

Also by Arrigo Cipriani

*Heloise and Bellinis*

# HARRY'S BAR

The Life and Times of the  
Legendary Venice Landmark



Arrigo Cipriani



ARCADE PUBLISHING • NEW YORK

Copyright © 1996 by Arrigo Cipriani

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be reproduced in any form or by any electronic or mechanical means, including information storage and retrieval systems, without permission in writing from the publisher, except by a reviewer who may quote brief passages in a review.

FIRST EDITION

The photographs on the third page of the photo insert showing the front window and entrance of Harry's Bar are by Denholm Jacobs III.

*Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data*

Cipriani, Arrigo

Harry's Bar : the life and times of the legendary Venice landmark / Harry Cipriani.

p. cm.

ISBN-13: 978-1-55970-259-1

ISBN 10: 1-55970-259-1

1. Harry's Bar (Venice, Italy) — History. 2. Cookery, Italian.  
3. Celebrities — Social life and customs.

TX945.5.H37C55 1996

641.5'0945'31 — dc20

95-53077

Published in the United States by Arcade Publishing, Inc., New York  
Distributed by Hachette Book Group USA

10 9 8 7

EB

Designed by API

PRINTED IN THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA

## CONTENTS

Introduction	1
1. Giuseppe	5
2. An American in Venice	19
3. Bellinis in Paradise	35
4. Hard Act to Follow	41
5. Fascism, War, and the Bar Arrigo	53
6. A Cast of Stars	63
7. Harry's Gifts to the World	85
8. <i>A Tavola!</i>	89
9. Karate and Me	105
10. Names and Faces	109
11. The Hotel Cipriani	115
12. Harry's Fifth Avenue	127
13. The Bellini	137
14. One Day in the Building of the Bellini	145
15. The Sort of Things That Happen in New York	159
16. Against Food Interpretation	169
17. Excerpts from the Suggestions Box	175

## INTRODUCTION

ONE VERY MUGGY SUMMER DAY in the late 1960s, I went to see my father in his home in the Valsugana Mountains near Trento, where in his later years he sometimes took a month's vacation. I had been running Harry's Bar for a little over ten years, and, in theory at least, my father was no longer involved in the day-to-day business of the bar he had founded in 1931 and built up to the legendary Venice restaurant it had become. Of course, until the day he died, my father would never accept that he was no longer in charge of Harry's Bar — and a good thing it was, too. My father *was* Harry's Bar. Had he ever really broken all connections with the restaurant, he would have ceased to exist. After he "retired" from managing Harry's Bar, he still came every day for lunch and was always our most demanding customer — the one

we tried most to please, and the one who was most sparing with his approval. But a good word from him meant more than all the lavish praise we got from our real customers.

I didn't arrive at Trento until the afternoon, later than I had planned. My father came toward me with that slightly hurried step of his, and he could not refrain from scolding me for my tardiness. I expected that, of course. In the twenty years I ran Harry's Bar while he was alive, I don't think I was late for work a single time. Getting to work by ten o'clock in the morning and again at six for the evening meal was like a law of nature in our family, and I'm sure that if anyone had ever asked me I would have said that the world would end if I ever arrived for work as much as a minute late. Today, I sometimes think that the strict adherence to a daily routine that I learned from my father, as useful as it is, ruined my taste for discipline forever. For example, soon after he died, I developed an immediate distaste for getting to appointments on time, even for scheduling appointments at all, and it's an aversion that has never left me.

That summer day, my father greeted me heartily, then hurried off to the warmest room in the house to see if the *Krapfen* dough was rising. As everyone in the family knew, fritters had always been my favorite sweet. A moment later he reappeared disgruntled, because the dough had risen too much. As usual, he asked how business had been going while he was away, but this time he did not pay much attention to what I said. He was clearly follow-

ing his own train of thought elsewhere. We were sitting on the shady side of the house, on a terrace overlooking the meadow, and he suddenly started to talk about Germany, where he had spent his childhood, and about German lieder. And then he started to sing, softly. The lied spoke of an exile's nostalgia for his home in Spain and his all-consuming longing to return.

It was then I discovered a side to my father I had never seen before, and I was glad, because only our family knows how little of it we saw when he was alive. Never had he told me in any explicit way whether I lived up to the expectations he had for the heir to the family business. But on that summer afternoon, I began to realize that I knew him more from what he did over the course of his life than from what he said.

Many of the episodes described in the first part of this book, as told by my father, were events I witnessed too; others he told me about; and still others are part of our family heritage — Mama Giulia, my mother, told them to the three of us when we were children. We listened eagerly, as children do to old stories about the grown-ups, as she told them in the evening, while we were alone, and he was at work.



## GIUSEPPE

*The first part of the book is told in the first person by my father, Giuseppe Cipriani, the founder of Harry's Bar in Venice.*

One morning in 1970 as I was signing some papers at my lawyer's office, my right hand suddenly felt very light: the more I tried to hold it down, the more it wanted to rise, as if it had become totally weightless. At the moment it happened, I was rather amused by this strange sensation, and I was far from imagining what it really was. They told me later in the hospital: paralysis.

That was the morning old age hit me. I understood for the first time what it was like to feel tired even after a good night's sleep. It was then I first began very slowly to look back at the past and review the events,

the people, and the situations that I had experienced in all those long years since I founded Harry's Bar, and during the time before. The older one gets, the more vivid childhood episodes become, events that are remote in time yet so close in memory you can almost touch them.

My family came from Verona. My father worked as a porter and wore himself out for eighty centesimi a day. He had eight children to support, four boys and four girls.

Those were the years when Italians could obtain the so-called red passport and cross the Atlantic to the United States, jammed into the ships of the Rubattino line. My father in Verona looked for a haven nearer home: Germany.

In 1904 we arrived in Schwenningen am Neckar. My family felt at home at once. The climate and the hilly landscape on the banks of the river were rather similar to those of Verona. And several of our neighbors from Verona were already there, so we settled in easily.

The Germans called us *Itakas*. They were slow to accept us, but they understood that we meant well. They blew off steam mainly with harmless jokes about Italians that for the most part put us in a good humor too.

Like most of his countrymen who ended up in those parts, my father worked as a bricklayer. He made twenty-three marks per week — the equivalent of two

hundred dollars today — which was five times what he had earned in Italy.

My mother also did her share to keep things going in the little house we rented. She took in boarders: room, *Frühstück*, and, of course, a liter of beer a day, all for one mark fifty. I may have been drawn to the calling of barman and hotelier (I ought to be more modest and say taverner or saloonkeeper) by watching my mother deal with our roomers. She was kind and considerate, but not servile. That is a hard balance to strike, as I can testify today after years of experience myself.

We children went to school. It took us about a year to become fairly fluent in the language. We made friends with German children, chiefly children of day laborers and factory workers like us, since Schwenningen had many factories by then. Looking back on it now, it was a good life for us children, especially for me. If we had stayed in Italy, it would have been very hard to go to school and learn something.

Today I can say without any ambivalent feelings: I grew up German, and I felt German. I was perfectly at home in that environment and identified with that cleanliness and order, a discipline that was so wise and, at that time, so far from being exploited by a fanatic like Hitler. I felt I was a German, and a good German. I was proud to live in a country where education was free and where, at the end of elementary school, students were carefully evaluated and advised on what direction to take in life. The year after a boy finished school, he might go to work as an apprentice in a factory or in some artisan's shop.

With pay and insurance, naturally. Even if he was a foreigner. For immigrants like us, all this meant an end to our former poverty.

After eight years of elementary school, my teachers suggested that I continue my studies at a *Gymnasium*, the secondary school for pupils destined to go to university. Unfortunately we did not have enough money at the time, so I became a helper in a watch factory. I now see clearly how big a part this first job played in forming my character: the sense of precision, the love of order, and the aversion for things not done properly that I have always had. They all came to me there among the gears and hairsprings.

The outbreak of World War I in 1914 put an end to my carefree days. It was a tragedy for me. I could not understand why, in the country I loved as my own, everyone — those who had taken care of me and my family, my classmates, and all those fine people of Schwenningen — had suddenly become the enemy, people I might have to shoot at. Mistrust of us "*Itakas*" developed slowly, like a nasty illness; and before long, what had been a friendly sounding nickname became a scornful epithet.

So we returned to Verona. I was fourteen years old, and there was no money; but there was work, because the adult men were going off to war. At Molinari's, one of the finest pastry shops in Verona, the owner had almost no one left.

Why did I choose to work in a pastry shop? Maybe because my father had heard there was a job. Yet it was

an important choice in my life. I began to put my hands in dough: a man of bars, restaurants, and hotels also needs to have a thorough understanding of the secrets of pastry. Before long, I learned the art of making pastry light as a feather. Meanwhile my father had found work as a helper for another famous pastry maker, Tommasi, who offered me a few centesimi more than I was earning. So, without many second thoughts I brought my recent experience to his shop and resumed manipulating cream puffs.

It was very hard work, but work has never been burdensome to me. On the contrary, I have always enjoyed it. As far back as I can remember, I have been stimulated by the idea of creating something, I have enjoyed making others happy, and I have constantly been driven by a desire to seek something better.

It was still dark when I got up in the morning; not even the street sweepers, who were early risers in those days, were out when I walked to work. There were no set hours: the working day was fifteen, even sixteen hours long. Sometimes we were asleep on our feet, on the verge of collapse, our brains numb and our hands mechanically repeating their task, over and over again: one thousand, one thousand two hundred, one thousand five hundred pastries. When the bells rang out for holidays, it was a real deliverance.

The wood-fired ovens were always open to make sure that the flame, that is to say the heat, was constant. We perspired all the time, even when Christmas snow was falling outside. No electric beaters in those

days: egg whites were beaten by hand. It was the simplest work of all, so that was what apprentices, the newcomers, did. I can still see myself during the first months at Tommasi's: the obsession of the production line; the same operation over and over; my right arm spinning at high speed, beating dozens of eggs at a time, and my left hand holding the receptacle firm. Morning to night.

Someone had tossed an old mattress on top of the oven between towers of dough set out for leavening. When we could no longer stand on our feet, we took turns lying on that sort of airborne bed. A couple of quick snores, and then a faint tap on the shoulder. Two blood-shot eyes looked at you, and an exhausted voice would announce the change: "It's my turn."

I earned barely three lire a week. I knew it was nothing, but kneading the dough, doling in the cream, watching the most imaginative forms of pastry come to life, more than made up for the low pay. I would peek out from the workroom at the customers in the shop tasting the fruits of our labor. Giving pleasure to others had become my vocation.

When he went to war, Tommasi turned the shop over to me. I was sixteen years old, and that job lasted about two years, until it occurred to the authorities that pastries were luxury items and banned their production. I will always remember the rush for the last pastries; if we had produced cannons at the same rate as we turned out pastries in those days, we would have won the war in a month.

In 1918 men born in 1900 were also called up, and I left for Sant'Arcangelo di Romagna for basic training. But for me, the war was not something serious, and in that attitude I was not alone. Everything seemed to prevent people from looking martial. At our age, what we thought most about was girls. We would have liked to impress them with our uniforms, but they were almost all hand-me-downs from the dead and wounded. I weighed about 110 pounds, and I made a sorry sight tromping around in old shoes that were three sizes too big for me.

It was an experience, though. I got to know the Italians, and I soon recognized that underneath the disciplined exterior my German childhood had lent me, I was still an Italian myself. When we threw hand grenades during basic training, few of us remembered to pull the pin, and nobody counted to three. I liked that and saw that the difference between us and the Germans was to our credit.

Fortunately, on the eve of departure for the front, my problems of conscience were happily resolved by the armistice. On November 3 we were in Ala, behind the lines; and on November 4, 1918, my eighteenth birthday, the fighting stopped.

Six months of military food, pasta and beans, and long marches did a lot for me physically. I put on more than thirty pounds, and I felt in great form. My mother hardly recognized me when I got back home.

There was a great welcome for me at the pastry shop, but my mania for change, for learning something



new, the same mania that had taken me from Molinari's to Tommasi's, took hold of me again. And I decided to become a waiter.

I bought a set of tails and looked good in it: girls looked at me with respect and admiration. I became a "flying" waiter, in the sense that I spun through a whirl of different bars, night spots, trattorias, a kaleidoscope of owners and customers — I was running all the time, almost skating with trays full of orders. I worked at the Gatto Nero, the Torcolo, and the Gabbia d'Oro — in those days one of the best hotels in Verona.

Uppermost in my thoughts, however, were two fixed ideas: to master the craft of restaurateur and to go into business for myself. So I would stay in one place long enough to learn what there was to learn, then I would take off again somewhere else. I would leave one café, and the next day I would be working at the one across the street. My bosses appreciated me for my working so hard, but at the same time they hated me for my faithlessness. That was my way. What I liked most was the constant human contact with the customers. I learned how much people need one another.

But Verona was too small a city. I was already thinking of going away when I was called up again for military service, this time for the ordinary draft. Nothing could have seemed more unfair, and I went to great lengths not to be drafted — no easy matter in those days. For example, to decide if someone were really deaf, he had to walk down a staircase, and they would roll an empty tin garbage can down after him. If he moved

out of the way, it proved he was not deaf. If he was hit, he was exempted. I was exempted on the grounds of amblyopia, or lazy eye, which I had actually suffered since birth. It seemed a blessing at the time. Now, with a cataract on my good eye, eyeglasses have become mandatory.

With military service out of the way, I thought that with my experience as a waiter and my perfect knowledge of German, I could get work in a hotel. I boldly answered an advertisement for a *chef de rang* at the Hôtel des Alpes in Madonna di Campiglio. I went with a friend who had the same experience I did — that is to say, next to none, at least as far as hotels were concerned.

The Hôtel des Alpes was magnificent and impressive. It was reopening for the first time after the war, and everything had to be readied and reorganized for the season. After a short interview we were hired on the spot. We opened crates and took out marvelous sets of Limoges porcelain, fine silverware, glistening crystal glasses, and tablecloths of the finest embroidered linen.

All the while, my friend and I were worried because we were practically all alone. There was no maître d', and there was a chef in the kitchen who scared you just to look at him. But he was the only authority we had, so about two weeks before the opening, still a bit awkward in my new tails, I went into the kitchen to talk to him. "Listen, Signor Vismara," I said, "I have to confess that I have never been a hotel waiter before. But I am very anxious to learn, and you must help me."

Vismara had seen how hard I worked getting

the dining room ready, and he replied: "Don't worry, Cipriani, there's nothing to fear. If you have any questions, just come to me."

Vismara was by far the greatest chef I ever met. I have seen a great many, but Vismara remains a shining example of human kindness and simplicity, the simplicity of a man who knows his business. In the rare moments when there was nothing to do, I would go to see him. I would stand at the kitchen door and watch him roll out pastry or bone a lamb. He handled the dough like a sculptor modeling clay, and he approached the lamb as a surgeon would in an operating theater.

Before long, I became his private student. I watched everything he did in silence and committed all his movements to memory. Late at night, before falling asleep, I would repeat his movements in the dark — a kind of mechanical training.

That was the school I grew up in, what they call nowadays the "old school." In the old school, a waiter ran like a locomotive if he wanted to get ahead and one day have a place of his own. Today, there are still a lot of fine young men, but for the most part they fall into one of two categories. There are young people who consider waiting on table a humiliating profession. They take no pleasure in their work, the surest way of staying on the lowest rungs. And then there are excellent but fearful young men afraid to run the risk of going into business on their own.

Getting back to the Hôtel des Alpes in Madonna di Campiglio, the maître d' finally arrived one morning

a week before the official opening. He was extremely elegant and had an aristocratic air about him — very solemn, but a bit too silent. He never moved; he would stand in the middle of the room and survey the whole place. But never a comment, no suggestions, and no orders; we never heard him say a word.

Two days before the opening he came over to me and said, "Listen, Cipriani, there's something I ought to tell you. You seem like a bright boy, and you've got to help me." He seemed embarrassed.

"Speak up," I said.

"Well, to tell the truth, I've never been a maître d' before. Can I count on you to help?"

I felt like a lion when I heard that, a real veteran of the profession. "Don't worry," I winked, "we've got everything under control. Count on me for everything!"

After that, it didn't take long before I was made head waiter. This was one year after the war; unemployment was high, and swarms of aspiring waiters appeared every day, people who had never worn a white jacket before. Among my new duties was the job of choosing the new waiters, and I found it was something that came naturally to me. I had a clinical eye for them. I would look a candidate in the eye for half a minute and make up my mind, and I never made a mistake. We began the season like a band of stragglers and ended it like a triumphant army. At the end of the season, the owners made us promise to come back the following year.

After a few stints in Trento at the leading café and very brief stops in Verona, where I had laid eyes on a

girl named Giulietta (or maybe she had laid eyes on me), I was off again, from one big hotel to another: from the Meranerhof in Merano to the Hôtel Metropole de Bruxelles at Bagnoles-de-l'Orne in France, then all the way to the Excelsior in Palermo.

In France I learned and understood a great many things aside from the language. What impressed me was not so much the great variety of sauces and combinations of food as the inimitable French art of selling and the importance they gave to color in food. They were absolutely the best at this. The dish that reached the table was as full of color as a beautiful painting, a wonder to look at, even if it was not always wonderful to eat.

And the wines? Splendid, but what contributed to their success in this case was that art of showmanship and that sense of grandeur that is so happily a part of the French character, ever optimistic about life and one's part in it. I admired bottles with marvelous labels in the hands of waiters and sommeliers who treated them with the same care a demolition expert might use with a bomb. Measured, elegant, and respectful gestures gave prestige and nobility to even the simple ritual of drinking a glass of wine. I tasted some of the finest champagnes. They were excellent, but it was all too punctilious. It was almost as if the customers were expected to stop after every sip, bow their heads to the goblet, and whisper thanks! On such occasions, I thought about Italian *spumantes* that did not come in ostentatious bottles but were certainly not inferior to those delicious nectars. I even felt nostalgic for a certain *prosecco* made

in the Veneto countryside that was at least a match for a Dom Perignon. Indeed, I later used the humble *prosecco* very successfully in cocktails whose names have become household words around the world.

I felt that there had to be another way of serving people, a way of inspiring the customers' trust without intimidating them, of loving one's guests and not just impressing them. For example, I thought it must be possible to create an elegant atmosphere without the help of the formal, stereotyped flambé. Personally, I have always detested that wordless ritual that customers are expected to watch in ecstasy, and I think those mannered affections are no substitute for dishes prepared by a loving cook using good and honest ingredients.

After Palermo, finally Venice. It won me over at once with its inimitable human dimension, its great civility, its sudden changes and light, its asymmetry, and the endlessly shifting life of its waters. I found a job at the Monaco, ten feet from a cordage warehouse that would later become Harry's Bar. But I didn't know that yet.

