



Portals into the Past: Italy's Wine Windows Reopen

A Florentine bistro that is using a wine window to serve its tipples, Photo Credit: Judy Witts Francini/Facebook

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The revival of a plague-era necessity in Tuscany is signalling the start of a new trend in pandemic-aware outdoor dining

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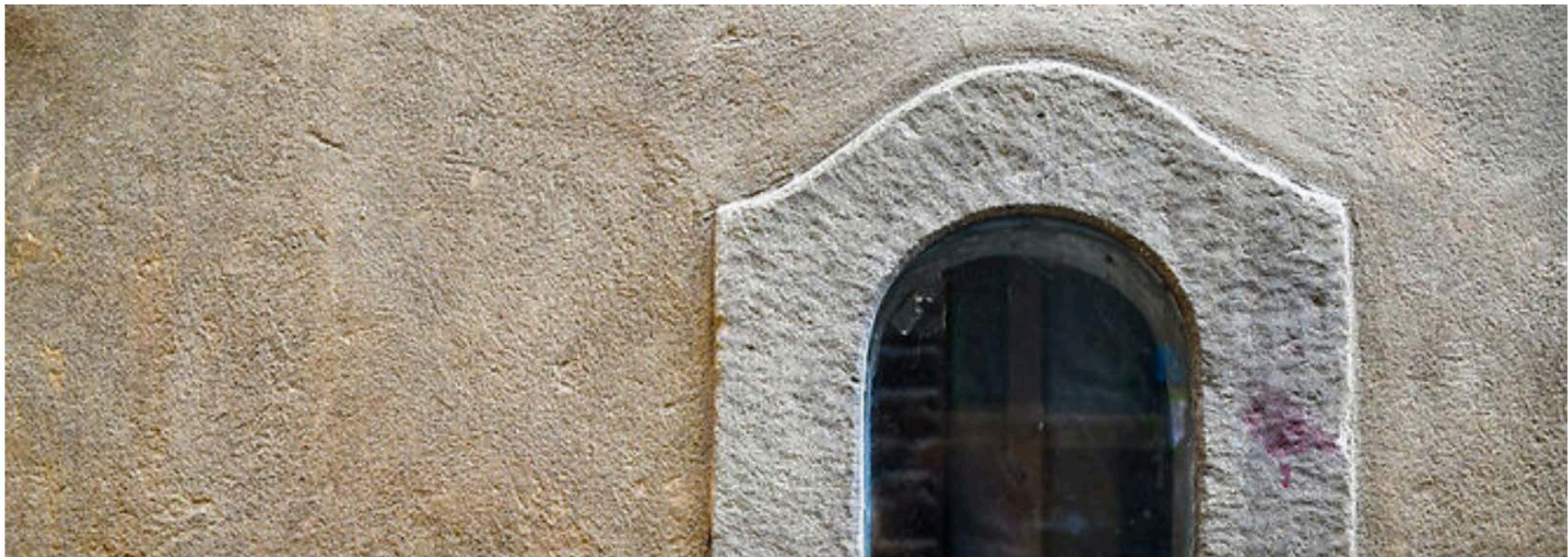
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Circa 1631. Picture an uneasy Florentine, gingerly pacing up to an aperture in the wall beside a grand palazzo gate, placing his straw flask at the sill of a little window. As he counted his coins before depositing them in the metal scoop – coins that were shortly to be disinfected with vinegar by the *cantinière* – could he have known that humanity would be resorting to similar cautions roughly four centuries hence?

Over the past few days, all the buzz has been around Florence's fated and famed wine windows, known more romantically as the *buchette del vino*. The little contraptions, constructed originally in the 16th century for influential winemaking families to evade taxes and sell their wines directly to the public (as sanctioned by the Medici dynasty), have made a hushed reappearance. As **Italy gradually revives** post the scourge of COVID-19, a number of establishments in Florence are enlisting these perennial deliverers of diseased times to serve not just wine, but coffee and ice cream.

Photo Credit: Simona Sirio/Shutterstock.com





A buchetta del vino in Florence, with a plaque that marks its heritage status

Buchette del vino are to Florence what the *nasoni*, or water spouts are to Rome and the *pissabraghe*, to Venice. They can be found at the side of every palazzo entrance in the wine-loving city, alcove-like doppelgangers of the grand adjoining gates themselves.

The little portals had doors on the inside to be knocked on, and were connected directly to the cellars or other storage of the purveying house. The last of the knockers, unfortunately, were pilfered in the recent past and quite a few of the windows defaced by vandals. Several of the *buchette* were damaged by the flood of 1966, bombings during Second World War and plain neglect and vandalism.

Wine windows are endemic to Tuscany, and apart from Florence, which has over 150 of them still surviving, are scattered all over this region that abounds in architectural splendour. While a 2005 book by architect Massimo Casprini terms them *finestrini*, (Italian for 'windows'), the 17th-century scholar Francesco Rondinelli, in his book on the outbreak of the bubonic plague in the 1630s, referred to them as *sportello*, meaning opening. As the second wave of the catastrophic Black Death struck this part of Europe, these devices helped people access their wine while practicing what we have, in the current pandemic, termed social distancing.

Read: [Take a Walk Through History in Tuscany](#)

Encountering these niches in the pretty streets of Florence elicits an awe that is similar to the tender feeling of adoration that we reserve for dainty, tiny, vulnerable objects. Their antique minimalism is also drawing hordes of photographers and suckers for nifty city spaces. The quirky façade of the bistro Babae, located in San

Frediano, is the consummate foil to the austere quality of the adjoining wine window. The year-old establishment had been handing out wine glasses much before the pandemic struck.

The *buchette*, however, hold their own in spite of this smallness, perceived in contrast to the imposing hulk of the entrances, thanks to their thick stone frames and a characteristic medieval bearing. The windows are all of varying sizes, but all big enough to hold the flasks that the Florentines would bring from their homes to refill.



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Firenze, Tuscany, Italy

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Coming to the flasks – well, they have a story of their own. Who hasn't seen these typical straw-covered pot-bellied receptacles that have carried the madly popular Chianti wine for over six centuries now? It wasn't just Chianti, which was enjoyed by the rich and the poor alike, but also Tuscany's other wine, the Vermiglio, that these traditional flasks were said to be perfect for, according to Boccaccio.

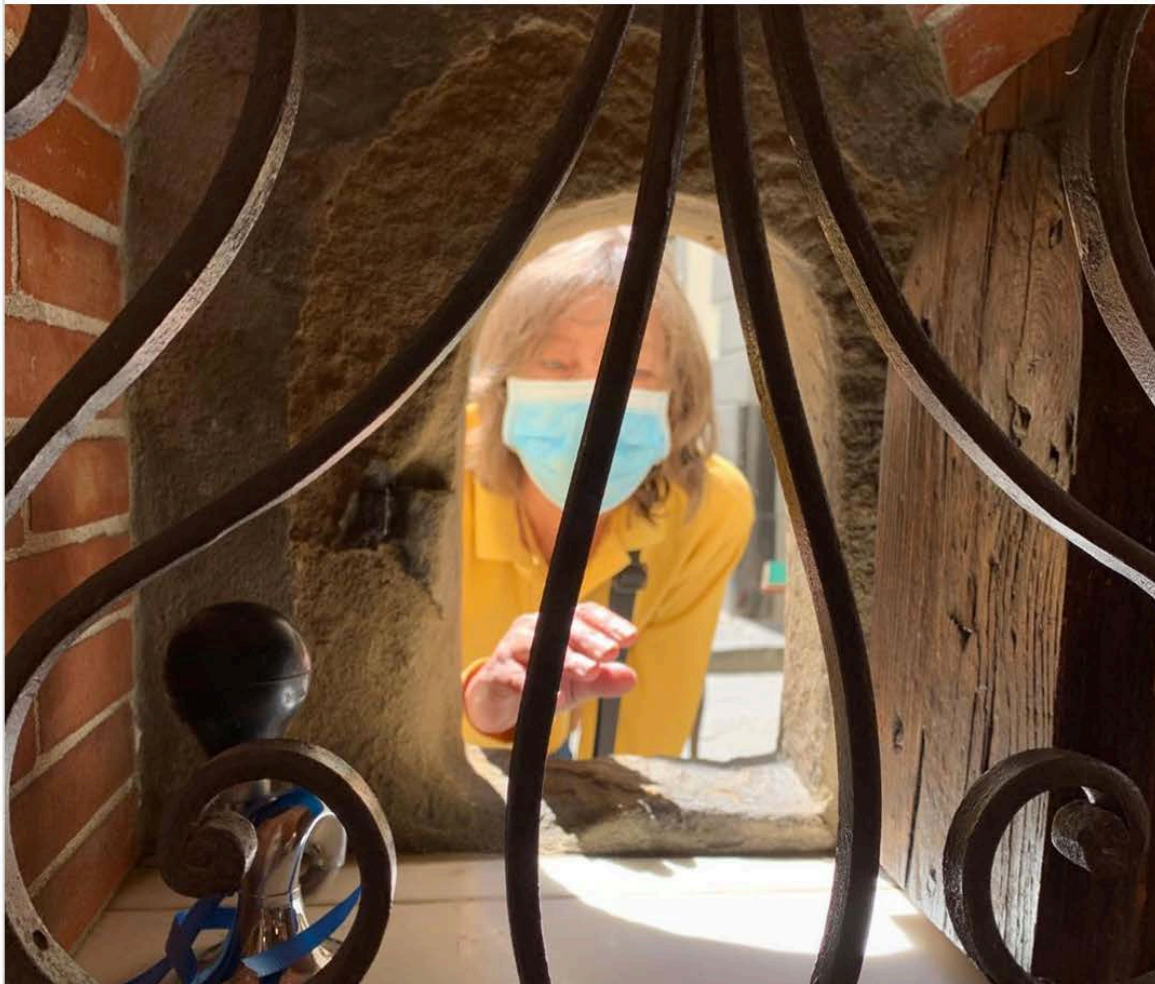
Named *fiasco*, their round base and unique shape helped not only during transportation and space, but also to keep the bottle steady on the sill of a *buchetta del vino*. Their bottom-heavy form can also be seen in a couple of other wine windows outside of Florence, in the Tuscan commune of Barberino, in their flask-shaped niches.



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One may not be able to get a taste of Tuscany's much-cherished wines from all of the windows, but rest assured that the riveting experience of being served creamy gourmet gelato from these historical passages will make up for it. The servers at the popular Vivoli ice cream shop—located quite close to the Duomo—will hand you down coffee as well, while Osteria Delle Brache, close by, is doing refreshing Aperol spritz. More restaurants are expected to follow suit soon and add to the city's **eclectic food scene**.

Read: [Florence's Duomo Introduces Self-Distancing Necklaces for its Visitors](#)

The Associazione **Buchette del Vino**, an organisation formed in 2015 for the preservation and documentation of the medieval relics, has a world of information about these windows, including a map that is constantly updated and which you can use to go on a self-guided tour. This association is also responsible for encouraging the installation of plaques at these places in order to facilitate their identification and conservation.



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