

■ BY MOTHER MARTHA

With a few exceptions — in the hilly Langhe region, in Piemonte, and in Faenza, a small city particularly famous for ceramics in Emilia-Romagna — “wine-windows” or *buchette del vino* are unique to Tuscany, especially to Florence.

At first they were cut, waist-high, in the large wooden entrance doors and later in the facades of aristocratic *palazzi*. They are roughly 12 inches tall and 8 inches wide, barely big enough for the streetside customer to pass a single flask to the factotum/cellarman inside, who filled it and passed it back. Nonetheless, for over 400 years these small hatches with a wooden door and an arched or rectangular stone frame have played an essential role in the city’s daily life.

Ever since Stanley Tucci, actor, producer, director and screenwriter, delighted American viewers with his 2021 CNN six-part *Searching for Italy* series, Florence’s *buchette del vino* have enjoyed a new renaissance. Numerous walking tours to discover their history are available, varying in length and price depending on the number of *buchette*, reopened as bars and restaurants, are visited.

I chose a one-hour tour at 10 euros per person — no tasting included — with Milan-born author and editor Matteo Faglia, who in 1972 moved to Florence where he’s worked for the publishers Giunti and DeAgostini. He first lived in a palazzo near the Duomo at Via Borgo degli Albizi 26 with a “wine-window” which so sparked his interest that in 2015, with art historian and author Diletta Corsini, and American ex-pat and long-term resident of Florence Mary Christine Forrest, he founded the *Associazione Buchette del Vino, Via della Pergola 48*, ([www.buchettedelvino.org](http://www.buchettedelvino.org)).

“Today,” he told me, “we have 110 members, 20 of whom are active. Besides giving guided tours, we organize exhibitions and conferences, as well as take photographs, do research in local archives and write books about the *buchette*. We’ve discovered some 400 *buchette* in Tuscany, although in the past there were many more,

## “WINE-WINDOWS” UNIQUE TO TUSCANY, ESPECIALLY FLORENCE



Above, Babae's wine window on Via Santo Spirito in Florence; and the book *Wine Windows in Florence and Tuscany*, by Diletta Corsini and Lucrezia Giordano.

Below, Rondinelli's 1634 treatise on the 1630-33 plague; *Portrait of Cosimo I de' Medici* by Agnolo Bronzino in the Uffizi Museum of Florence



sold wine from home, to escape any danger of catching the plague by touching the flasks, since the purchasers were mainly the poor, installed a tin spout at the hatch, with a funnel attached for pouring the wine, and whoever was buying it outside received it there.”

To avoid infection, as an additional safety measure, the sellers collected the coins paid for the wine using a copper scoop, immediately throwing them in vinegar as a disinfectant. In their book, *Wine Windows in Florence and Tuscany*, available on Amazon for 12,90 euros, Diletta Corsini and Lucrezia Giordano tell us: “In May 2020, during the first COVID-19 lockdown... a number of long-forgotten wine windows found a new lease on life” — including the bistro Babae, Gelateria Vivoli, Ristorante Pietrabbianca, Il Latini and Caffè Odeon. ○

reaching their peak in the 1700s; some 200 in Florence are still visible; we’ve found archival evidence for another 120 in Florence, which are no longer visible; as well as another 120 in the rest of Tuscany. Most of them are defunct, plastered over, bricked up or turned into mailboxes or doorbells.”

The first *buchette* date to the mid-16th century; in 1559, Cosimo I de’ Medici, Grand Duke of Tuscany, hoping to gain popularity with merchants and bankers of Florence who had diversified their investments to include vineyards, allowed the sale of surplus wine directly from city residences, allowing the merchants to avoid middlemen and retail taxes.

The earliest document mentioning a *buchetta*, recently discovered in a local archive, dates to 1596. It details fees paid to a carpenter and blacksmith to install a wine window at the *Palazzo Rucellai*. The latest to be found was on July 30, 2020.

The *buchette* became iconic during the bubonic plague which ravaged Italian cities between 1629 and 1631 and killed at least 300,000 people. Verona was the hardest hit, losing 60% of its population; Milan and Parma 50%, Venice 30%, while Florence, thanks, in part, to the *buchette*’s “social distancing,” lost only 9,000 inhabitants out of 76,000, or 12%.

According to Florentine scholar Francesco Rondinelli in his *Relazione di Contagio stato in Firenze l'anno 1630 e 1633* (1634) “those who