

# Venetian Class

Venice, long known for its famous lovers, has none more passionate than those fighting to save the fabled *cittá* and its history. BY RACHEL BOWIE  
PHOTOGRAPHS BY ANDREW SWAINE





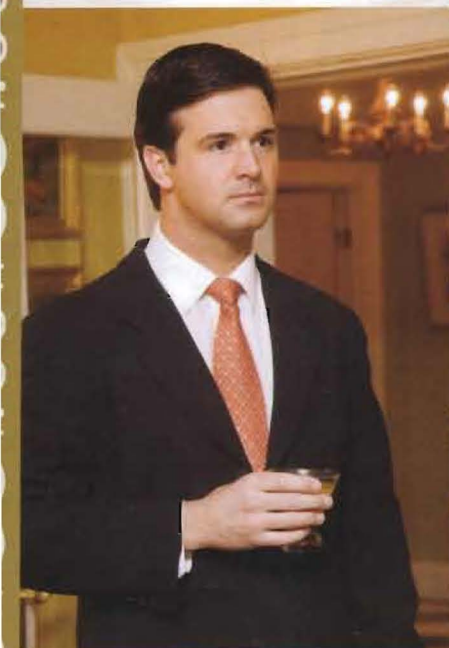


OPPOSITE PAGE: The candlelit dinner table. THIS PAGE, CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT: The Young Friends share a toast; guests Ashley Bernon and Meredith Roy; host Juan Prieto.





CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT: Allison Drescher, Young Friends founder and assistant chair; a golden place setting; Frederick Ilchman hands out postcards depicting Venetian art; roast monkfish wrapped in prosciutto; Kerry Landry, a Young Friends cochair, chats with guests Meredith Roy and Ashley Bernon; Jed Raymond; spinach-and-porcini-stuffed veal.





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In the dining room of Juan Prieto’s exquisite home overlooking Back Bay’s Commonwealth Avenue, gold Venetian masks glimmer in the candlelight. The rhythmic sounds of Pink Martini and a remix of Bizet’s *Carmen* fill the air. More than just gathering for a dinner party, Prieto and friends are here to toast an inspiring cause: saving Venice.

“Many cities have admirers, but Venice alone has lovers,” says guest Allison Drescher, the founder and assistant chair of the Young Friends of Save Venice, an adjunct to the largest private organization dedicated to the restoration and preservation of art and architecture in the Italian city.

Prieto, chair of the Boston chapter, and members of the 30-year-old Boston-based organization’s regional board and event committee have a lot to celebrate, and the buzz abounds. On the heels of another successful Carnevale celebration, hosted by the organization’s Young Friends group, all are eager to talk about their upcoming annual gala, The Travels of Marco Polo—from the Silk Road to Venice, held every year on Saint Mark’s Day (April 25).

Cocktails—blood orange cosmopolitans and flutes of Prosecco—begin in the living room. Prieto’s home reflects an Old World charm, decorated with treasures from family members who were exiled from Cuba, including cherished family portraits. Each piece has its own story that Prieto is happy to tell—for example, a Salvatore Ferragamo scarf made into an oversized throw pillow—especially to this collecting crowd that knows a thing or two about art.

The Catered Affair and Matt Donegan, chef for the night’s festivities, have prepared a feast fit for any *compte* or *comptessa*. The Maine lobster *arancini* (fried rice balls) and caramelized onion and goat cheese flatbread hors d’oeuvres go fastest. Between bites, Frederick Ilchman, assistant curator of paintings at the Museum of Fine Arts, explains his dedication to saving a city on the other side of the Atlantic. “Venice is the most fragile metropolis in Western culture. It is the canary in the coal mine. By keeping this magical fairy-tale city alive, we are doing something right.”

Worthy of any palazzo, the table in Prieto’s dining room is captivating, decorated with flickering candelabras and loose bundles of white roses. Colorful gems, picked out by Prieto himself at the International Gem and Jewelry Show, provide bursts of brilliant color. Gold abounds—in the ornate chargers and the gold-rimmed stemware and flatware—adding to the warmth of the room.

“Such a well-equipped host!” jokes Drescher. The dinnerware and décor are part of Prieto’s personal collection. Guests take their seats for the first course: an antipasti tasting plate that includes a caprese salad Napoleon, melon wrapped in prosciutto di Parma, and crostini with seared tuna, white bean purée, and arugula.

Drescher first fell in love with Venice while studying in Italy. She wanted

to stay connected to the country’s art and culture and saw an opportunity when she discovered Save Venice. She teamed up with Prieto, and the pair began to gather a group that believes strongly in the cultural preservation of the Italian city on the water.

“It’s very moving when a painting or sculpture is restored and returned to the church where it belongs,” says Ilchman, a member of Save Venice for eight years. “The parishioners are so grateful, and in one step we have done so many things. We are keeping Venice a living city, discovering it, and saving art.”

Guests choose between spinach-and-porcini-stuffed veal and roast monkfish wrapped in prosciutto for the second course. “After having children, I realized the importance of maintaining Venice’s treasures for the next generation,” says guest Meredith Roy. “If Save Venice didn’t exist, I could bring my family to Venice and find dilapidated buildings and paintings that were falling apart. So much of our culture is based on history. If we don’t preserve the past, we aren’t going to be able to learn from it.”

For guest Ashley Bernon, the cause feels personal. A native of New Orleans, she lost her family home in Hurricane Katrina. “I never understood the meaning of saving a city,” she reflects. “But having just lost my house and much of where my roots are, I now understand the need for such a group and appreciate its efforts.”

The organization is run entirely by volunteers; Save Venice has no bevy of development staffers running around planning socials. “The group’s work is a testament to how passionate everyone is about the cause,” says Jed Raymond, a member of the group’s Carnevale committee.

Such an intense level of support strongly connects the different generations involved with the group. “You come across many organizations that you want to be involved with, but some are too set in their ways,” says Lacy Garcia, who serves as a cochair for the Young Friends. “They really lose the opportunity to allow a younger generation to utilize its talents and create something new. Save Venice gives creative license and support.” Drescher chimes in to tell the group, “We’re very open to new ideas, and we want you guys to own this.”

“Shh, you’re giving away all of our secrets,” Prieto laughs.

Chocolate profiteroles with hazelnut gelato and pizzelle cornets with vanilla mascarpone, followed by strong espresso, close the evening, but not before Ilchman brings out a series of postcards depicting Venetian works of art. “It’s a creative-caption contest!” he exclaims. “The funniest comment gets to take a piece of art off the wall!”

Ilchman offers these final thoughts: “Bostonians love Venice. The first map of New England was printed in Venice, Back Bay’s architecture looks like Venice, and the organization was founded in Boston by two professors from Wellesley and Harvard. We’re simply picking up the torch.” ♦