

Wine Windows (Buchette) of Florence



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 COMMENT 1



(If you don't want to read this, scroll down and look at the photos!!!)

In 2014 when I was in Firenze for a month studying Italian, I discovered the existence of some very curious architectural features along the ancient streets of this art- and history-filled city. A little book called *"Secrets of Florence"* alerted me to a number of fascinating points, unseen by most tourists—and locals—in the city which gave birth to Western art as we know it. The revelation which most impressed me referred to a number of little "wine windows" or *"buchette del vino"* scattered about the old part of town. Damn! Turns out I had walked by dozens of these many, many times and had never noticed them.

What is a *buchetta del vino*? Well, during the 1500s Florence experienced a period of economic hardship—remember, it had been the center of commerce and banking for the previous three or four centuries. So many of the local gentry, all of whom owned land, meaning farms and vineyards, outside the city walls, decided to begin selling their wine directly to the consumer in order to supplement their income immediately. Before that time, they had been required to sell through a middleman, like a tavern, much like today's two- or three-tiered sales system in many parts of the world. Eventually they successfully lobbied to have the law changed, and were then able to sell wine directly from their often luxurious palaces. Logically, they would not want to have the hoi polloi, the commoners, dirty, smelly, and possibly inebriated, coming into their homes to purchase wine. To facilitate these sales with the minimum of human contact, the nearly anonymous "wine window" was developed, a kind of "to go" porthole which allowed the seller to simply pass the flask or bottle through the wall of the palazzo directly into the hands of the buyer, with no danger of possible home invasion or contamination by the filthy commoners! The windows ranged in style from simple holes in the wall, to elaborately detailed constructs including features mimicking architectural elements of the palace itself.



Perhaps the most magnificent *buchetta del vino* in Firenze!

Luckily for us, many of these windows are still intact, about 145 in Firenze's historic center by the latest count. And they are scattered everywhere; you can hardly walk more than a hundred yards without passing one. But, likely as not, you will never notice them...until now!



This *buchetta* includes the rules and hours for sales!

When I first learned of the *buchette*, I snapped a few photos, and eventually scouted out a few that were specifically mentioned in *Secrets of Florence*. But then, as my gaze became more attuned to the characteristics of these fascinating idiosyncrasies, I began to see them everywhere, and each time a new window came into view, I captured it on "film". Before long, I had photographed nearly fifty of these things, and slowly (well, slowly within the span of a week!) became obsessed with finding more and more of these historic precursors to the drive-up window! Soon, everyone I walked with through the city's streets had to get used to my constant cry of, "*Ecco! Una altra buchetta!*" ("Wait! There is another window!") The interesting thing was that, when I walked around Florence with my native-born *fiorentine* language teachers, they had no idea of the existence of these windows, nor did they know the history! Amazing! To be surrounded by these things everyday or your life, and have no idea, nor curiosity, about their purpose! A few weeks passed, and by the time I left, I had more than sixty or seventy portraits of the nearly forgotten windows onto this fascinating aspect of Florence's historic past.

Fast forward to April of 2016 when I returned to Florence for another month of Italian study at the *Istituto David* (<https://www.davidschool.com/en>) (a great place to work on your Italian, by the way), filled with the determination to finish my photo essay on the *buchette del vino*. Early in the visit I rented a bicycle which I hoped would enable me to cruise up and down every single street of the historic center, eyes peeled for yet more and more *buchette*! If you've never ridden a bike along cobblestone streets, well, it is not something I recommend, however, the bike was a necessary tool for an efficient combing of the city, and I did indeed find new, obscure windows.

But the real breakthrough occurred when I was made aware of a new organization dedicated to the discovery, documentation and preservation of Florence's historical retail wine legacy. I immediately sent an email to the folks at the *Buchette del Vino Associazione Culturale* and received a quick response from Mary, one of the founding members, an American ex-pat who had lived in Florence for a few decades. She told me she and the other members were impressed with my photo collection, and after I assembled an interactive Google Map locating all the known windows, they invited me to lunch, and then made me an honorary member of the association. The lunch was delightful, held, as it was, in the backroom of a Florence *trattoria* called La Buchetta which is graced with an old, forgotten window from years past in one of their charming dining rooms. It seems the current internal wall was formerly an external street-front wall, tucking that particular window away from public scrutiny for centuries. Anyway, one of the members of the *Associazione*, Matteo, alerted me to a book that had been published some years before by a lover of Florence history. From that minute, locating a copy of "*I Finestrini del Vino*" (The Little Wine Windows) by Massimo Casprini, became my sole focus! Immediately after the lunch, I beelined it straight to the three bookstores Matteo thought would have a copy of the little book, but, to no avail. I become despondent, but soon enough, Matteo got in touch with Sig. Casprini who arranged to have a copy for me to buy at a local shop.



A window in a door!

Once I had Casprini's inventory, complete with photos, in front of me, I was able to compile an agenda of windows missing from my photo collection, and I set out to capture that elusive dozen or so with my camera. In a few days, I thought I had them all, about 125 different windows—at the time, the total number in the list of the *Associazione*. I was ecstatic! But, when I returned home and began to compile and sort my collection, I discovered that I had actually missed three windows, and that I had miscounted, due to unseen duplications in my precious stash. Damn! So I currently have around 120 different windows in my collection. The following photos comprise most, but not all, of my stockpile. In time, I will comb through these, and eliminate duplicates and install the remaining photos. But for now, this should keep you busy. Look at these carefully, and notice the different styles and features, and the creative ways some of these have been repurposed. I will do my best to eventually to caption these and to include the address for each, but I am not happy with WordPress's current system for assembling and captioning a photo gallery. So stay tuned, this is a work in progress, and sometime in 2018, I intend to return to Firenze to finish my work! I have about 25 windows, it seems, that I need to locate! Wish me luck!

Thanks to Matteo Faglia, Diletta Corsini and Mary Christine Forrest of the *Buchette del Vino Associazione Culturale* for their help and guidance in this project. Turns out there are dozens, if not hundreds, of Buchette fans, all of whom, like me, are fascinated by these remnants of a long-gone era of Florentine history, which live on to remind us—along every few hundred feet of sidewalk—of the amazing artfulness and craftiness of Fiorentini from centuries ago. Next time you are in Florence, open these windows for yourself!



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