

# 36 Hours in Florence, Italy

By Ingrid K. Williams

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Florence was thrust into the spotlight in February when its mayor, the dynamic 39-year-old Matteo Renzi, became Italy's youngest prime minister. But the Tuscan capital he left behind appears to be flourishing. Once-neglected landmarks have been repurposed as contemporary cultural spaces. This spring, the historic Mercato Centrale market hall unveiled a new floor filled with stalls from the region's top food artisans, and an ultramodern new opera house began hosting regular performances during the annual Maggio Musicale Fiorentino festival. Meanwhile, a spate of recent openings — bars, boutiques and restaurants squirreled away from the tourist throngs — suggests that the city's upward trajectory isn't changing course anytime soon.

## FRIDAY

### 1. A Garden With a View | 3 p.m.

To gaze upon the Florentine skyline — the terra-cotta rooftops and graceful dome of the Duomo — without battling crowds, hike up to the Forte di Belvedere, an imposing fortification designed by Bernardo Buontalenti in the 16th century. After a five-year closure, the fort reopened in 2013 to showcase daring sculptures from the Chinese artist Zhang Huan. This year, the grassy ramparts and panoramic views are again accessible during an exhibition of stark, nature-inspired works by the Italian conceptual artist Giuseppe Penone (through Oct. 5; admission, 5 euros, or \$6.30 at \$1.27 to the euro). The exhibition also spills into the neighboring Giardino di Boboli, the sprawling garden behind Palazzo Pitti that last year, together with a dozen Medici villas, earned Unesco World Heritage status (admission, 10 euros).



Giardino di Boboli. Alexandra Garcia/The New York Times

### 2. Aperitivo Ora | 6 p.m.

In the shadow of Palazzo Pitti, pause for a glass of sangiovese at Enoteca Pitti Gola e Cantina, an elegant little wine bar with a handful of marble-topped tables and tall bookshelves lined with bottles of the high-end, small-production variety. On warm evenings, swirl and sip at a seat on the sidewalk outside. Or spend an aperitivo hour down the street at Le Volpi e l'Uva, another neighborhood enoteca with al fresco tables on a small cobblestone square and a by-the-glass list with over 30 well-chosen wines from across Italy.

### 3. Chic Cucina | 8:30 p.m.

In a city where a few dusty Chianti bottles typify restaurant décor, find respite at Cucina Torcicoda, a stylish spot that opened near Piazza Santa Croce last October. Inside, five distinct establishments, including a gelateria, pizzeria and food shop, are housed in an interconnected maze of rooms. But follow the lead of fashionable Florentines who flock to the ristorante with its plush banquettes and white tablecloths to feast on bottarga-and-prawn spaghetti (16 euros) and suckling pig confit (22 euros) under elegantly domed ceilings. Forgo dessert in favor of a postprandial passeggiata to Gelateria dei Neri, an artisanal shop nearby that scoops decadently creamy caramel and pistachio gelato.

### 4. Prison Break | 11 p.m.



Caffè Letterario.  
Alexandra Garcia/The New York Times

The somber stone walls of Le Murate, a former prison built in the 15th century, belie its current incarnation as a welcoming hub of contemporary culture. At the heart of this recently renovated complex is Caffè Letterario, an all-day cafe and events space that since opening in 2011 has hosted lectures by respected authors, poetry readings, dramatic performances, debates and film screenings. Music fans of all ages turn up for free concerts on weekends, but if the band's not your style, order a negroni and head outside to mingle with the crowd gathered beneath the stars in the ancient courtyard.

## **SATURDAY**

### **5. Colazione of Champions | 9 a.m.**

Those who lament that there are no secret gems left in Florence have not hopped on a bus to Pasticceria Giorgio, a pastry shop in the residential Soffiano neighborhood west of the city center. Locals have managed to keep this place to themselves, and they endure long lines for the freshly baked pastries, glazed brioche and custard-filled millefoglie. Join the local crowd for a morning cappuccino and, when available, a slice of schiacciata alla fiorentina, an airy, orange-flavored cake that is a seasonal specialty.

### **6. Remember the 1900s? | 11 a.m.**

Instead of braving lines to view Renaissance masterpieces, visit a museum that focuses on Italian art of a more recent vintage. The Museo Novecento (8.50 euros) opened in June in a renovated complex that faces the newly beautiful — after a recent restoration — Piazza Santa Maria Novella. Inside, the museum's immersive exhibitions are dedicated to 20th-century works, like a painting by Emilio Vedova that is viewed while you are “showered” in the music of the composer Luigi Nono. The building's Renaissance-era loggia now houses large-scale contemporary works, and a roof terrace serves as a screening room showing scenes of Florence from films shot between 1916 and 1999.

### **7. Pick a Panino | 1 p.m.**

If the quality of a panino is inversely related to the size of the shop, then Semel serves some of the best sandwiches in town. Seek out the shoebox-size storefront beside the Sant'Ambrogio market and order, say, a panino with herring, pecorino and tomatoes. Six creative choices change daily. Still hungry? Head to the Pollini street cart around the corner for a stellar rendition of the panino al lampredotto, the classic Florentine sandwich made from the fourth stomach of the cow, chopped and topped with salsa verde.

### **8. Spada Shops | 3:30 p.m.**

The small stores around Via della Spada lure shoppers away from the luxury labels on Via de' Tornabuoni. The diminutive MIO Store brims with fun finds like wooden iPhone speakers and street signs adorned with clever cartoons by Clet, a well-known local artist. A few doors down, the tiny Antica Officina del Farmacista Dr. Vranjes is filled with jewel-like bottles of home fragrance scented with tuberose and pomegranate. And down a nearby alley, the small showroom of Il Micio is the place to splurge on men's shoes made to measure by Fukaya Hidetaka, a Japanese-born, Tuscan-trained artisan whose bespoke balmorals and monk-straps are handcrafted in a workshop across the street.



Antica Officina del Farmacista Dr. Vranjes. Alexandra Garcia/The New York Times

### **9. Balanced Meal | 8 p.m.**

Cross the river to the Oltrarno, the city's bohemian neighborhood, for dinner at Il Santo Bevitore, a restaurant that strikes a balance between traditional and modern, casual and formal. The rustic interior — wooden tables, vaulted ceilings — is warmed with candlelight, and the wine list is packed with excellent Tuscan reds. And then there's the food: house-made tortellini in Parmigiano crema, beef tartare with crisp vegetables, and tasting platters of prosciutto, salami and raw-milk pecorino cheese. Dinner for two, about 75 euros.

### **10. Beer Buzz | 10:30 p.m.**

Despite the buzz about Italian craft beer, Florence has surprisingly few places to drink it. One cozy spot is Archea Brewery, a pub that opened in the Oltrarno in 2012. Ten taps pour Archea's own artisanal beers as well as microbrews from a changing lineup of producers like Piedmont-based LoverBeer. The friendly staff is knowledgeable and generous with samples.

## **SUNDAY**

### **11. Tower Power | 10 a.m.**

Take a Sunday stroll along the south side of the Arno to the attractive San Niccolò neighborhood to admire the Torre di San Niccolò, a 14th-century tower that opened to the public in 2011 after major renovations. (Tours are offered only in the evening in summer months.)

### **12. Lunch Counter | Noon**

Delight in simple pleasures at Zeb Gastronomia, an informal restaurant nearby that sprouted inside a former deli. The stylish whitewashed space fills with diners sitting elbow to elbow at counters for satisfying soups, stews and hearty Tuscan fare. There are no written menus, but the owners Alberto Navari and his mother, Giuseppina, are wonderful hosts, happily pouring wine and reciting specials. A recent lunch included taglierini topped with shavings of white truffles, orange-scented ravioli in an apple-and-fennel sauce, and Italian beef stew laced with cocoa. Lunch for two, about 40 euros.

### **13. Gucci Goods | 2:30 p.m.**

Nearly a century ago, Guccio Gucci founded a fine-leather-goods shop in Florence; today his interlocking initials adorn purses, belts, sneakers and even automobiles around the globe. Learn about the luxury label's rise at the new Gucci Museo, which is housed in a historic palazzo on Piazza della Signoria (admission, 7 euros). The museum showcases all things Gucci, from vintage bamboo-handle handbags to glittering red-carpet gowns worn by modern-day starlets. Afterward retire to the on-site cafe, whose sleek terrace is now the place to see and be seen on what may be Florence's prettiest piazza.