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Travel

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Tuscany's "Wine Windows" Offer a Sip of Its History and Culture

The "buchette" that sold wine without human contact even played a role in social distancing during the plague of 1629 to 1631



Italian Hours

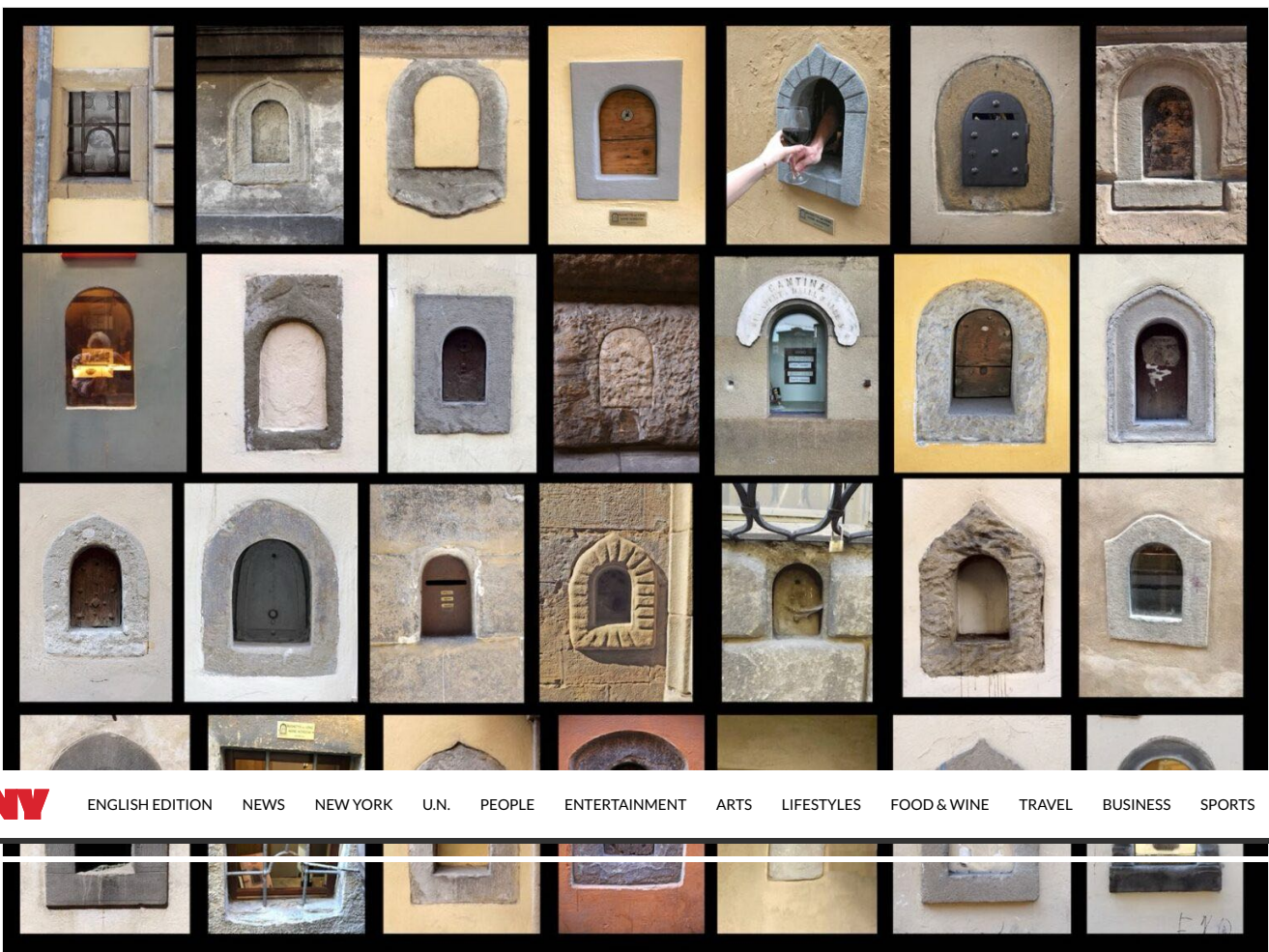
Lucy Gordan



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Although a few examples exist in the Langhe 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. Cut waist-high in the facades of aristocratic *palazzi*, they’re 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—from the Renaissance until the last testimonial in 1958—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 they were featured in Stanley Tucci’s 2021 CNN six-part *Searching for Italy* series, Florence’s *buchette del vino* have enjoyed a new renaissance. If you click on their internet entry, you’ll find numerous walking tours to discover their history. These vary in length (from 1 to 2 hours) and in price depending on how many pit stops they make at the some 15 *buchette* that have reopened as bars or restaurants.



The wine windows of Florence.

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Instead, I chose a one-hour tour at 10 euros per person and no tasting included with Milan-born author and editor Matteo Faglia, who moved to Florence in 1972 and has worked for the publishers Giunti and DeAgostini. He first lived in a *palazzo* near the Duomo on Via Borgo degli Albizi 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, tel. 011-055-0503936, www.buchettedelvino.org, info@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 do research in local archives and write books about the *buchette*. We've discovered some 400 *buchette* in Tuscany, although in the past we know there were many more; 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, mainly in the cities of Lucca, Montepulciano, Pisa, San Gimignano, and Siena. In Florence the *buchette* are concentrated in the city center and in the Oltrarno, across the Arno, in the San Frediano neighborhood."



Wine window with knocker on Via della Greve in Florence

The first *buchette* date to the mid-16th century, for in 1559, to gain popularity with the merchants and bankers of Florence who'd diversified their investments to include vineyards, Cosimo I de' Medici, Grand Duke of Tuscany, allowed them to sell their surplus wine directly from their city residences. Thus, they avoided middlemen and retail taxes.

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 to the *buchette*'s social distancing, lost 9,000 inhabitants out of 76,000, or 12%.

According to Florentine scholar and academic Francesco Rondinelli in his *Relazione di Contagio stato in Firenze l'anno 1630 e 1633 (1634)*, "those who 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*, purchasable 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": Bistrot Babae, Gelateria Vivoli, Ristorante Pietrabbianca, Il Latini, C... Pucci, and Osteria delle Belle Donne, joined later by Fiaschetteria Fantappiè, Osteria Sa... Duomo, and Caffè Odeon.



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Italian Hours

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