

There's Something About Harry

Harry's Bar in Venice became a national monument in 2001. What's the secret? Harry himself has a simple recipe that keeps everyone, from the famous to the fabulous, coming back. **Words SHARON FEINSTEIN**

THERE ISN'T EVEN A SIGN on the door. Unknowingly, I used to jog straight past it on my morning run from the Baglioni Hotel Luna along Venice's Grand Canal. Yet the glitterati are known to fly from London just to have lunch here. This is the legendary Harry's Bar, favourite haunt of kings, writers like Hemingway and Coward, and Hollywood's big names, including Woody Allen and Angelina Jolie.

For me it is all about Harry, or 'Arrigo' in Italian, son of the founder of this epic restaurant. For habitués of Harry's Bar, the famous Bellini cocktail and simple food are merely incidental. The reason they flock here is the atmosphere. It feels like a club, a relaxed meeting point for intellectuals, artists, politicians, and



movers and shakers. Harry, 83, and his waiters make everyone feel special, no matter who they are.

Harry took me for a spin in his Mercedes 6.3 AMG across the Freedom Bridge from Venice to the mainland to see his small pasta factory that supplies Harrods, hand-picked shops and certain families. We could really talk, without him excusing himself to greet the King of Sweden or check the *scampi fritti*.

His formula is the 'complexity of simplicity' and total 'non-imposition' on customers. They don't have a sommelier or luxurious plates. It's simple and sophisticated, and goes towards making you feel utterly relaxed.

'If a customer is not relaxed it's not working,' says Harry. 'We put the bar right by the door because that helps with people's shyness. When you go to a famous place for the first time, you feel that everybody is looking at you.'

Hemingway was a regular from 1949 and set scenes from his novel *Across the River and into the Trees* in this bar. 'I think solitude frightened him and that was why he always sought the company of others,' says Harry. Orson Welles would down two bottles of Dom Pérignon here, and Truman Capote always ordered the prawn sandwiches. When the Venice film festival opens, the stars come for lunch and dinner every day.

Nicole Kidman and Tom Cruise arrived once. 'I didn't know who they were,' says Harry. 'We'd reserved the table in the corner but they said, "No, we don't want to be seen," so I gave them a tiny little room at the back and they were quite happy. Just being in the magic of Harry's Bar was enough for them.'

'The furniture is simple, designed by my father. Sometimes restaurant tables are very high so you have to eat slightly upwards. Children love this place because for the first time they have a table at the right height. Linen is also very important. The floor is slightly heated in a way that you don't even feel it, but the whole atmosphere is nice and warm.'

Yet it is perhaps the food at Harry's Bar that seals the deal. 'People come in and say, "Do you still have the bean soup? The prawn sandwiches?" You can have a club sandwich if you want to or you can go wild. People have total freedom here. The intelligentsia love it. Last night at that table for six, there were writers, architects, painters, and they're all coming back tonight.'

'I never change anything,' says Harry. 'The Bellini was invented by my father (pictured). He used to serve the peach and Italian prosecco. In 1948 there was an exhibition of the painter Bellini so we began to call it "Bellini". A few years later, our sliced raw meat goes all over the world. My father made the first beef carpaccio for the countess Amalia Nani Mocenigo in 1950 when he found out she couldn't eat cooked meat.' The name was inspired by the Venetian painter Carpaccio's works, often in red and white tones not dissimilar to the appearance of raw meat.

'The other day, Richard Gere asked me, "Harry, what is it about this place?" "It's very simple," I said. "We know how to make you happy."' □

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