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Born-again *Chianti*



ENOTECA REVIVAL

wine bars offer a slice of Florentine life

by Chandi J. Wyant

It's only natural that Italy, the producer and exporter of more wine than any other country in the world, would have a plethora of wine bars offering the fruits of the Italian soil. Indeed, *enoteche* are sprouting like porcini mushrooms in the narrow cobbled streets and lively *piazze* of the country's major metropolitan centers. And where better to chart this revival than in Florence, the Renaissance city famous for the rediscovery of the best in art and culture?

As a frequent visitor to this stunningly beautiful capital of Tuscany, I have long noted the presence of these wonderful little wine bars, but over the last five years their popularity has really soared. To find out what has spurred this rally and to savor more than a few glasses of wine, I set out to explore the city's new *enoteche* and to return to some favorite haunts as well.

At bar after bar, it was evident that while Americans and other tourists are among the patrons, they are far outnumbered by the Florentines who are enthusiastically embracing the neighborhood *enoteca* as a friendly place offering more than just wine for sale. Everyone from the astute aficionado to the casual diner seeking convivial conversation and a good bite to eat is flocking to *enoteche* in each of the city's charming neighborhoods.

In the historic center of Florence with its glorious, tri-color marble cathedral and its designer shops, you'll find the chic wine bar, *Cantinetta da Verazzano*, paneled with sleek mahogany, and the cozy, new *Coquinarius*, which operates non-stop. Crossing the River Arno to the artisans' neighborhoods you'll find wine bars with local flavor, such as the enophile's hangout, *Le Volpi e L'Uva*, and the relaxed *Fuori Porta* wine bar, whose owners claim to have started the city's *enoteca* revival.

Many of these *enoteche* serve snacks and wine into the wee hours. Others serve full meals throughout the day without closing between the lunch and dinner hours, a relatively new concept in Florence that is particularly useful for tourists and allows one to seek sustenance on a whim.

By definition, *enoteca*, an ancient word that comes from *oenotria*, or "land of wine," the name the ancient Greeks gave to their Italian colonies, is any place that offers a collection of native wines for its patrons to enjoy. Here, one hopes to benefit from the personal insights



afforded by the generally knowledgeable proprietor, as well as from the comfort and coziness of the environs.

For visitors, the *enoteca* is an ideal place to catch an authentic glimpse of Florentine life. In the afternoon, locals come by for a light lunch, a chat with the owner and a quick glass of Chianti, or they might drop in after work to unwind and trade gossip with their neighbors. Evenings find them stopping by after the theater for a late-night bite or a glass of grappa.

The heritage of social wine drinking in Italy dates back some 4,000 years to the time when the peninsula's occupants gathered and pressed wild grapes. The origins of the *enoteca* concept can be traced to the Middle Ages, but only in the last few hundred years has the wine bar as we know it evolved. In Florence and elsewhere, an enterprising merchant would set up in nothing more than an arched opening in the cobbled street, drawing a motley clientele with the promise of a simple glass of cheap wine and a bit of rustic bread.

According to Kyle Phillips, an American living in Florence and the editor of *Italian Wine Review*, today's *enoteca* is an outgrowth of the old *fiaschetta*, which served simple food and sold wine a *mescita* (by the glass) from a flask that was refilled from a demijohn kept out back.

Phillips notes that, with the exception of a few old-style *fiaschetta*, the modern *enoteca* now serves well-made wine by the glass poured from freshly opened bottles alongside dishes that are at least a step or two up from the *fiaschetta* snacks.

Because Italians don't drink wine without something to sink their teeth into, Florence's *enoteche* serve a variety of Tuscan specialties — from regional cheese, salami and prosciutto with the typical saltless Tuscan bread, to seasonal delights such as arugula salads, porcini mushrooms and delightful truffle-scented dishes. >

Above: Unlike most *enoteche*, *Coquinarius* serves meals and offers wine by the glass at any time of the day or night. **Opposite page, from left:** Founder Andrea Conti and his partners Rocco Ascani and Angelo Carciola, run the off-the-beaten-track *Fuori Porta*, the author's favorite Florentine *enoteca*.

Fuori Porta ALIMENTAZIONE
Caffè
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Above and below: Patrons at *Fuori Porta*, shown here in both outdoor and indoor settings, may select wines by the glass from a thoughtful list composed by owners who are driven by the desire to serve only those bottlings that meet their rigid standards of “qualita.”



A leisurely stop at a well-appointed wine bar can be a wonderful respite from touring the weighty museums of Florence. Besides, taking time out from a busy day to savor good wine, food and conversation is the quintessentially Italian thing to do.

Fuori Porta

Via Monte alle Croci 10

Phone: 055.234.2483; fax: 055.2341.408

Hours: 12:30 to 3 p.m. and 7 p.m. to 12:30 a.m., closed Sunday

The authentic and friendly *Fuori Porta*, considered by some Florentines to be the place where the revival of the city's wine bars began, ranks as my all-time favorite *enoteca*. Its name, which means “outside the door,” refers to its off-the-beaten-track location just beyond the massive, arched *porta* in what is left of the city's venerable, 14th-century walls.

Founded in 1987 by Andrea Conti, a bushy-

haired, bohemian wine enthusiast, *Fuori Porta* boasts an extensive menu of appetizers and delicious, Tuscan-style sandwiches, as well as a wine list that caters to the most sophisticated enophile. The interior décor is rustic and inviting with plenty of wood benches and small tables. Outdoor seating overlooks the quiet neighborhood of San Niccolò framed by quintessential Tuscan hills studded with gnarled, silvery olive trees and the occasional ochre villa.

I arrive by bicycle on a crisp autumn day to chat with the innovative Conti. “It was my desire in starting this *enoteca* to provide quality wine,” he says. “Until the 1980s, most *enoteche* served mediocre wines — the kind of basic wines our parents’ generation put on the table every night — and it cost nothing.” Now, he notes, “The way we drink wine in Tuscany has changed. We used to consume 100 liters of wine a head per year. Now we consume only 50

liters a head per year.” He attributes this marked decrease in consumption to the proliferation of wine bars all over the city. “Ironically, it’s the *qualita*. My generation doesn’t drink as much as the older generation, but we drink better!” he asserts. “We now pay attention not only to the quality of our food, but to which wine goes with what food. It’s the same as putting colors together when you dress!”

Thinking of the Florentine’s fashion-conscious outlook, it’s amusing to realize the aptness of his insight: How could a people who express such concern about their clothes not pay attention to the everyday wines that best complement their foods?

“Tradition is important,” Conti admits, “but the world of wine is changing and we must change with it.”

Fuori Porta's extensive wine list is second only to the city's celebrated Michelin-starred restaurant *Enoteca Pinchiorri*. *Crostini* (small sandwiches) and *crostoni* (larger sandwiches) are house specialties. They are served open-face on grilled Tuscan bread, topped with melted Italian cheese and a variety of accoutrements, including roasted prosciutto, arugula, fresh tomatoes and warm porcini mushroom paste. Salads, pastas and desserts are also available.

Pitti Gola e Cantina

Piazza Pitti 16

Phone/fax: 055.212.704

Hours: 10 a.m. to 11 p.m., closed Monday

The small and lively *Pitti Gola e Cantina* attracts a late-night crowd. Inside, tiny tables are tucked next to the large bar, and outside, patrons enjoy a commanding view of the Palazzo Pitti. This is the newest wine bar of note on the Florentine scene. Previously a wine shop, it was acquired in November 2000 by Giancarlo and Sabina Avuri, a couple with a shared passion for wine and food. They believe that an *enoteca* should expose patrons to current trends and enhance their general wine knowledge.

To that end, the Avuris offer themed tastings with a wine expert (reservations are required). Sabina suggests comparing various wines made from sangiovese to learn how it expresses itself in such Tuscan reds as Chianti Classico, Brunello, Vin Nobile and Morellino.

The proprietors themselves prefer wines that are inviting to drink on their own and go well with

Tuscan foods — including Chianti Classicos from Isole e Olena, Cepparello, Cennatoio and Castello dei Rampolla — instead of the bigger-boned wines that often win top honors in blind tastings.

A stickler for quality, Giancarlo procures the delicacies served at *Pitti Gola e Cantina* from artisanal producers. The *tonno del Chianti* (pork boiled in white wine and packed in oil), for instance, is made by Dario Cecchini, arguably the most famous butcher in Tuscany.

Giancarlo, who grew up in Panzano, a small wine-producing town in the Chianti region, and once made wine himself, is pleased with the revival of the *enoteca*. "After a period in which one heard mostly about beer, young people are returning to wine, and it's women now, too, as much as men, who tend to be quite knowledgeable and eager to learn more."

Enoteca Baldovino

Via San Giuseppe 18

(Piazza S. Croce)

Phone: 055.234.7220

Summer hours: noon to midnight

Winter hours: noon to 4 p.m. and 6 p.m. to midnight,

closed Monday

Seating is limited, reservations recommended

This wine bar, situated near the famous Chiesa di Santa Croce, opened three years ago under the auspices of David Gardner, the owner of *Trattoria Baldovino*, which operates next door. An ebullient Scotsman, Gardner, with the recent purchase of another *trattoria* called *Il Francescano* and the opening of *Beccofino*, a modern, upscale restaurant on the other side of the River Arno, is doing some empire building of his own.

The Florentines doubted that a Scottish restaurateur could achieve success in their city, but Gardner has surprised them.

Speaking at dizzying speed, he recounts with a grin, "I [purchased and] reopened *Trattoria Baldovino* in 1996. I gave it bright colors and hung Modern art on the walls, and I got a real *pizzaio*. I took a look around and noticed that hardly anyone in Florence was making the authentic *pizza Napolitan*. I found my man in southern Italy and brought him up here." Gardner pauses to gulp an espresso and then gushes: "The Florentines talked about us from the beginning because it was the place with the most authentic pizza in town and run by a Scottish man. We got lots of press."

The success of the *trattoria* inspired Gardner to open *Enoteca Baldovino* next door. "The modern taste is for quality wine in smaller amounts. Thank goodness the old *fiaschetteria* with the tumbler of insipid wine is a thing of the past," Gardner exclaims. "That stuff wasn't even good enough for cooking! It ruined the Chianti name, but now, in the past ten years, Chianti has reformed itself." He says the revival of the modern *enoteca* in Florence "has really only taken place in the past three years, but there's been an explosion of them."

With 1,000 labels in stock, *Enoteca Baldovino* has plenty of wines from which to choose, but the house specialty is the Super-Tuscan category. And what are Gardner's favorites? "Angelo Gaja is making a fabulous, high-end Brunello and has a table wine called *Promis* that's absolutely wonderful," he asserts. "And I mustn't forget Sammarco, a gorgeous red made by Castello dei Rampolla."

Enoteca Baldovino's fare is mostly vegetable-based with an eclectic mix of Tuscan and Asian dishes such as couscous and Tandoori chicken; spinach and ricotta lasagna; Indian curry; spicy red and yellow pepper soup; and seasonal salads. It also offers a delectable array of *crostini* and *crostoni*, such as Scamorza with grilled eggplant or with radicchio, and Gorgonzola with Tuscan honey or with prosciutto and arugula.

Le Volpi e L'Uva

Piazza dei Rossi, 1

Phone: 055.239.8132

Hours: 10 a.m. to 8 p.m., closed Sunday

The wine lovers who run *Le Volpi e L'Uva* (the foxes and the grape) give themselves playful names: Giancarlo Cantini is the sly old fox; Emilio Monecchi, the poetic fox; and Riccardo Comparini, the famished fox. Their mission statement is "Premium wines and foods at civilized prices." They say their interest in wine never wanes "because the wine world is fascinating, complex and multifaceted," a fact demonstrated by an experience Cantini had while dining in a Paris restaurant. Upon finishing a bottle of wine, he ordered another of the same kind and the sommelier changed his glass. "Why change glasses when it's the same wine?," Cantini asked. >

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The partners at *Fuori Porta* have stockpiled an extensive inventory that places their wine list second only to Florence's acclaimed Michelin-starred restaurant *Enoteca Pinchiorri*.

buying WINE

For travelers who would like to buy their wine at the source, there are three retail shops of note located in Florence's historic center that both sell and, more important, ship their products:

Enoteca Alessi

Via delle Oche 27

Phone: 055.21.49.66; fax: 055.239.69.87

Enoteca Alessi is the biggest wine shop in Florence. Its main floor is filled with lavish displays of Tuscan products, such as olive oil and biscotti, and the cellar below is an impressive cantina where more than 1,000 wines are coddled in a temperature- and humidity-controlled environment. Proprietor Giorgio Alessi has organized the

cantina by Italian wine region — Toscana, Piemonte and so forth — and even has selections dating from as far back as 1900. A Brunello Riserva by Biondi Santi from that vintage is priced at \$2,725. He calls his wine shop “la piu’ attrezzata” (the most equipped). After inspecting an incredible array of Italy’s best Brunellos, Chiantis and Barolos, one is hard-pressed not to agree with him. Among his specialty wines, I spied a bottle of Muffato della Sala — my favorite dessert wine by Antinori. My mouth watered just looking at the label. In retrospect, I should have brought a bottle home, but if I can’t find it stateside, I need only call and order it from *Enoteca Alessi*.

La Galleria del Chianti

Via del Corso 41

Phone/fax: 055.291.440

An attractive and charming little venture, this wine store stocks 400 different Italian bottles. It also sells *produzione artigianale* (produced by artisans, usually from traditional, organic methods): Tuscan specialties such as *cantucci di Prato*, honey, jam and pasta sauces. In addition, *La Galleria del Chianti* holds comparative tastings of such comestibles as the famous balsamic vinegar from Modena, allowing prospective buyers to judge the subtle differences between those aged for five years and those aged more than 30.

L'Antica Cantina del Chianti

Piazza Duomo 23

Phone / fax: 055.28.24.89

This wine shop is located in a historic building that was used in the Renaissance era as the storehouse for the Wool Guild, Florence’s most important craft association. (The building still bears the symbol of a sheep carved in stone.)

In addition to the expected Tuscan bottlings, there are specialty offerings such as limoncello, grappa and vin santo, along with a delectable lineup of Tuscan products: wild boar sausage, pecorino cheeses, conserved fruits, fresh and dried porcini mushrooms, pungent and rare black and white truffles, *cantucci*, *panforte* and *baci*. — *Chandi J. Wyant*

The reply was: "No two bottles are the same." Cantini was hooked.

Just a stone's throw from the Ponte Vecchio, *Le Volpi e L'Uva* is frequented much more by locals than by tourists. Its intriguing list of wines features about 20 by the glass plus a broad selection of ever-changing bottlings that the three partners travel all over Italy to secure. It is these *vini strani* (rare and unusual wines) that make this *enoteca* a particular delight for the savvy wine drinker.

Light snacks are offered, too, including unusual cheeses from both Italy and France and hot dishes such as *schiazzatine* (flat, crusty yeast bread in small round pieces) with porcini mushrooms and truffles. Sit at the bar inside and chat with the friendly "foxes" or enjoy the tables outside in the little *piazza* under the Tuscan sun. This is a real haven for serious enophiles.

Cantinetta da Verrazzano

Via dei Tavolini 18

Phone: 055.268.590

Hours: 8 a.m. to 9 p.m., closed Sunday

Comparatively new (1997), the two-room *Cantinetta da Verrazzano* is an outgrowth of Castello di Verrazzano, a winery south of Florence in the Chianti region. Patrons enter through the *caffè* and pastry section where coffee by Piansa, the city's leading coffee roaster, and freshly baked focaccia from the wood-burning oven is served. Beyond the *caffè* is the stunning wine bar, crafted from lustrous dark woods. Gleaming mirrors and floor-to-ceiling shelves of wine bottles complete the elegant picture.

Cantinetta da Verrazzano has become quite popular with Florentines and discerning foreigners alike, most of whom choose to mingle at the small, polished tables. The wines are only from Castello di Verrazzano, and the *salumi* are only from Falorni, one of Tuscany's most renowned butcher shops (located in the main *piazza* of Greve in Chianti).

Coquinarius

Via delle Oche 15

Phone: 055.23.02.153

Hours: 9 a.m. to midnight, closed Sunday

Reservations recommended for standard dining hours

This inviting little establishment, with its wood tables and stone walls, opened its doors two years ago. Owner Susan Rushton, a South African who has lived in Italy for 30 years, founded *Coquinarius*, which means food and drink in Latin, because she wanted to start "something different," she explains. "*Coquinarius* deviates from the traditional serving hours for lunch and dinner. It is one of the few places that will serve a meal at any time, and you can taste by the glass any time."

Rushton offers wines from all the Italian regions as well as some bottles from Australia and California. "Italians like to taste these foreign ones, too," she notes. "It's part of the movement we have seen lately — to appreciate and to know more about quality wines."



The stylish *Enoteca Baldovino* stocks 1,000 labels and specializes in the Super-Tuscan category.

Coquinarius is not only unusual for serving food throughout the day and evening but also for the range of dishes it offers.

"Because Tuscan cuisine tends to be rather heavy, especially for the summer months, our light meals, including our variety of salads and vegetable dishes, are our strong point," Rushton says.

The *raviolini* (little handmade pasta in the shape of miniature drawstring purses) filled with pecorino fresco and small, crisp pieces of pear, complemented by a light butter and pepper sauce, are especially good.

In this casual atmosphere with its handful of tables, a solo traveler can feel comfortable, enjoying the cozy candlelight that flickers on the timeworn brick arches and savoring every last morsel of food and drop of wine.

I Fratellini

Via dei Cimatori 38

Phone: 055.2396.096

Hours: 8 a.m. to 8:30 p.m., closed Sunday

Anyone who appreciates a true "hole in the wall" or wants to experience an authentic, old-style Tuscan wine bar should not overlook *I Fratellini*. This well-

known bar has been quenching the thirst of the Florentine working class since 1875, and although the *vino* is simple, the hearty sandwiches are delicious.

Just off the Via Calzaiuoli, down which a great river of tourists flows, this gem is easily spotted during the lunch hour due to the crowd of locals gathered at its "bar."

There are no tables; customers stand in the street to eat and place tumblers of wine on the tiny shelves along the wall. The sandwiches are served on simple crusty rolls with an array of wonderful ingredients, such as sun-dried tomatoes and pecorino; pesto spreads made with arugula or basil; and wild boar sausage and *lardo di collonata* (salt-cured pork fat from the pig's back).

Sometimes, nothing makes me feel more at home in Florence than the unspoken camaraderie I sense while mingling with the Florentines in the Via dei Cimatori, contentedly munching *I Fratellini* sandwiches and quaffing a glass of simple Chianti. ☞

Chandi J. Wyant is a freelance writer based in Colorado who frequently travels to Italy.