



The Row Venice organization is a group of women who teach tourists how to row Venetian style, standing up. — AFP photos



Row Venice aims to preserve tradition, both of the rowing style itself, but also the crafting of the 'batela' - a traditional workboat now out of production.

Gondoleering goddesses teach ancient art to the masses

Big wave incoming, use your legs! shouts Gabriella Lazzari, as her laughing students try out their new gondoleering skills in the sunshine of Venice's lagoon. Lazzari is one of some 20 women who teach tourists from around the world how to row standing up, Venetian style, in "Batela coda di gambero", shrimp-tailed wooden boats. "We take them out to the lagoon so they can do the gondoleering part without crashing into everybody," quips Jane Caporal, who founded the Row Venice organization more than eight years ago in a bid to save the "voga alla veneta" style of rowing. "Obviously Venice is motorized now, so people don't row around in their little boats anymore," she said.

"The idea is to save the tradition. Not just the actual rowing, everything: the boat building, the oar making, the forcola (oar rowlock) making, crafts that have been going for centuries and centuries," she said. Accountant Yezi Jin shrieks in delight as she drives the blade into the water and propels the boat forwards, far from the peaceful canals of Italy's floating city, in the vast open waters where vaporetto waterbuses sail back and forth. "It's hard work, my back's aching, but it's great fun!" the 32-year old from Portland in the

United States said, as her husband, gripping his own oar tightly, tried valiantly to match her pace. "We see all the islands here... it's very different from the Rialto Bridge or being in the crowds," Jin added.

Master craftsman

Most of the women who teach "voga" also race professionally, and Row Venice sponsors them. Caporal sees it as a way of attempting to level the playing field in a sport and profession dominated by men. There is currently only one female gondolier in the whole city. She has had to fight tooth and claw for her share of the 20 million tourists who visit the Serenissima each year, Caporal said. "The number of people certified as gondoliers is controlled by the gondoliers' association. "It's a tightly-closed shop. With Row Venice we've carved out a space for women to work too," she added.

The British-born Australian, who has lived in Venice for 30 years, said she picked the batela—a traditional workboat now out of production—because it is more stable than the asymmetrical gondola and easier to manoeuvre. "I came across one that was sold to me by a rowing club, it had been out of use for years. It was made by a master craftsman who had seen this kind of boat as a boy and remem-



Gabriella Lazzari (left) says it is a pleasure to show tourists around Venice by water, explaining its pollution and high-water problems.

bered it," she said.

The former stockbroking analyst fell in love with it, and was ready to shell out 14,000 euros (\$15,600) for a replica to be made.

But the master craftsman had died. With no-one left alive who knew how to make them, the boat builders had to get the plans from the

city's naval history museum.

'A dream come true'

"It's a pleasure to enable tourists to live Venice by water, and explain the pollution and high-water problems," said Lazzari, in reference to the damage cruise ships cause to the

fragile ecosystem and floods that leave Saint Mark's Square underwater. Just a week ago, a massive cruise ship lost control, crashing into the wharf and sparking fresh controversy over the damage the huge vessels cause to the city. "I tell them about the types of boat there used to be, like the mascareta, so-called because it was used by masked 'working women', or the gondolas, which were the taxis of the rich," Lazzari added.

The Doges of Venice, the Republic's rulers until the 18th century, boasted golden, two-deck ships which were used yearly in a "Marriage of the Sea" ceremony, which symbolically wedded Venice to the water. Row Venice pays tribute to the carnival city's heyday by sponsoring parties held on boats in the lagoon on summer nights.

By day, its craft glide peacefully past ducks diving for crabs and disused boatyards transformed into canal-side gardens. "It was a dream come true," says Alice Hendricks, 71, her eyes sparkling as she gets out of the batela after her first lesson. "It was very challenging, it looks so easy when you watch the gondolieri doing it... but after a few tries with it you kind of get a feeling for it. It's a joy," she said. — AFP

How a Brit got Asia to fall for Macau's Portuguese egg tarts

With their flaky pastry casing, creamy custard filling and brulee topping, Macau's Portuguese egg tarts are as much of a part of the Chinese enclave's fabric as its casinos—but their origin is surprisingly British. Across the city it is not uncommon to see long lines of tourists patiently queuing for the sweet treats, a sight that might not seem all that surprising given the former Portuguese colony's most famous dessert is based on Lisbon's equally renowned pastel de nata.

But the current craze for Portuguese-style egg tarts—which has spread across China and parts of Asia in recent years—owes much of its success to a Brit who blundered into the business. The tale began three decades ago when Essex-born industrial pharmacist Andrew Stow opened Lord Stow's bakery at the southern harbor side village of Coloane. "In 1989, recognizing there were no western street-side bakeries... he decided to do something for the local Portuguese community which was to create a pastel de nata for them," said Eileen Stow, Andrew's sister, who now manages the business.

With no original recipe for pastel de nata to use, Andrew experimented with a heavier British custard filling, based on a family recipe, and Portuguese pastry techniques. The creation initially raised a few eyebrows among Andrew's Portuguese friends in Macau, but the local Chinese community became hooked. Courtesy of the British, Cantonese cuisine already had a version of an egg tart, made with shortcrust pastry and a more jelly-like filling.

"To differentiate it from what they recognized in dim sum, a 'dan tart' (egg tart in Cantonese), they call it a



Chef Dennis del Rosario turning a tray of egg tarts to make sure they cook evenly at Lord Stow's bakery in Macau. — AFP photos

'po tart'... 'Portuguese egg tart', Eileen said. The creamier, flakier, richer versions were a roaring success. "That's how it grew before the days of likes online. It's just word of mouth," added Eileen, who took over the business after her brother's death in 2006. The business now churns out 21,000 handmade egg tarts per day from three bakeries in Macau, and it also boasts two franchises in Japan and Manila.

A string of rivals have cropped up in the last three decades in Hong Kong, Taiwan and Singapore. One of the best-regarded Macau competitors was set up by Andrew's ex-wife Margaret Wong. She sold her recipe to KFC, which now offers Portuguese egg tarts at outlets across China, a move that has introduced Macau's Portuguese-British hybrid to hundreds of millions more hungry mouths — AFP



Eileen Stow (center), who manages the business, posing for a photo in front of freshly baked egg tarts at Lord Stow's bakery in Macau.



A customer (center) leaving Lord Stow's bakery in Macau.



Custard which goes into making egg tarts being stirred at Lord Stow's bakery in Macau.



Customers being served at Lord Stow's bakery in Macau.



Chef Dennis del Rosario preparing to box up cooked egg tarts at Lord Stow's bakery in Macau.



Custard being poured into the pastry molds at Lord Stow's bakery in Macau.