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Centuries-Old 'Wine Windows' Open for Business in Florence

A low-risk alternative to curbside pickup, the portals may have helped fight an outbreak of bubonic plague in the 1630s



A "wine window" in Florence (Nico Tondini / REDA&CO / Universal Images Group via Getty Images)

By [Nora McGreevy](#)
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As institutions around the world devise new ways of staying safe during the COVID-19 pandemic, restaurants in Florence, Italy, are making creative use of an architectural anomaly: small “wine windows” embedded in the sides of centuries-old buildings.

Though no official list exists, the Wine Window Association of Florence [has counted](#) more than 150 *buchette del vino*, or wine windows, scattered across the northern Italian city. As the organization’s president, Matteo Faglia, tells *Business Insider*’s Phoebe Hunt, the unique portals were introduced to the Tuscany region as a way for sellers to sell surplus wine to working-class buyers. Often decorated with small wooden doors, the openings are just big enough to stick one’s arm through with a glass of wine in hand.

Now, as Italy [slowly reopens its economy](#), some businesses are reviving the historical tradition. (Faglia tells *Food & Wine*’s Mike Pomranz that four Florentine restaurants currently offer a wine-window delivery option, versus just one prior to the pandemic.) And in 2020, wine isn’t the only item on offer: At certain locations, gelato, cappuccinos and [Aperol spritzes](#) are also on the menu.



Buchette del Vino

Associazione



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As Lisa Harvey reported for *Atlas Obscura* in 2019, Florentine wine windows date back to 1559, when Grand Duke of Tuscany [Cosimo I de’ Medici](#) decreed that people could sell wine directly out of their homes. This meant that wealthy families with wine cellars could dodge taxes and sell directly to consumers.

“People could knock on the little wooden shutters and have their bottles filled direct from the Antinori, Frescobaldi and Ricasoli families, who still produce some of Italy’s best-known wine today,” Faglia tells *Business Insider*. But over time, he adds, the windows “gradually became defunct, and many wooden ones were permanently lost in the floods of 1966.”

Interestingly, wine windows may have played a role in preventing the spread of bubonic plague, association co-founder Diletta Corsini told *la Repubblica*’s Carmela Adinolfi in May. The disease, also known as the “[Black Death](#),” afflicted [European countries for centuries](#), killing millions.

In the early 1630s, an outbreak of the plague [swept through Florence](#) and northern Italy. Florentine scholar Francesco Rondinelli recorded the events in a book, *Relazione del Contagio Stato in Firenze l’anno 1630 e 1633*, published in 1634. Corsini identifies a section in which Rondinelli describes wine sellers using holes in the wall—which he calls *sportello*, the generic word for aperture or opening—to avoid contact with customers. The chronicle also mentions sellers wiping down [coins](#) with vinegar to prevent the spread of disease.



Vivoli Gelateria
circa 5 mesi fa



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As Corsini explains in a [blog post](#), Rondinelli's entry may be one of the earliest records of wine windows' use in Florence. The passage also offers evidence that the openings were previously employed for a similar purpose—namely, to counter the spread of disease.

Writing for [History.com](#) in April, Dave Roos noted that plague outbreaks were common in Italian cities during the early 17th century. Some Italian cities responded to the 1630 plague by adopting serious public health measures, including closing off the city gates and creating large plague hospitals outside of city limits.

Though Florence's wine windows have protected status, vandalism remains an issue. Moving forward, Faglia tells *Business Insider*, "We want to put a plaque by all the wine windows, as people tend to respect them more when they understand what they are and their history."

About Nora McGreevy

Nora McGreevy is a freelance journalist based in Chicago. Her work has appeared in *Wired*, *Washingtonian*, the *Boston Globe*, *South Bend Tribune*, the *New York Times* and more. She can be reached through her website, .

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