

FRANCESCO DA MOSTO

A visit to the engaging Italian television presenter in Venice

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Lunch at the Palazzo da Mosto is such a quintessentially Venetian experience that it would seem disrespectful not to arrive by way of the Grand Canal. Stepping ashore from a water taxi close to the Rialto, you find yourself at the end of a broad, sunny street lined with the usual tourist shops; but turn aside into a dark alleyway where the sky is a far-off ribbon of blue, and you step into another age.

At the end of the alley enormous double doors lead into a dim, cavernous hall with family crests painted on the walls. Such light as there is comes from opening at the far end, framing a narrow stretch of canal and a yellow rowing boat. And there at the bottom of a marble staircase – instantly recognisable from his wide smile and trademark thatch of white hair – is Francesco da Mosto: architect, writer, television presenter, and now cookery guru.

In person, he is every bit as engaging as he appears on screen, whether guiding us around his native city in BBC2's *Venice* or revving a red Alfa Romeo Spider in *Francesco's Italy: Top to Toe*. (It turns out that the car was not actually his: 'I had to give it back when we finished filming,' he says wistfully.) His new book, *Francesco's Kitchen*, has no supporting series, but contains such a wealth of local recipes and anecdotes that it provides hours of armchair entertainment in itself.

The book was largely inspired by Francesco's father, Count Ranieri da Mosto. 'He has long been engaged in researching and preserving traditional Venetian gastronomy,' explains Francesco, 'and the recipes come mostly from him. I think the periods of terrible hunger here during the Second World

War contributed to his interest.’ He remembers his father taking him at a young age to a restaurant in the foothills of the Dolomites where they ate at least ten different types of mushroom: ‘I couldn’t face mushrooms for months afterwards.’

As he explains, Venetian cookery is based on the simple ingredients available to the islands’ original inhabitants – fish (especially sardines and stockfish), game and garden vegetables – which were gradually overlaid with others brought back by adventurous merchants. The city’s prosperity was built by trading salt from the lagoon and cane sugar and spices from the Orient; rice arrived from the Arab world in the sixteenth century, beans from the Americas in the seventeenth. So the recipes in *Francesco’s Kitchen* range from deep-fried soft-shell crabs (native to the area) to quail risotto and pevarini biscuits made with molasses, cinnamon and nutmeg.

Francesco’s wife Jane reveals that he leaves most of the day-to-day cooking to her, and is not the tidiest of chefs – ‘But when he does do it, he takes it very seriously.’ He is an expert shopper in the local markets, and often grills the food he brings back on one of the palazzo’s fireplaces in preference to the kitchen stove.

Many of the book’s anecdotes relate to the da Mosto family, which has been prominent in Venice for over 800 years. Halfway up the marble staircase stands a bust of the fifteenth-century explorer Alvise da Mosto, who discovered the Cape Verde islands; but there are other ancestors with more dubious claims to fame – among them Franco Barozzi, accused of conjuring up demons with the blood of a murdered man, and Elena Da Mosto, with whom Byron had an exhausting affair.

Francesco describes his own fame as an accident. ‘A team from the BBC came to Venice to get inspiration for a series about the city,’ he says, ‘and I think contacted me because I’m an architect and have been involved in some

interesting projects like the rebuilding of La Fenice Opera House. We walked around the Rialto food market, and they started to film me talking, and though I didn't realise it, it was a screen test of sorts. Months later they wrote again and proposed that I be the series presenter – though not before I'd had my teeth whitened and taken some extra English lessons.'

'Certain people have a natural intimacy with the lens, and there's no doubt that Francesco is one of them,' says his BBC producer, Basil Comely. 'He also has this British fantasy of an Italian accent which makes some women weak at the knees – but it's absolutely real.'

In the enormous *salone*, dappled with light from high, leaded windows and embellished with exquisite eighteenth-century plasterwork, Jane da Mosto pours pre-lunch glasses of prosecco. Born in South Africa, brought up in London, and educated at St Paul's Girls School and Oxford, she appears to have made a seamless transition to the role of Venetian chatelaine; she is also a respected environmental scientist, and has co-written a book on the lagoon's flood defences. She and Francesco met when she was staying with her mother – who also has a house in the city – and a mutual acquaintance invited her to a party at Francesco's studio.

'There were a lot of people and we could easily have missed speaking to each other,' she remembers, 'but I was curious about a trophy that Francesco had just won in a backgammon tournament at Bora Bora. I thought he must be a top gambler to have gone beyond Monte Carlo and as far as Polynesia in pursuit of great winnings, but discovered that Bora Bora is also a very seedy bar near the Rialto. The next time we met, I was concerned that Francesco wasn't taking proper care of the baby turtle that lived in a small tank in his studio, which gave us something to talk about. The turtle is still thriving today, but in a much bigger tank in our dining room. It's nearly bitten off the

children's fingers twice.' The children are Delia (12), Vettor (10) and Pierangelo (7).

The party assembled for lunch is a large one, consisting of eleven adults and ten children, but the da Mostos take it in their stride. My visit coincides with one of Venice's great festivals, the Feast of Il Redentore, which commemorates the city's deliverance from plague in 1577, and is traditionally celebrated with a roast duck stuffed with giblets, salami, grated cheese, breadcrumbs and herbs. Also on the menu are *sarde in saòr* (fried sardines marinated in onions, raisins and vinegar) and a leaf salad made from rocket and all the different local varieties of radicchio – a kaleidoscope of green and purple.

Sitting in the dining room with its neoclassical frescoes soaring to the ceiling, one cannot help feeling that the palazzo is on the large side for a family of five. In fact Francesco and Jane share it not only with his parents, but with some fifteen other families, who rent a variety of flats at the top of the building. It is a state of affairs inherited from Francesco's grandfather, who bought the palazzo just after the First World War: the oldest tenant, until her death a few years ago, was a woman who had been born there at the turn of the last century.

Francesco laments the way in which the Venice of his childhood has been increasingly touristified, 'Though thank heavens the city is still relatively safe, and children can play among themselves to their hearts' content in the big squares.' Only when he was eighteen did he feel the need to explore the world beyond: he went to Padua University to read engineering, but soon lost interest, and joined the Italian Army's Alpine Regiment to do his national service instead. It was a thrilling experience, involving parachute jumps into the snow: 'No sooner had I arrived at the barracks as Lieutenant than the Captain broke his ankle in 33 pieces, and I suddenly found myself as second-

in-command.’

Returning to Venice, he took another stab at university, this time studying architecture. It was a subject at which he excelled, although he did not graduate until his early thirties, taking time out to work for a film-maker in Rome, write screenplays, and become a magazine photographer. He also travelled in Kenya and Tanzania, where he befriended doctors and accompanied them on their rounds to the furthest reaches of the African bush: ‘It was a way to get a truer sense of how the people lived – their culture, needs, traditions.’

As an architect, his designs have included Luxembourg’s prize-winning pavilion at the 2003 Biennale, and a piazza created out of an illegal car park in a nearby fishing village. ‘The whole dynamic of the village improved,’ he says proudly: ‘people began socialising in the new square, and there were none of the anticipated problems of vandalism.’ He is now drawing up plans for new staircases in one of Venice’s historic hotels: ‘I enjoy doing staircases – it’s like solving sudoku puzzles.’

Most of his time, however, is taken up with television, and he has spent much of this summer filming his next series, which will be shown on BBC2 next year. It takes the form of a two-month trip aboard a magnificent late nineteenth-century schooner, from Venice to Istanbul across the Adriatic, Ionian and Aegean seas, to discover the cities and islands where Western civilisation was born. For Francesco, now 46 (his hair went white when he was twenty), the journey harked back both to the sailing holidays of his youth and to the voyages of his forebears.

‘It is the closest I could get to experiencing the Mediterranean like the Venetian traders and explorers did, and I thought of them when passing through the various ports, markets and looking at all the fortresses along the way. It has been a wonderful opportunity to capture flavours, history, customs

and legends – and has allowed me to think that the world is still a big place after all.’

It is no surprise, then, to learn that the ancestor with whom he most strongly identifies is the seafaring Alvise da Mosto. ‘I admire him greatly, and feel he is pushing me on. I pass his statue every day on the landing outside my studio, and hear him saying to me, “Come on, Francesco, when are you going to set sail?”’