

Renaissance-era “Wine Windows” Revived in Florence for Social Distancers

Aug 13, 2020 Steve Palace



Wine windows

Historic "wine windows" are providing much needed – and safe – refreshment for the citizens of Florence. A little stone window from which a hand emerges clutching a glass of wine may look surreal, yet has proved a godsend for social distancers.

Described as an "architectural anomaly" by Smithsonian Magazine, they were first mentioned in print in the 17th century. The Insider calls them "a much-overlooked part of Florentine architecture." Now with social distancing initiatives in place, the tradition is back in style. "Just one wine window was active before Covid-19" Matteo Faglia, President of the Wine Window Association comments to Food and Wine. "There are four at the moment."

How did these alcohol dispensing holes – or to use an authentic name, "buchette del vinos" – in the wall come to be added to the city's cultural landscape? The answer is simple – wine windows were a great big tax dodge.

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Florence, Italy

In the 15th century when Cosimo I de' Medici (Grand Duke of Tuscany) decided wine selling was something you could do at home, the higher ups opened up apertures in their palaces to effectively offload surplus wine down the necks of the working

class. By doing this they avoided tax and pocketed all the proceeds, having sterilized them with vinegar first.



Wine window in Florence, Italy

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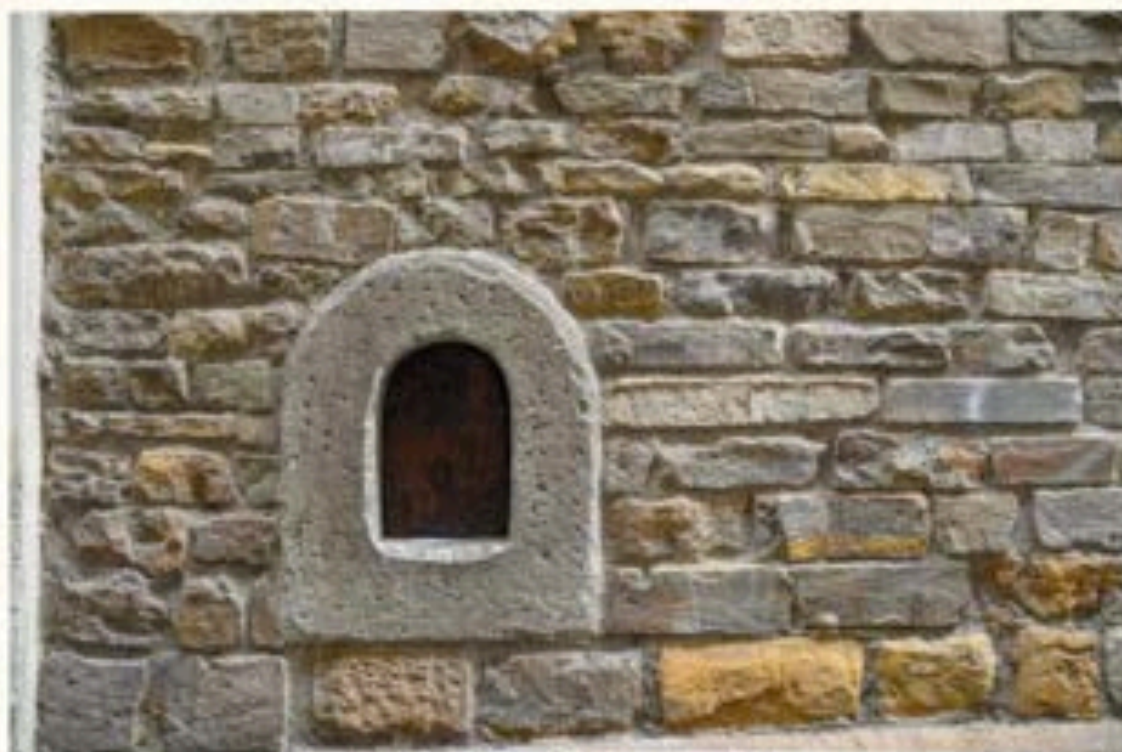
That sounds extreme, but the hygienic move highlights surprising attitudes toward the spread of disease hundreds of years ago. Back then it was bubonic plague! Writing for the "Buchette del Vino" blog, Diletta Corsini refers to a 1634 tome by academic and scholar Francesco Rondinelli. Rondinelli writes about "sportello", meaning an opening. Corsini believes the wine windows acted as "useful anticontagion devices".





Wine window in Florence

Great care was taken, not only during sales but afterwards. The blog notes that people behind the windows "attempted to avoid touching the wine flasks which were brought back... Either the client purchased wine which was already bottled, or the client was allowed to fill his or her flask directly by using a metal tube which was passed through the wine window, and was connected to the demijohn on the inside of the palace."



Wine window in Florence, Italy

A demijohn is a narrow-necked container that holds gallons of liquid. Corsini adds: "So, the wine merchant either filled new flasks for direct purchase or placed the demijohn in a slightly raised position so that the wine would flow down the small metal pipe into the client's bottle." Minimum contact, maximum safety.



How the wine windows work. Image from [Buchette del Vino Facebook page](#)

Today's wine windows are catalogued by Matteo Faglia's Association, who've counted over 150 to date. The easily-missed historic features are thought to be unique to the Tuscany region. Not that the centuries have been kind to them. Some have been covered over, or removed. Many have been lost, particularly wooden examples that suffered during floods in 1966.

Changing laws over wine sales in the 20th century also watered down the legless legacy of buchette del vino.



And despite Florence's reputation for beauty, vandals lurk to deface things just like everywhere else. Protected status for wine windows is in place, though Faglia is putting up plaques to further safeguard their future. Quoted by The Insider, he remarks "people tend to respect them more when they understand what they are and their history".

Related Article: [The oldest bottle of wine in the world remains unopened since the 4th Century](#)

A ray of light exists in the way modern eateries have embraced the wine window. Not always for the intended purpose either. Those seeking refreshment of a non-boozy variety are catered for by the Vivoli ice cream parlor (found at Via dell'Isola delle Stinche), where coffee and gelato are handed to customers before they put the yummy treats down their own hatch.

No good things come from pandemics, but the revival of the wine window has brightened Florence's spirits... spirits being the operative word.

Steve is a writer and comedian from the UK. He's a contributor to both The Vintage News and The Hollywood News and has created content for many other websites. His short fiction has been published by Obverse Books.