oyster five. The fish that must be at minimum seven centimetres are the red and grey mullet, sardine, and anchovy. A whole shoal of fish must be at least 12 (sea bass, gilthead, dentix, umbrine, white sea bream, grey mullet, thick-lipped grey mullet, golden grey mullet, flathead mullet, leaping mullet, brill, hake, sole, flounder, and turbot) and eel at least 25 (Scarpa 2008, 65-6).

Considered the Wall Street or World Bank of its time, Rialto was, according to Calabi, at the centre of a "world economy" (Orazi 2020). Yet today, she describes the area as neglected and at risk of becoming "a large, bad quality supermarket" (2021, 34). Its decline reflects depopulation, which is pronounced in a city that has made tourism its main trade. It also reflects structural changes in food distribution and consumption. Rialto is now in competition with supermarkets that offer longer opening hours and a larger range of products and prices. Although supermarkets ease the convenience of grocery shopping, they also further the distance between those producing food and those consuming it. Nonetheless, convenience matters. Rialto Market is open five days a week, only in the morning. Although the fruit and vegetable stalls stay open until around 1 pm, many fishmongers begin shutting down around noon. Addressing Italy at large, anthropologist Rachel E. Black attributes the drop in business at open-air markets to their limited opening hours (2012, 71). I got around this challenge with the help of my office fridge. Conveniently halfway between my apartment and office, I would drop by Rialto on my way to work. After storing my catch in the communal kitchen fridge, I would write a note to remind myself to pick up the "SARDINES!" or "FISH!" at the end of the day. I did not want to risk another colleague encountering the smell of forgotten fish.

Luigi Divari is an artist who documents the lagoon's fish and boats. "Like all markets", he explains, "Rialto is based on the number of shoppers" (Ocean Space 2020, 39). A shrinking city means a shrinking market. Although beyond this article's scope, Divari also calls the



idea that Venetians always eat fish a myth. The market once sold large quantities of many other foods in order to feed the city's 160,000 inhabitants (today this number is around 50,000) (Ocean Space 2020, 39). Additionally, who eats what has changed over time. For example, in the eighteenth-century, fish was a rare site on the tables of the noble and rich, but a staple in other homes (Da Mosto 2007, 146).

Rialto's Pescheria might be a tourist attraction, but tourists do not buy fish. As "Venice natives vanish", the *Wall Street Journal* describes the fishmongers as "at risk at disappearing" (Legorano 2018). It quotes Andrea Vio, who as of 2018 had worked as a fishmonger for 43 years (although the same year *La Stampa* wrote 50). Vio sees Rialto's future as a synonym for Venice's: "The market's struggle is a sign of Venice's fight to survive as a normal city", he states (Legorano 2018). In the 1980s he sold up to forty small crates of sardines per day and now sells five. The price of the stalls has also decreased. In 2008 Marco Bergamasco was offered € 80,000 for his stall and in 2018 was trying to sell it for € 12,000 (Zambenedetti 2018). This change has been quick. In Lidia D. Sciamia's ethnography of Burano, first published in 2003, she writes that a Rialto stall is very desirable: "Licenses are not easy to obtain, and, in some instances, they have been kept in the same family for generations" (2006, 113). In 2008 there were 18 stalls, but now there are less than half, plus some for sale. Vio, one of the four last big traders, wonders if tourists will continue to frequent the Pescheria without the fish and the people selling it (Zambenedetti 2018). As fishmonger Dario Naccari details, around eighty per cent of people who stop at his stall are tourists who take photos (Legorano 2018).

Because of these challenges, reports about Rialto often proclaim that the market is dying – a narrative Venice's 1600th birthday signs countered. In response, there is a citizen-led association to save Rialto, and Calabi serves as its head. Progetto Rialto aims to highlight the market's history in an effort to re-energise the area. It proposes to transform the Pescheria's top floor into a centre that hosts events, workshops, and courses (Rosenberg 2020).<sup>2</sup> It spans nearly 1,000 square metres, but has been empty for around a decade, with the exception of pigeon guano (Calabi 2021, 34). Although it is not in use, the city, which owns it, has designated it as a museum in the town plan. Progetto Rialto's goal of revitalisation spills far beyond the market.

Enhancing the area's excellence could be a way for the future city to exist and maintain its beauty, and indeed to make it to the ob-

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<sup>2</sup> Another example is the #PescheriaRialto initiative on 3 and 4 August 2018. Although aimed at revitalising Rialto, it encouraged residents to buy fish from the market.

ject of specialist training and the transmission of knowledge; ultimately attracting new citizens. (Calabi 2021, 35)

Progetto Rialto's mission reflects Black's suggestion that "the best way to see markets is as integral, living heritage sites" (2012, 180). In her ethnography of Porta Palazzo in Turin, Black describes the *Oxford Dictionary* definition of a market as having three components: "the physical place organized around the activity of exchange, the gathering of people for the activity of buying and selling, and the abstract economic concept of exchange" (2012, 4). In addition to their commercial and culinary functions, she further underlines the social aspect of markets. Because of their sociability, she compares them to parks and plazas. In fact, the economics of markets are not reason enough for them to operate because, as she explains, "markets are among the least efficient methods of food distribution" (2012, 4). Rather it is their social lives and functions that keep them alive.

Men dominate the Pescheria, but there is a woman who works at a storefront that is often the last to close. With a Venetian colleague, I asked her how fish culture in Venice has changed. A cigarette dangled from her hand as she answered (while she stood in front of a sign forbidding smoking) that people want to buy seafood that has already been cleaned and is ready to throw into a pot. There is consumer demand for fillets instead of whole fish, for deboned and skinless chicken breasts instead of chickens with hearts and livers and the odd feather still hanging on.<sup>3</sup> Customers, she states, only want to buy *schie* (miniature prawns) that have been cleaned. In addition to limited opening hours, it all comes back to labour and time. However, she is confident Rialto will not close. Venetians do not go to the supermarket, she explained. They want to buy fish and meat from the market. If you close the market, then Venetians cannot eat.

All of this is to say that the Rialto Market is a thermometer for several things: the size of the local population; how many chefs and home cooks do or do not source from the market; the intersection between human appetites, the lagoon and other bodies of water; and the health of seafood stocks. I argue that Mercato di Rialto measures the health of the city – tracking its pulse – but also the health of the lagoon and even the world.

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<sup>3</sup> This connects to scholarship that shows how contemporary cookbooks and supermarket displays have turned animals into meat. See, for instance, Syse, Bjørkdahl 2021.

### 3 A Market and its Fish

Although farming fish is an ancient practice, contemporary aquaculture has disconnected it from the boundaries of seasons, biology, and geography. Fish stalls at markets and freezer aisles at grocery stores map the waters of the world. The Rialto Pescheria is no exception. It carries salmon from Norway raised on a diet of anchovies from Peru, calamari from Chile, mullet from France, tuna from the Seychelles, and so on (Berardi 2020). One morning when I was placing my order my eyes drifted down to the fishmonger's apron. Thick, waterproof, and navy blue, white letters and a flag crossed its chest: "Seafood from Norway". An apron from the same country from which the stall's scampi, salmon, and cod had travelled.

So how Venetian is Rialto Market? The question may appear simple, but the market's entangled geography makes it difficult to establish clear borders. Where does Rialto begin and end? Does it begin in Istanbul, formerly an essential stop in the spice trade, or Bangladesh, from which some market vendors come? Does Rialto Market begin in the lagoon, once the source of much of its seafood? Or in the Norwegian waters that supply its scampi? Black outlines that "[m]arkets, and in turn cities, put themselves on the map through their connections outside their limits" (Black 2012, 30). This is especially true of Venice, which has long defined itself as a crossroads, as where East meets West.

At many markets, fruits and vegetables do not arrive directly from farms. Instead, wholesale distribution centres connect produce, from Italy and elsewhere, to markets and shops. This reflects developments in technology and transportation, both of which have transformed culinary relationships to fish. For example, despite being landlocked, Milan now has the best provisioned fish marked in Italy (Perasecoli 2014, 212). Similarly, seafood does not usually travel directly to the market; it detours to a *mercato ittico*, a wholesale marketplace. In Venice there is one on the island of Tronchetto, next to a car park and the cruise ship terminal. Chioggia, too, has a *mercato ittico*. Seafood arrives from the lagoon but also from faraway oceans and seas and lakes. It arrives by boat but also by truck and plane. From the wholesale market, seafood then travels by boat to Rialto. As Divari states:

So, the fish in the northern Adriatic end up in Switzerland, in Milan, in the five-star restaurants of northern Italy, and here in Venice we get shrimp from Argentina, monkfish from Scotland, John Dory from England, scallops from Brest, spider crab from Spain, and so on. Basically, if it wasn't for planes and trucks, nothing would ever get to the market here. (Ocean Space 2020, 40)

Gone are the days when fish arrived by water alone. Global trade routes – refrigerated ones – keep Rialto Market running.

Fishing has changed in the lagoon, and it has changed the lagoon. Human appetites are a major contributor to climate change (see Reay 2019). Focusing on Venice, the anthropologist Rita Vianello explains that:

While the fishers of the Lagoon do not associate the rising sea and lagoon water temperatures with the increased intensity of *acqua alta* events, they do see warming as a primary cause of the changing habits of fish and their reproductive cycles, the presence of new species [...] and the disappearance or decrease of native ones. (2021, 104)

Like eel, once a popular catch, other fish have become less common, such as goby. Some have become more common, like sea bream, and some are completely new, like blue crab.

In the cookbook that chronicles Venice's most famous restaurant, Harry's Bar, Arrigo Cipriani shares his memories of how plenty fish once were in the lagoon. In the late 1940s, he recounts that a Harry's Bar regular would drink an Americano and then ask the restaurant to boil a pot of water. While the water came to a boil, he motored his boat in front of Harry's Bar in Saint Mark's Basin, trailed a silver spinner, and then returned with a couple of sea bass. Although Cipriani's tale memorialises the golden days before the water was polluted and the fish were still native, he ends by assuring readers that Venice still has wonderful fish, even though some of it comes from elsewhere. "Almost all the fish and shellfish we get at the market is still alive", he boasts (2000, 159).

In modern industrial diets seafood is one of the few wild foods – which is to say a food that has been hunted or caught as opposed to farmed or raised – that many people eat.<sup>4</sup> Or it has been until recently. Scale distinguishes early models from globalised and industrialised aquaculture. Industrial practices use artificial lighting to control the seasonal growth cycles of fish, manipulating when a fish thinks it is day versus night. Similar to challenging and conquering seasonal boundaries, globalized seafood also collapses spatial ones. Historically, a fish was consumed immediately or preserved, aided by the likes of drying or smoking, pickling, salting or canning. Now, the industry employs flash-freezing, stretching the lifespan of a fish that is considered fresh.

Flesh alone, however, does not reveal geographical origins. Shoppers must instead rely on labels. And trust these labels. One study,

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<sup>4</sup> I also address these ideas in Gora, forthcoming.

however, found that thirty percent of labels misidentify fish – examples of fish fraud and even “fish laundering” (Barendse et al. 2019, 198-9). Beyond misleading consumers, seafood fraud is of concern for matters like species conservation, environmental impact, and the health of humans, sea creatures, and bodies of water. Labels reframe flesh, which means consumers need what I call fish or seafood fluency to navigate grocery store aisles and market stalls. This is just as true at Rialto’s Pescheria as it is in a big-box store. One common recommendation to counter fraud is to buy whole fish as opposed to fillets, which are easier to identify. But even a whole fish needs a label to know from which waters it comes.

So how does one choose what seafood to buy? Culinary knowledge, food knowledge, food literacy, and kitchen literacy are all terms related to the question of how one knows food (Goodman, Dupuis 2002). Jessica Kwik, a public health professional, defines traditional food knowledge as “the cumulative teachings and experience gained from the process of sharing foodways from generation to generation” (2008, 62). She sees the concept as supporting “the continuity of cultural heritage”, as well as providing a counterpoint to the de-skilling of grocery store consumers (63). Food literacy, on the other hand, concerns consuming food. As its name implies, it suggests being able to read one’s options and make responsible decisions about what to eat. Addressing the emergence of the term, Helen Vidgen, a scholar of nutrition, writes that it “is an attempt to encapsulate the knowledge, skills and behaviours needed for everyday eating” (2016, 2). Although it grew out of health literacy, Vidgen explains that the term has taken on new meanings related to “environmental sustainability, informed consumerism, active citizenship and food security” (2). It advocates eating practices that are ethical as well as healthy. Similarly, Ann Vileisis writes about “kitchen literary”, which is synonymous with cookery with a conscious and kitchen know-how (2008, 3). This returns to de-skilling. The less agrarian and more industrialised a society becomes, the thinking goes, the less its citizens know about their food. I know fish by eating fish, which means that I am better at naming the fish I eat than the ones I do not.

#### 4 Smells Fishy

Beyond their lists of ingredient, instructions, and illustrations, cookbooks are also maps. They connect plants and animals and chart the lands and waters of the cuisines they represent. English language cookery books about Venice are, unsurprisingly, rich in fish. The lagoon’s waters are present throughout their pages and the geography of some titles, such as Nino Zoccali’s *Venetian Republic: Recipes from the Veneto, Adriatic Croatia and the Greek Islands*, published in

Australia no less, travel far beyond the lagoon. Zoccali considers Rialto “one of the world’s best retail food markets” (2019, 19). However, Lo Torto points out that it is up for debate just how fresh Rialto’s fish is. Distinguishing Venetian cuisine from Chioggian, she writes:

In Venice, one eats fish caught elsewhere whereas – and it is no small distinction – in Chioggia one eats fish caught locally. And this is fish that has all the forty virtues that popular tradition declares a fish possesses, a virtue it loses at the rate of one per hour. (2020, 12)

Nonetheless, Venice is a city of fish.

In 2012 restaurateur Russell Norman published *Polpo: A Venetian Cookbook (of Sorts)*, chronicling the London restaurant he opened in 2009. “It is possible to spend a whole morning wandering from stall to stall marvelling at the vast array at the Rialto fish market”, he writes, “You know with absolute certainty that these beasts were swimming just a few hours earlier” (103). However, another cookbook disagrees. Chronicling Osteria alle Testiere, *Venice, Food and Wine* includes the section “Choosing Fresh Seafood”. “Unfortunately, not all of the fish one finds at the fish market is actually that fresh”, it reveals (Chojnacka 2010, 16). It then provides three pointers for determining freshness: “*tatto, olfatto, vista*, touch, scent, vision” (16). Smell plays an important role in judging if food is good or bad, if fish is fresh or old. For fish, one should rely on “*Olfatto/scent*” and ask: does it smell bad? “It should smell fresh, salty, of the sea”, the restaurant points out, “[a]ny bad or suspicious odor is cause for alarm” (16). Regarding molluscs one should ask if they are still alive. “If they are, then they are fresh; if they are dead, then you are taking your chances” (16). Crustaceans also call on the nose.

Any hint of bleach odor is a sure-fire sign that the creature is at least three days old, and that decomposition has begun – that odor is a natural by-product of the breakdown process. (17)

Judging the freshness of seafood is a multisensory affair that requires culinary knowledge.

Cookbook author Skye McAlpine, who grew up in Venice, also confesses that she was apprehensive about cooking fish although she loved eating it. She was “tentative about what to buy, uncertain about its freshness, oddly squeamish about the handling of it” (2018, 203). But then she discovered:

[a] fish that is fresh looks fresh. Its eyes are bright and sparkly, not cloudy; its body is firm; its scales are wet and glossy, not dry; its gills are red. It smells salty and briny like the seaside and not, as you might perhaps expect, ‘fishy’. (2013)

Similarly, Francesco Da Mosto recognises that for the inexperienced buying fish can be “daunting”. To counter this, he recommends buying directly from the fishermen who return in the morning. He, too, relies on smell: “saltwater fish should have a hint of seaweed in their smell and freshwater fish should recall the smell of river reeds” (2007, 147).

Ice also helps to ensure freshness. It encourages an ingredient to last longer. Raw seafood, especially oysters, are often served ‘on ice’. Ice slows down time and ‘on ice’ means to stall or to delay. To preserve something for later. At the Pescheria, ice helps to delay any ‘fishy’ smells. Jan Morris describes the Rialto fish market as “a glorious wet, colourful, high-smelling concourse of the sea” (1998, 199). Brodsky remembers the first night he arrived in a city; it was December, late and windy. His nostrils delivered him a “feeling of utter happiness”, which, for him, is a synonym for “the smell of freezing seaweed” (*vodorosli* in Russian) (2013, 5). He recognises this is peculiar and that others likely prefer the smell of tangerines. He continues:

A smell is, after all, a violation of oxygen balance, an invasion into it of other elements – methane? carbon? sulphur? nitrogen? Depending on that invasion’s intensity, you get a scent, a smell, a stench. (7)

Another way to describe the smell of the Pescheria is *freschin*. The Venetian chef Marco Bravetti taught me this term, describing it as “the smell you can feel at Rialto at the end of the day”. This is a more polite way to say the stench, or perhaps what some might even consider a scent. Bravetti’s description frames smell as something you feel.

In her discussion of tourist imaginations, Italian Studies scholar Stephanie Malia Hom addresses guidebooks, writing they “have long influenced the behaviour of tourists by directing them where to go and telling them what to see” (2015, 14). They reinforce stereotypes, including culinary ones, and often tell tourists where or what to eat. Or which foods to photograph. The popular travel guide *Lonely Planet* describes the Pescheria as “pungent”. “To see it at its best”, it recommends arriving “in the morning along with the trolley-pushing shoppers and you’ll be rewarded with pyramids of colourful seasonal produce”. It is telling that it addresses “seeing” the market rather than, perhaps, experiencing or smelling it, or even shopping there. Oddly, it ends with: “If you’re in the market for picnic provisions, vendors may offer you samples”. Instead of supporting vendors by purchasing from them, it recommends aiming for free bites. Another travel guide, *Afar*, also emphasises the market’s visuals: “Seek it out in the early morning”, it advises, “when it provides an authentic local experience (and awesome social-media ops), with fishmongers hawking their fresh seafood catches”. At Rialto tourists do not only photograph fish and flora. They also photograph birds with voracious appetites.



**Figure 3** A seagull feasts on fish in front of Rialto Pescheria. Photo by the Author





Figure 4 2 € worth of shrimp and 2 € worth of green onions. Photo by the Author

## 5 The Early Bird Gets the Fish

When I visited Rialto with a colleague and her dog, while she bought scampi for *spaghetti alla busara* he stole a *canocia* (mantis shrimp), proudly licking his lips as we tried to prevent him from snatching another. Fish attracts other animals, from cats and dogs to rats and mice. But, above all, fish attracts birds. The English expression claims that the early bird gets the worm, but at Rialto it gets the fish. The late bird does too. Pigeons casually loiter between stalls. Seagulls, in contrast, are less casual in announcing that they, too, are interested in the seafood on offer. Morris even claims that most people “remember Venice as a city of birds” (1998, 59). Beyond the seagulls foraging at Rialto and the pigeons that once carpeted Saint Mark’s Square, she explains that birds are entangled with Venice’s legends and art. Morris includes “the big white seagulls of the lagoon” in her inventory, writing that they

are often driven into the city canals by bad weather, and are even to be seen, humiliatingly plucked, hung up for sale in the Rialto market – excellent boiled, I am told, but only in the winter season. (59)

I have yet to see seagulls on offer as food, but I have seen plenty of live seagulls on the hunt for food [fig. 3].

Markets classify animals and plants as food – classifications that change across time and place. Simply presenting something for sale at the market asserts that it is food. Labels provide more details – that is if one is able to read them. I have cooked fish and shellfish I know by name, but also ones I did not. Some days I would purchase something on a whim, trying to pronounce a new-to-me name, or simply pointing and saying *questo*, only to then look up what I bought and what to do with it. I collected receipts, made notes, and took photos in an effort to connect my grocery shopping to the bigger picture of foodways in Venice, the lagoon, and the world.

One day, fuelled by a craving for shrimp and grits, I paid 2 € for a handful of shrimp and then the same amount for a fat bunch of green onions [fig. 4]. This left me thinking about price, value, and plant and animal life. Another day I paid 1 € for ten sardines that I roasted with harissa, pine nuts, and *coriandolo*. And one morning, a fishmonger simply gave me a handful of sardines for free when I asked for the price. The small amount I requested – which I ate with pasta, yellow raisins, fennel, and parsley – was not worth my small change. I did, however, pay higher prices for scampi, all of which I learned was Norwegian. I roasted it with medicinal amounts of garlic and blushing radicchio. I boiled it and dunked it in saffron mayonnaise. I ate it raw with pistachios, orange, mint, and olive oil. The scampi felt connect-

ed to Venice, to the lagoon, and yet, unlike the sardines – *sarde nostrane* – never wore a sign classifying them as ‘ours’ [fig. 5].

Labels at the fish market range from minimal black marker announcements on white card paper to form-like templates with boxes to tick, the likes of: *decong.*; *fresco*; *acqua dolce*; *pescato* and *allevato*. Some signs are simply recycled labels and stickers that recall long shipping journeys. Although the Pescheria peddles fish from all over the world, shopping there creates a sense of connection to the Venetian lagoon that is similar to what Black writes about farmers’ markets: “[f]ood sold in the *mercato dei contadini* is instilled with value that has to do with place, local knowledge, and social relations” (2012, 145). Because of this she argues: “[l]ocal food is produced at the market itself, rather than just in the field on the farm” (148). Local food is both a cultural construction as well as “something one can certify and put a label on” (150). Although *nostrano* is not a legal term, it is the term with which market vendors and fishmongers claim produce, as well as fish, as local, as Venetian, as Italian, as ‘ours’. Black also unpacks the function of this pronoun, writing:

the farmer is possessive of the produce and proud of what he or she is selling. There is a nationalistic connotation in the term *nostrano*: anything grown in Italy must be better than produce grown elsewhere. (151)

She defines a market as “a series of intimate daily interactions between humans and built spaces that facilitate social relations” (171). But what about the plants and animals? The fish and shellfish?

## 6 Conclusion: Life and Lunch

Eating is messy. It is extractive and exploitative but it can also enact ethics of care, policies of conservation, and efforts to restore and eat with environments instead of just eating them all up. As literary scholar Jes Battis asks: “[d]oes food have rights? Would that matter?” He continues:

Thinking about the ways in which we coexist with food might galvanize us to treat non-human life in more ethical ways. [...] Respecting things that don’t think – at least not in the ways that we think – can only lead to a more expansive definition of the human. (2020, 326)

Pursuing similar ideas, geographer Kelly Donati uses Donna Haraway’s work as her



Figure 5 Signs claim sardines as ‘ours’, meaning ‘local’. Photo by the Author

springboard in calling for a multispecies gastronomy that considers not only how humans might eat better, but how we might eat better with non-human others. (2014, 128)

Here, non-humans others is expansive and recognises all the forms of living things that make up the food chain, from fungi to insects and from microorganisms to animals.

In 1825 the French lawyer and politician, Jean Anthelme Brillat-Savarin, published *Physiologie du Goût*, which begins with: “Dis-moi ce que tu manges, je te dirai ce que tu es” (1970, 13). The sociologist Priscilla Ferguson writes that the obvious comparison to this aphorism “is the well-known German adage ‘Mann ist, was er ißt’, which Americans personalize as ‘You are what you eat’” (2004, 31). Its notoriety demonstrates how strongly entangled food and being are. Donati adds multispecies gastronomy to this equation. Expanding upon Brillat-Savarin’s aphorism, she writes:

We too are food, or as Haraway puts it, ‘everyone is on the menu’. Yet, this lack of generosity in giving our bodies back to the living earth and our unwillingness to feed the soil which has fed us position humanity outside of the food chain. (2014, 131)

Donati names soil; water is another example. Multispecies gastronomy disregards the boundaries that separate humans from other animals, the boundaries between food and feed.

Rialto, depending on the season, takes turns boasting tiny artichokes or heavy pumpkins. An edible calendar. But despite its seasonal plenty, the market’s fish section is its main draw. Brodsky writes that it is clear that, whether swimming or caught, Venice is a city of fish: “And seen by a fish [...] man would appear a monster indeed; not an octopus, perhaps, but surely a quadropus. [...] Small wonder, then, that sharks are after us so much” (2013, 84). A multispecies approach to markets recognises that lunch is always about life.<sup>5</sup> It is about ethics and the interactions between human appetites and the worlds around them. In addition to acting as a thermometer that charts the health of Venice’s population, its lagoon, and the many water-based animals that call other waterways home, Rialto provides a viewpoint from which to consider the entanglement between life and lunch. Between appetites and environments.

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<sup>5</sup> If lunch is about life then it is also about death. As Iovino points out: “[a] recurrent trope among artists and writers long before Thomas Mann, death in Venice is much more than a fictional theme” (2016, 48).

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