

Bar del Fico



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Enoteca Palombi



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Bellissimo Bites

Despite the cities' rivalry, a distinctly Milanese trend is taking over Rome's bars – an evening 'aperitivo hour', where free food is dished out daily from around 7 to 10pm. Kathryn Tomasetti sinks her teeth into the city's best venues

PHOTOGRAPHY BY LORENZO PESCE

▶ Aperitivo has a long and established history. Over close to a century, what began as sophisticated pre-dinner drinks in 1920s Milan – served with nibbles like roasted peanuts, olives and canapés – has morphed into a veritable foodie bonanza. Today, aperitivo is loosely based on the American 'happy hour', except it tends to stretch to at least two to three hours, rather than the single American one. Drinks aren't discounted bottles of beer either, but tempting cocktails made by Prosecco-wielding pros.

But we all know what's really important to Italians: food. Two decades of serious aperitivo

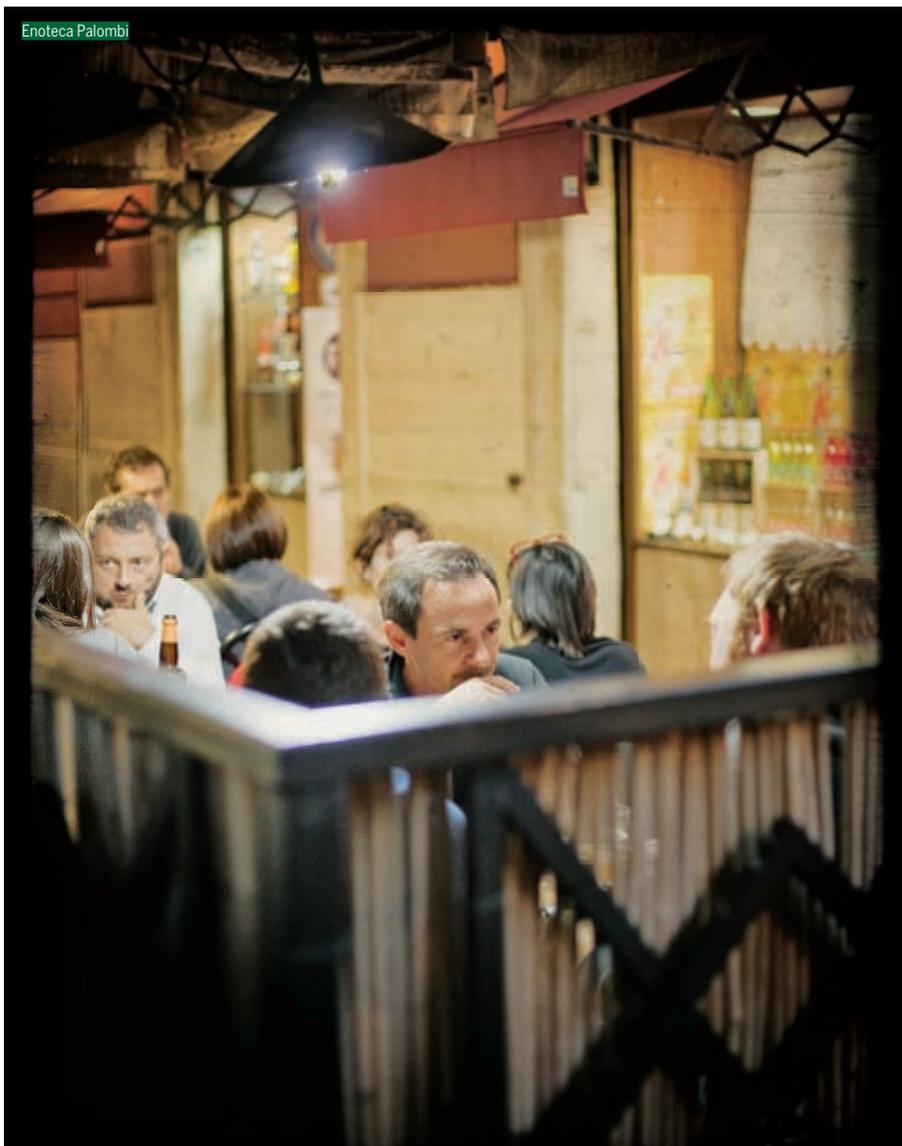
competition means Milanese bars now turn out elaborate 20-dish buffets, refreshed with an additional hot dish or two every 15 minutes – all served free to sipping patrons.

It may have been a long time coming, but at long last Roman bars (who hate to copy their northern neighbours) have hopped aboard the aperitivo bandwagon. With a little advance planning and a handful of insider tips, the savvy traveller can load up on all-you-can-eat Italian extravaganzas – ranging from paper-thin slices of prosciutto to pizza, pasta and salvers of house-smoked salmon – for the paltry price of a Mojito.



DI DOMENICA
13.30 - 02.00

“It’s best to arrive early to snag the best of the petite but pithy spread of house dishes”



THE HIPSTER APERITIVO FRENI E FRIZIONI

Swing by out-of-hours and the tightly closed shutters, marked with a simple stencil of a hammer and wrench, give little away. But come evening, this former mechanics' garage turned buzzing bar tells a different story.

Freni e Frizioni ('Brakes and Clutches') is tucked into the trendy Trastevere neighbourhood, overlooking the Tiber River that rumbles through central Rome opposite. An artsy, international crowd sips minty Mojitos with abandon (it's the house special), before spilling from the terraced tables and draping themselves fashionably over the adjacent stone walls.

The enviable buffet of aperitivo snacks lies inside the bar's minimalist interior. Pad over the brushed concrete floors, scooting past the vintage furniture and into the large room off to the right. It's here that the bar lays out freebie delights, including home-style barley and black olive salad or updated takes on traditional Italian classics, like penne spiked with smoked goat's cheese and sun-dried tomatoes. Peppery rocket leaves and slices of crisp raw fennel are also displayed at eye-level on pretty 1950s cake trays.

Tummy filled, be sure to check out the rotating selection of contemporary creations by local artists, all illuminated by the bar's bling-tastic chandeliers.
4-6 Via del Politeama, tel: +39 06 4549 7499, www.freniefrizioni.com
Aperitivo daily from 7-10pm, wine €6, cocktails €7-8

THE BOHO APERITIVO BAR DEL FICO

It may sit just steps from the tourist-trodden Piazza Navona, but Bar del Fico is hidden away to all but the most dedicated aperitivo-seekers.

Formerly favoured by local chess competitors, this sublime spot was given a complete makeover in 2010. A multi-coloured mishmash of bistro tables sprawls under the bar's namesake fig tree. Effortlessly chic neighbourhood intellectuals dither over the lengthy menu of Italian wines served by the glass, while slick staff shake up heavy-duty cosmopolitans and vodka-soaked strawberry caipiroskas at a second, separate bar.

It's best to arrive early to snag the best of the petite-but-pithy spread of house dishes that occupies one corner of the turquoise and red interior. Towers of bite-sized mini-pizzas are frequently among the fragrant freebies, as are (somewhat incongruously) searing hot pans of crispy roasted potatoes. Tuck into traditional eats like tomato and basil pasta, tuna and roasted onion bulgur salad and morsels of veggie and egg frittata. Load up a plastic plate, then stake out a match on the vintage 1960s tabletop football game.

Bar del Fico doesn't neglect its former patrons, either – chessboards are embedded in a scattering of the bar's outdoor tables.
26 Piazza del Fico, tel: +39 06 6880 8413, www.bardelfico.it. Aperitivo daily from 7.30-10pm, wine €5, cocktails €8

“Load up for free on old-style Italian tidbits like top-quality cured pork and Parmesan cheese”



THE OTT APERITIVO STRAVINSKIJ BAR

Just steps from the verdant Villa Borghese gardens, the candlelit courtyard of this super-trendy bar, set within the glamorous Hotel de Russie, attracts a mix of stylish *signore*, snappily dressed foreign businessmen and catwalk-clad celebs. It's little surprise that Picasso was a former hotel patron and George Clooney beds down here when he's in town.

Bow-tied wait staff flit between the hushed tables, magically appearing with award-winning barman Massimo D'Addezio's decadent cocktails, including a Bond-inspired range of martinis. Their De Russie Martini is legendary, served with a spoonful of caviar.

There's no help-yourself buffet of nibbles here (too uncouth, perhaps?), but patrons are plied with trays of ultra-contemporary Mediterranean offerings instead: neat triangles

of salami-stuffed focaccia bread, perfectly pared vegetable crudité, chocolate-dipped almonds and crunchy sugar-topped fruit jellies.

Catering to the calorie-counting crowds, there's a fine selection of alcohol-free Healthy Cocktails (€15) too, like the lip-smacking Duffy Duck, a blend of blueberries, blackberries, orange zest, lime juice and guava. *Hotel de Russie*, 9 Via del Babuino, tel: +39 06 328 881, www.hotelderussie.it *Aperitivo daily from 6.30-9pm, cocktails €19*

THE TRADITIONAL APERITIVO ENOTECA PALOMBI

Tucked inconspicuously opposite Piazza Testaccio's covered market, the family-run Enoteca Palombi is a combination of wine shop and snug bar that's attracted stallholders from over the road since 1917. Elderly locals still drift over for wine and a round of cards, marking scores on paper shopping bags.

Aperitivo in the Enoteca Palombi consists of a simple selection of drinks: red or white wine,





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or beer, accompanied by plate after plate of seasonal goodies – most of them straight from the market over the road – at the bar’s abundant buffet. Load up for free on old-style Italian tidbits like top-quality cured pork and Parmesan cheese. Tiny, toothpick-speared ciabatta sandwiches nudge up against hearty vegetable stews and rich desserts, including a delectable homemade yogurt cake.

Beer aficionados should head downstairs to L’Oasi della Birra: it’s here that Mario Palombi stocks close to 500 types of artisanal beers, including obscure offerings from Italian microbreweries like Birrifico Sorrento from outside Naples, or Cittavecchia from Trieste. 38-41 Piazza Testaccio, Testaccio Market, tel: +39 06 57 46 122
Aperitivo daily from 5.30-8.30pm, wine or beer €10

THE SEXY APERITIVO MICCA

Burlesque shows, go-go dancers, cabarets... this retro haunt just south of Termini train station has it all – not least a killer list of cocktails by Micca’s master mixologist Daniele Gentili.

Autumn 2011 saw the bar bump up its exotic drinks menu with a host of tantalising new offerings. Plump for a Ruby Sky (gin, raspberry, crème de violette and grapefruit), knock back a Mexican Passion (tequila, lime, ginger and passion fruit) or go all out for a Hanky (S)Panky (cognac, vermouth and bitters). All include free reign over the bar’s aperitivo buffet, laden daily with melt-in-your-mouth egg pasta, freshly baked



bread and sweet Roman pastries, all homemade by Micca’s chefs.

If you’ve packed your dancing shoes, on Mondays Micca’s aperitivo hour is dedicated to swing (accompanied by a live band every other week). Pop in on Tuesdays for ‘Delicious’, when you can sample a selection of Italian wines and regionally themed cuisine, such as delicious Pugliese burrata cheese or Bolognese mortadella ham. On a budget? A special Tuesday cocktail is offered each week for a bargain €5. And for something entirely different, stick around post-happy hour on Fridays, when Micca transforms into a club at 10pm, showcasing their infamous burlesque shows.

For visitors in town in March, Micca will be home to the second annual American Burlesque Revue (15–18 March), a series of shows featuring the US’s top burlesque performers. 7A Via Pietro Micca, Porta Maggiore, tel: +39 06 8744 0079, www.miccaclub.com
Aperitivo Thu-Tue from 7-10pm, cocktails €10



GETTING THERE

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