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Venice Tonight

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carnevale masks make venice come alive

By Missy Carducci
Senior Editor

The first *Carnevale di Venezia* got off to a rollicking start at the beginning of the last millennium in 1094 and grew into a months-long bout of bawdy behavior ushering in the season of Lent. Similar to our Mardi Gras, "Carnevale" literally means "farewell to meat" in Latin—

hinting at its origin as a prelude to meatless fasting for many. These days, the fanciful masks and elaborate disguises donned by revelers are meant to attract the paparazzi rather than thwart recognition by a jealous spouse. In fact, many Venetians are so into the exhibitionism of *Carnevale* that they take the better part of the whole year to design and complete their costumes. Which explains part of why the crowds continue to squeeze into the Piazza di San Marco and other public squares to participate in the spectacle of color and entertainment inspired by Venice's glorious past. The rest of the appeal lies in the pure romance of this fairytale city and center for culture and art.

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For those of you fortunate enough to attend the festivities this year (from February 16-27), it's a chance to, perhaps, try on a new personality under gilded cover. And, you're sure to indulge in some traditional Venetian foods, including [gnocchi](#) and [risotto](#). We were so intrigued by the consummate craftsmanship displayed in Venice's *Carnevale* masks, we decided to offer a limited quantity of these handmade works of art at selected Wegmans stores. To learn more about *Carnevale*, go to [about.com](#)

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The Meaning behind Venetian Masks Revealed

Masks at *Carnevale* allow the wearer to mingle freely (and flirt shamelessly, if desired) in disguises depicting stock characters of the *Commedia dell'Arte*, traditional figures familiar in Renaissance Venice, and creative designs of pure fantasy.



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Commedia dell'Arte Masks:

A comedic form of Italian theater with roots going back to the 16th century, *Commedia dell'Arte* featured stock players with exaggerated costumes and masks that underscored their characters' personalities. The two beautiful examples of *Commedia* masks below will be available in selected stores only for collectors who want a touch of *Carnevale* in their homes this year.

- **Columbina Music**

One of the first women to be accepted into the theater, Columbina was reluctant to cover her lovely features with a mask and so the small half-mask, or loup, was designed especially for her. She was the mischievous and charming serving wench of the *Commedia* — a comic character that was not always a mirror of virtue. Her name lives on to this day, as all half masks are referred to as Columbina masks.



- **Pierrot**

The original character, Peppe Nappa, dates back to the second half of the 16th century. He was a valet, but he differs radically from others by virtue of being a young, personable, trustworthy individual who could be a charming lover, if necessary. Though at first he had a heavily powdered face to give him a great range of facial expression, a chalky white mask was later developed for the player.

Traditional Masks:

Depicting the nobility or its many enemies, traditional costumes depend on time honored elements, like a "volto" white half-mask. One of the most popular, the *maschera nobile* (the patrician) disguise employs this familiar white mask along with a three-cornered black hat and enveloping black cloak for a somewhat sinister look that haunts the festivities.



The Making of a Venetian Mask

Fantasy Masks:

Fantasy Masks:

As the name implies, mask-makers let their artistic expression and imagination loose to design highly stylized, creative masks, though some may reflect historical influences.

The stunning masks you'll find in selected stores are the work of Franco, one of the few master mask makers in Venice, who crafts them with centuries-old techniques:

- The artist presses papier-mâché into molds and coats the mask with plaster.
- He applies a second layer of papier-mâché, lines the back of the mask with gauze and places it in an oven to stiffen.
- Finally, he trims the edges and hand paints the result.

The Fall and Rise of Carnevale

You may not know that Carnevale fell out of favor for over a century following Napoleon's conquest of Venice in 1797. In fact, some historians judged the immorality prevalent during the festivities as evidence of the once powerful republic's total decline. Thanks to some enterprising artists and tourism promoters, the resurgence of Carnevale in the late 1970's gives travelers today yet another reason to plan a trip to Venice.

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Carnevale Trivia

- Roman masquerades in celebration of fertility festivals inspired the tradition of donning masks for Carnevale
- Back in its heyday (the 18th century), Carnevale extended from the day after Christmas until just before Easter (on Ash Wednesday)
- Mask-makers were first recognized with their own guild (a trade association) back in 1436
- The establishment of modern mask-making by former students of the Academy of Fine Arts in 1978 ushered in a new age of popularity
- On the last Friday of Carnevale in Verona—the city of Romeo and Juliet—a giant fork with an equally large gnocco (singular of gnocchi) comes parading down the street. It's held by the Papa del Gnoc, who leads the crowd to a feast of these feathery pasta "pillows." Of course, they're only light as a feather if you know [how to make them](#) correctly.



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