

An Appetite for Venice

Italy's storied seaport has many sides, but for Phil Rosenthal, star of the new Netflix culinary travel show *Somebody Feed Phil*, it is one thing only: a city of restaurants.

BY JOEL STEIN



Fresh bigoli pasta with anchovies and bread crumbs at the Bauer Palazzo hotel.

Despite the warm glow of the magic hour, the outdoor tables facing the small canal at **Il Refolo** (*Santa Croce 1459; 39-041-524-0016; entrées \$12–\$18*) were empty but for one couple, due to the drizzle. It was so perfectly Venice that the producer asked Phil Rosenthal, the host of a new Netflix show that was filming in the restaurant, to sit at a table for a 10-second silent beauty shot. But Rosenthal doesn't do silent. Rosenthal wanted to know how the couple's pizza was and what they'd seen here in Venice. They were such a nice couple, in such a nice place, at such a nice time of evening. Rosenthal then went inside and secretly paid for their dinner—because what could make this experience nicer for all of them than a nice gesture? The most surprising thing about Rosenthal is that he doesn't whistle.

Or maybe that he's found success in front of the camera after so much time behind it. For nine years, Rosenthal was the showrunner on the sitcom *Everybody Loves Raymond*. Since then, he's built a career as a food and travel evangelist, beginning with his PBS series, *I'll Have What Phil's Having*, which won a James Beard Award in 2016.

Rosenthal and Anthony Bourdain share the same production company, but the similarities end there. "I'm exactly like Bourdain, if he were afraid of everything," he told me. "I want those guys who might relate to me to say, 'If that putz can go outside, maybe I can, too.'" This month, Netflix will begin airing six hour-long episodes of his show, now called *Somebody Feed Phil*. In it, Rosenthal goes to such places as Copenhagen, Buenos Aires, and Dublin, eating at both Michelin-starred restaurants and food trucks and employing the broad, dumb smile and nod of a traveler eager to learn. →

Behind the Scenes

For five days, I followed Rosenthal, a friend, as he filmed an episode in Venice. Our first stop was **Trattoria Vini Da Arturo** (365 Calle dei Assassini; 39-041-528-6974; entrées \$45–\$60), in San Marco. A 45-year-old, 22-seat sliver of a space, it's decorated with photos of Barbra Streisand, Tom Hanks, and producer Joel Silver, who has flown the chef, Ernesto Ballarin, out to Los Angeles to cook for him. Rosenthal ordered the trattoria's famous breaded bone-in pork chop, which is finished by cooking off two cups of white vinegar in the pan. He then got a second chop for the rest of us to taste, and before the bite hit my mouth, I coughed from the vinegar fumes. The only thing this vinegary I'd ever eaten was vinegar. But it was so interesting I kept going back for more, washing it down with a 2012 Capo di Stato, a soft, Bordeaux-style local blend the chef served to cut the acid.

Other than that pork chop and the excellent steak that soon followed, it was a week of seafood. At **Al Covo** (ristorantealcovo.com; entrées \$34–\$45), a traditional fish restaurant looking out onto a quiet palazzo, Phil befriended the Venetian chef, Cesare Benelli, and his wife, Diane, a Texan who makes all the pastries. They bombarded us with *crudo*, fried sardines, spider crabs, tiny fried soft-shell crabs, and the best raw shrimp I've ever had—sweet and briny. Diane's chocolate torte was zero percent Venetian but 100 percent delicious.



Above: Phil Rosenthal and his friend Laura Sousounis sample *cicchetti* at Cantine del Vino Già Schiavi while filming an episode of the new Netflix show *Somebody Feed Phil*.

The next day, we joined up with Laura Sousounis, a professional massage therapist Rosenthal met in Hollywood who lives part-time in Venice. She took us on a crawl of wine bars that serve *cicchetti*, the city's version of tapas. At **Cantine del Vino Già Schiavi** (cantinaschiavi.com), a small wine store and tavern, the owner impressed Rosenthal with tuna salad dusted with cocoa on a small baguette slice, while at **All'Arco** (436 Calle de l'Ochialer; 39-041-520-5666; small plates \$2–\$5), Sousounis and Phil shared overstuffed, triangle-shaped white-bread sandwiches called *tramezzini*.

On a warm, clear day, we piloted a rented boat to Burano, an island where the houses are all brightly colored and the air smells of vanilla from the local hard cookies, called *bussolà*. Our tour

guide, food blogger Valeria Necchio, walked us over a tiny footbridge, putting us on what is technically a separate island called Mazzorbo, home to **Venissa**—a vineyard, five-room hotel, micro-farm, and Michelin-starred restaurant (*venissa.it*; tasting menus from \$142). It's a stunning, enormous property with a sculpture garden: an escape within the escape of Venice. At the restaurant, Rosenthal became so hooked on the Lippia dulcis—microscopic flower buds that offer a flavor bomb of minty licorice sweetness—that he asked for a bag to go.

Over his five days in Venice, Rosenthal got upset only once. A man found his Achilles' heel, which is made of gelato. The gelateria Rosenthal wanted to see was closed, so he decided to walk into **Venchi** (*venchi.com*)—a chain! When the young man behind the counter told us he was out of chocolate-dipped cones, and that we would have to pay before tasting, Phil shook his head in disgust. Then the gelato scooper said precisely the wrong thing: "Come on, guys, you're not buying a car. It's just ice cream." To Phil Rosenthal, there might be "just cars," but there is no "just ice cream." It took all of his will to leave peacefully with his mediocre cup of gelato.

But other than the damned gelato scooper, Phil collected friends faster than meals. In fact, he decided to hold a dinner party at Venice's famed →



The Bauer Palazzo, an iconic hotel on the Grand Canal.

Behind the Scenes

Bauer Palazzo (bauervenezia.com; doubles from \$507) and invited friends he met three years ago in Florence while filming *I'll Have What Phil's Having*. Dario Cecchini, Italy's foremost proponent of nose-to-tail butchering, came up with his American wife, Kim Wicks. Silvana Vivoli, the owner of Vivoli, one of Florence's oldest gelaterias (it's a far cry from Venchi) was also there. Sitting outside on the Bauer's seventh-floor terrace, we all watched the crescent moon rise over Santa Maria della Salute, the church built to celebrate the end of the plague in 1631. Wearing red pants, red clogs, and a vest and belt with the colors of the Italian flag, Cecchini blew a horn to celebrate each course, humming Verdi



Grilled cuttlefish at Al Covo.

They bombarded us with fried sardines and the best raw shrimp I'd ever had.

in between. He ended the meal with a speech about Venice enduring, which made him cry. "The older I get, the more sentimental I get," he said. "This reminds me of my father. *L'chaim*."

On the last night of my trip, when Phil delicately asked me if it was okay if he went out alone with the crew—who were celebrating the end of spending 20 days in a row together traveling from Cape Town to Venice—I said yes. Back in my Airbnb, I thought about what Phil would have done with a free night in Venice. Normally, I wouldn't bother a stranger. But I texted Brittany

Hymore, a friend of a friend who runs **Cima Rosa** (cimarosavenezia.com; doubles from \$220), a five-room bed-and-breakfast, and took her up on what I'm sure was merely a polite offer for a drink. I stood next to the canal by the Rialto Bridge and waved nervously to Brittany, her Venetian architect husband, Daniele Vallot, and their two adorable kids as they picked me up in their motorboat. They brought me to **Al Timon** (altimon.it), a casual bar where we snacked on *cicchetti* and downed Campari Spritzes. Later, we walked through a private, lantern-lit 13th-century

courtyard to their palazzo, home to both the B&B and their beautiful, minimalist apartment on the top floor. Dinner was a cheap feast of pasta, John Dory, and Prosecco a few doors down at **Osteria Mocenigo** (osteriamocenigovenetia.com; entrées \$18–\$38), where we talked long after their son had fallen asleep on Brittany's lap. I walked home at midnight, and e-mailed Phil to thank him for inspiring me. He was, as you can guess, very happy. ■

Joel Stein is the author of Man Made: A Stupid Quest for Masculinity.

AROUND THE WORLD WITH PHIL

The host of the globe-trotting series *Somebody Feed Phil*—now streaming on Netflix—dishes on three other restaurants he fell in love with while filming.

Cau Ba Quan HO CHI MINH CITY

"Chef Nikky Tran splits her time between Houston and Vietnam, where she does a completely original mash-up of delicious dishes. There's a beef salad that has every element of flavor in it, and they go together magically. They should change the name to 'happy salad.' It's a small place on the water, so you think you're in Paris when you sit there." fb.com/caubaquan82; entrées \$4–\$20.

Lung Prakit Kad Kom CHIANG MAI, THAILAND

"This spot has the best bowl of anything I've ever had: *khao soi*. It's a coconut-curry-based soup with fresh noodles in it. It also has organic beef or whole pieces of chicken topped with crisp noodles. They gave me a big bowl of the chicken one and a big bowl of the beef one. I finished them both." *Kom Market, Suriawong Alley*; 66-083-209-9441; bowls \$1–\$1.50.

Cervejaria Ramiro LISBON

"Incredible fresh seafood in a casual setting. They serve eight species of prawns and shrimp. One was a little brown guy that looked like Wilford Brimley, with the mustache. They keep everything in tanks and show you your order before serving it in the most delicious sauces. Seafood is light, and so they send you off with a little steak sandwich for dessert." cervejaria-ramiro.com; entrées \$12–\$30.