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Then and Now: Wine windows

by Grant Addison, Deputy Editor - Magazine | | August 13, 2020 11:00 PM



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Across the globe, the coronavirus and accompanying lockdowns have forced businesses to adapt in order to keep their doors open. And some resourceful business owners in Italy have instead looked to the past.

As [reported](#) by the *New York Post* earlier this month, medieval “wine windows” are reopening across Tuscany, “reviving [an] Italian plague tradition.” The “wine windows,” or buchette del vino, are small apertures, around a foot tall and 8 inches wide, built into the walls of shops, businesses, and homes that once belonged to Renaissance gentry, who would use them to sell wine. According to the [Bucchette](#)

[del Vino Associazione Culturale](#) (Wine Window Association), current-day Florentines have begun to do the same, “dispens[ing] glasses of wine, cups of coffee, drinks, sandwiches and ice cream — all germ-free, contactless!”

And while it’s true that the *buchette del vino* were used during a second bout of bubonic plague, several hundred years after the major outbreak of the Black Death known as the Italian Plague of 1629-1631, the original motivation behind them was profit, not contamination mitigation. As Lisa Harvey [pointed out](#) last year in *Atlas Obscura*, wealthy Florentine families sold wine from their palaces to get around distribution fees and taxes. In a sop to landowning local nobles, on Feb. 28, 1599, Cosimo I de’ Medici, the Grand Duke of Tuscany, issued a declaration allowing wealthy families to sell the wine they produced directly from their residences, rather than via merchants, taverns, and inns.

“Many wealthier Florentines (including the Medici) not only had homes inside the city walls, but also vineyards in the countryside,” she explained. The windows developed as a way for such families to utilize the direct-to-buyer edict, and thus skip out on the accompanying taxes, without having to open their homes to the *hoi polloi*. Instead, passersby could simply knock on the door of the *buchette del vino*, where “a well-respected, well-paid servant, called a *cantiniere* and trained in properly preserving wine, stood on the other side. The *cantiniere* would open the little door, take the customer’s empty straw-bottomed flask and their payment, refill the bottle down in the *cantina* (wine cellar), and hand it back out to the customer on the street.”

According to [writings](#) of contemporary scholar Francesco Rondinelli (1589-1665), additional sanitation measures were instituted during the plague years, including prohibiting the exchange of empty flasks and vinegar disinfection of all collected coins. Yet, as Robbin Gheesling noted for *The Florentine* magazine, it wasn’t until Grand Duke Cosimo III’s Bando Granducale of Oct. 2, 1749 (an official notice about Tuscan wines), “that the concept of *botteghe a sportello* — shop windows set up in

homes — was solidified, significantly weakening the power of the wine guild.”

An [interactive map](#) for the Wine Window Association currently lists 149 active and inactive wine windows inside Florence alone, with yet more located throughout the surrounding countryside.