

Florence's 400-year-old 'wine windows' undergo renaissance thanks to coronavirus crisis

The windows were last used four centuries ago when Florence was hit by the plague

By Nick Squires ROME

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A wine window in Via Santo Spirito in Florence | CREDIT: Wine Windows Association (Buchette Del Vino)



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A tradition that evolved in Florence centuries ago during an outbreak of the Black Death has been given a new lease of life by the coronavirus crisis.

Bars in the city's historic centre have started reusing "wine windows", tiny holes that were carved into the walls or wooden doors of palazzi owned by noble families.

The 12 inch-high holes – known in Italian as "buchette del vino" – enabled wine to be sold without the risk of buyer and seller catching the plague, which ravaged the city in the early 1630s.

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An empty flask would be placed in the niche and then filled up with wine. The customer would hand over a few coins on a metal palette and the money would immediately be sterilised in vinegar to prevent infection.

The holes, protected by little wooden or iron doors, were manned by servants employed by Florence's aristocratic dynasties.



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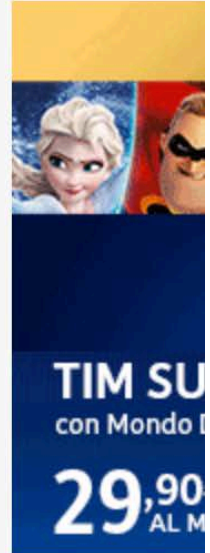


A wine window at Osteria delle Brache in Piazza Peruzzi, Florence | CREDIT: Wine Windows Association (Buchette Del Vino)

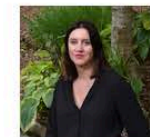
Four hundred years on, the windows are undergoing a renaissance, enabling the safe serving of wine, coffee and even gelato as Italy tries to keep on top of Covid-19 by maintaining social distancing and health protocols.

Over the centuries, some of the holes were sealed up or destroyed outright, particularly during fighting during the Second World War.

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But around 180 remain in Florence, of which 150 are found in the historic centre, and there are another 95 in other towns in Tuscany, including well-known tourist destinations such as Siena, Pisa, Pistoia, San Gimignano, Cortona and Montepulciano.

There is even an organisation dedicated to finding and preserving them – the Wine Windows Cultural Association – which has produced a map showing tourists where they can see the distinctive wall openings.

“It is an old tradition that you don’t find anywhere else in Italy or indeed the world,” Matteo Faglia, the association’s president, told The Telegraph.

“They enabled wine and sometimes food to be served safely during the plague because there was no physical contact. Now some of them have reopened and people are serving wine, cappuccinos and aperitifs.”

Although the holes-in-the-wall became popular during the plague outbreak of the 1630s, they were initially created a century before.

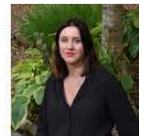
Cosimo I de’ Medici, the then ruler of Florence, decreed in the 1500s that Florence’s nobles could sell their own wine, from their palazzi in the city, without paying taxes.

They were not allowed to set up bars or tavernas, so instead created the little holes in the walls of their grand homes.

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Most of the surviving wine windows are in the historic centre of Florence | CREDIT: Alamy

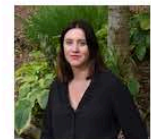
“It was entirely political, a way for Cosimo to keep the nobles on side,” said Mr Faglia. Noble families all had vineyards on patches of land outside the city.

“If you wanted to drink Antinori wine, you would go to the Antinori palazzo, for instance. For Frescobaldi wine, you would go to the Frescobaldi palazzo. These are wine-producing families that are still famous to this day.”

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There were advantages for ordinary Florentines, too -- without any taxes being levied, the wine sold from the holes was cheaper than that found in shops or taverns.

Although many wine windows were blocked up over the centuries, their outlines are still faintly visible on walls and in timber doors.

“They are all a uniform size because they were designed to accommodate the wine flasks that were in use at the time,” said Mr Faglia. “We’re finding more all the time.”

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