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UNFILTERED

Florence's Renaissance 'Wine Windows' Reveal New Secret

The tiny Tuscan holes in the wall were a safe, socially distant way to serve wine during an epidemic outbreak—400 years ago





When Italy had to close its doors, a window opened. (Courtesy of the Associazione Culturale Buchette del Vino)

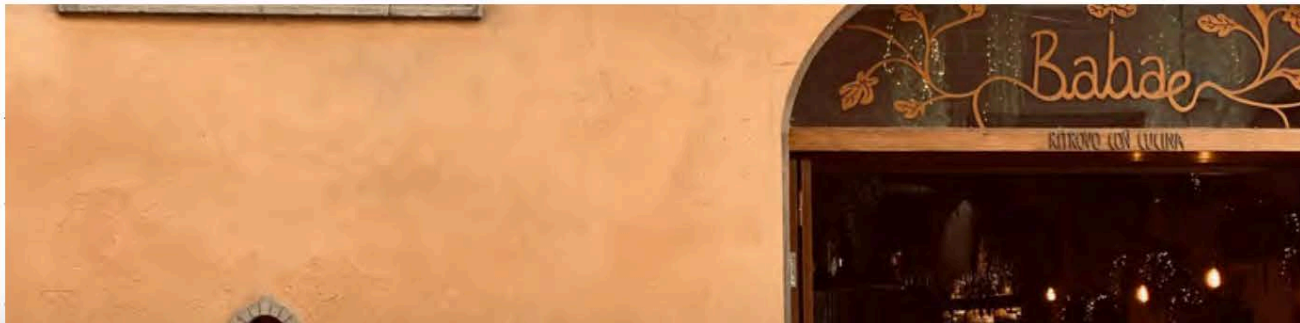
By Ben O'Donnell



■ Aug 14, 2020

When we [last peeked in](#) on the unusual architectural phenomenon of *buchette del vino*—“wine holes”—carved out of Renaissance facades around Tuscany, they were seen by most as a neat old [oddity](#). What practical use would the modern world have for tiny portals through which drinks could be served to customers, with purveyor and recipient unable to see, touch or even breathe on one another?

The *buchette* once provided a convenient, tax-avoidant way for the vineyard-owning aristocrats of 16th-century Florence to literally hand-sell their wine directly from their residences to passersby. Patrons would belly up to the window, knock on a little wooden door, offer an empty bottle and some coins, and receive a fill-up, hassle-free. The Associazione Culturale Buchette del Vino, a group of enthusiasts and preservationists, was established in 2015 to track down and, potentially, spruce up the long-disused windows in Florence, Siena and Pisa. And as it turns out, we're not the first ones to (re)think that these little wine slots are pretty well-suited to beverage service during a disease outbreak.



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What is this, a window for wine?! The size of Babae bistro's wine portal (left) compared to its human portal (Courtesy of Babae)

This spring, while [Italy was locked down and hunkered down](#) during the coronavirus pandemic, a *buchetta* scholar found an early description of the wine windows in a 1634 account of the bubonic plague by writer **Francesco Rondinelli**. During the plague, “wine windows were prized as being anti-contagion devices,” Associazione founding member **Mary Forrest** told Unfiltered via email. “The writer says that the cellarer would sometimes put the coins he was paid into vinegar before touching them.” The winekeepers even served pre-bottled wine, or passed tubes through the *buchette* allowing clients to self-fill, to avoid touching the recycled bottles. “Imagine!” said Forrest. “This is long before germ theory was known.”

As of last year, only one taverna had restored its *buchetta* to service, but others have since taken a fresh look at their windows of opportunity. “Some of them had the brilliant idea of using them to pass beverages, ice cream, coffees, etc., especially right after the lockdown eased up,” reported Forrest. The bistro Babae,

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which was first to throw open its wine window last year, said the novelty has provided a small comfort.

"After the lockdown, we decided to use the *buchetta* to try to give people a bit of happiness and bring them back to normality," a Babae rep emailed us. "That choice helped us to spread the story to more local people, who love the idea so much."

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