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Italy's Plague-Era “Wine Windows” Return for Pandemic-Proof Drink Service

By Michelle Baran

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Courtesy of Wine Windows Association/Osteria Delle Brache

Florence restaurant Osteria delle Brache has been serving Aperol spritzes out of a wine window.

History is repeating itself in Florence where wine windows that were used to help prevent contagion during the bubonic plague are being reopened by the region's bars and restaurants for coronavirus-friendly delivery.

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As it turns out, social distancing is not a new concept. In Florence, the coronavirus pandemic has brought back the nearly 400-year-old tradition of socially distanced drink service through wine windows, which were used to help facilitate contagion-free alcohol delivery during the plague.

In the 17th century, central and northern Italy experienced a series of deadly bubonic plague outbreaks that became known as the Italian Plague. To help prevent transmission, wine producers sold their wine through small windows.



Courtesy of Wine Window Association

In Florence, Vivoli is serving its iconic gelato through a wine window, and others are using the windows for their originally intended purpose—vino!

“They passed the flask of wine through the window to the client but did not receive payment directly into their hands. Instead, they passed a metal pallet to the client, who placed the coins on it, and then the seller disinfected them with vinegar before collecting them,” reports [*Buchette del Vino*](#), or the Wine Windows Association, a Florence-based cultural organization devoted to studying and promoting the unique and historic openings.

Back then, in order to reduce the amount of contact, clients could either purchase an entire bottle of wine, or they could fill their own flask by using a metal tube, which was passed through the wine window, according to the association.

Now serving: gelato, coffee, wine, and cocktails

Fast forward to the year 2020, and the wine windows have found renewed purpose amid the coronavirus pandemic. To help prevent the spread of coronavirus, some businesses in Florence started using theirs to offer customers minimum-contact wine, coffee, cocktails, gelato, and takeout food.





Courtesy of Babae

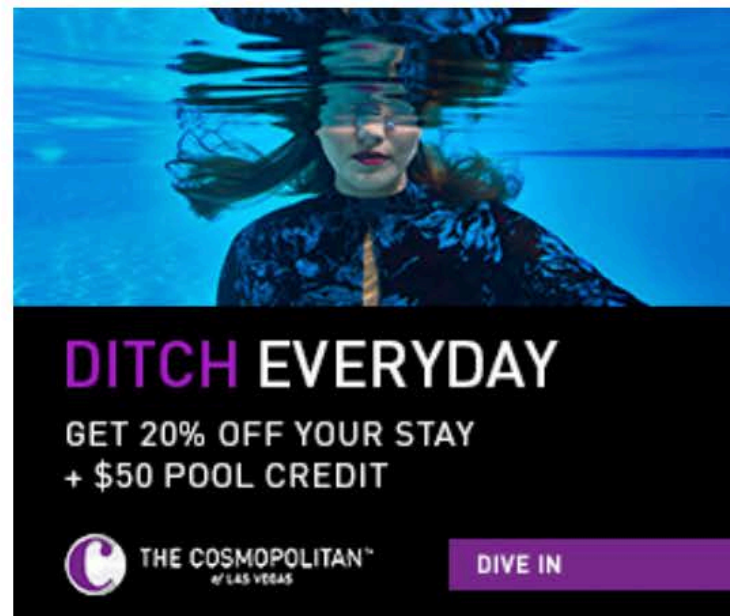
Florence restaurant Babae is using its wine window for coffee, wine, and takeout service.

They include one of the oldest gelato purveyors in Florence, [Vivoli](#), which was founded in 1929. Vivoli sells gelato, as well as *semifreddo* (or semifrozen desserts such as *zuccotto*, a combination of cake and ice cream), and *affogato*. Its wine window is being used to pass the gelato to customers during COVID-19. Tuscan restaurant [Osteria delle Brache](#) in Florence's Piazza Peruzzi has been serving Aperol spritzes and other cocktails out of its wine window, and the chic [Babae](#) on Via Santo Spirito in Florence is using its wine window for everything from coffee and wine to takeout meals. In fact, Babae had been using its wine window since before the pandemic—having offered a *l'ora della Buchetta* or a daily wine window hour (7 p.m. to 8 p.m.) when glasses of wine were served from the opening.


There are more than 100 of the historic wine windows in Florence, according to the Wine Windows Association. They are typically small (just big enough to fit a bottle of wine), arched openings located near the front door of palaces and larger homes often at eye level or below. They normally had a small door that opened inwards, though many have been more permanently closed off.

During nonplague times, wealthy families who had vineyards outside of the city in the Tuscan countryside used the wine windows to sell their wine directly to their city customers. People could knock when they wanted to purchase a bottle of wine, and they could then have their bottle, jug, or glass filled.

Article continues below advertisement

An advertisement for The Cosmopolitan Las Vegas. The top half of the ad shows a woman with long, wavy hair underwater, looking directly at the camera. She is wearing a dark, patterned top. The background is a clear blue water. Below the image, on a black background, the text "DITCH EVERYDAY" is written in large, bold letters, with "DITCH" in pink and "EVERYDAY" in white. Underneath this, in smaller white text, it says "GET 20% OFF YOUR STAY + \$50 POOL CREDIT". At the bottom left is the Cosmopolitan logo, a stylized 'C' inside a circle, followed by the text "THE COSMOPOLITAN™" and "OF LAS VEGAS" in smaller letters. At the bottom right, there is a purple rectangular button with the white text "DIVE IN".

DITCH EVERYDAY
GET 20% OFF YOUR STAY
+ \$50 POOL CREDIT

 THE COSMOPOLITAN™
OF LAS VEGAS

DIVE IN

Want to check out some of the wine windows next time you're in Florence? In addition to the businesses mentioned above, the Wine Windows Association has called out some of the local establishments that have the charming windows on their premises (though they're not in use). They include Cantina del Gelato, Osteria delle Belle Donne, La Buchetta Food & Wine, Le Botteghe di Donatello, Trattoria Osteria da Que' Ganzi, Oibò, Sartoria Alimentare, Il Latini, Finisterrae, Odeon Bistro, and Ristorante Buca Lapi.

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