

THE ART



OF THE CITY

No longer content to coast on the glories of its Renaissance past, Florence is recasting itself as a 21st-century global hub. **David Amsden** looks beyond the tourist trail and finds a city eager to recapture its reputation as a hotbed of creativity.

PHOTOGRAPHS BY **FEDERICO CIAMEI**

A salad of Belgian endive, sorbet, and samphire sauce at Gurdulù, a recent addition to the Oltrarno dining scene.
Opposite: Bartolozzi e Maioli, a wood-carving atelier in the Oltrarno neighborhood founded in 1938.





I DID NOT EXPECT TO FALL FOR FLORENCE WHILE EATING A JAPANESE DUMPLING.

Like most first-time visitors to the storied Italian city, I'd arrived with the itchy fervor of a museum-goer, believing transcendence would be delivered by seeing in person all the Renaissance glory I'd encountered in photographs. Michelangelo's *David*. Brunelleschi's Duomo. Botticelli's *Primavera*. The Ponte Vecchio and Palazzo Pitti. I spent my first 48 hours in a manic whirl, pinballing through the terra-cotta maze in the hot May sun, working through the requisite to-do list with surgical efficiency. Yet in

this blister-inducing gorge on Medici-era splendor, I couldn't shake the sense that I'd made the very mistake I'd vowed to avoid: seeing plenty but savoring little, skimming the city's surface at the expense of understanding its soul.

Then, on my third evening, came the dumpling. I was in Sant'Ambrogio, a sleepy neighborhood on the fringes of the tourist-clogged center, dining at the bar of a tiny restaurant called Ciblè. Opened in March 2017, it is an enthralling spot with only 16 seats that



Above, from left: A guest room at the Four Seasons Hotel Firenze, housed in a 15th-century former palace; Baccio Bandinelli's 16th-century copy of a Hellenistic statue of Laocoön and his sons in the Uffizi Gallery. Opposite: Walking on the Pescaia di Santa Rosa, a dam that juts into the Arno River on the Oltrarno banks.

bills itself as “Tuscan Oriental.” There is no menu; instead, diners sit for a languid, *omakase*-style feast of tapas that mixes Japanese, Chinese, Korean, and Italian flavors with elegant simplicity. Edamame and wild field peas arrived drizzled in spicy olive oil; a fatty sliver of soppressata shared a plate with a wasabi-infused potato; glasses of local wine gave way to sips of sake. The dumpling, perfectly steamed, its delicate skin pinched around a stuffing of Casentino pork, arrived in the middle of my meal. It was beyond delicious, a bite-size reminder that Florence is far more than a dazzling reliquary. It’s a city opening itself to the modern world in surprising ways.

“It’s quite special, is it not?” said Fabio Picchi, Cibrèo’s owner, ostensibly referring to the dumpling,

though I’d like to think he understood I was having a revelatory moment about his hometown.

A wizardly charmer with a white beard, Picchi has long been regarded as the high priest of Florentine cooking. His first restaurants—the intimately upscale Cibrèo Ristorante and its more informal sibling, Cibrèo Trattoria—opened in 1979 and remain some of the best places to sample regional delicacies and relish the ebullient energy that percolates outside the city’s more trodden precincts. Later came Caffè Cibrèo, where espresso-and-pastry mornings blur into Chianti-and-salumi evenings, and Teatro del Sale, a supper club where buffet dinners are followed by musical performances. Along with Cibrèo, they are all clustered around a lively intersection. Picchi presides over his empire with panache—gliding between restaurants, scouring the nearby market for ingredients, greeting old friends and making newcomers feel like regulars.

What led Florence’s most famous chef, a revered gatekeeper of local tradition, to take the curious leap of opening a restaurant serving Asian-influenced food? Picchi shrugged. “I had a dream after visiting Japan,” he explained in his soothing baritone. “That was forty years ago, so it was one of those perhaps-mad dreams that refused to die.” He

grew contemplative. "I am a Florentine," he said. "This is a place built on realizing wild fantasies, on innovation and inspiration. What you see in the museums is connected to what you see in the streets today. You miss the point if you think the Renaissance exists only in the past."

FLORENCE IS MORE popular than ever, with some 16 million people visiting annually. Even so, you hear a lot of talk from locals about how it's misunderstood, even undiscovered. The sheer volume of crowds can make it easy to forget that the city is a living, breathing home to more than 380,000 residents. Before my meal at Cibléo, I met up with Dario Nardella, the youthful, quick-witted 42-year-old who has been mayor since 2015. Like just about everyone you meet in Florence, Nardella is worried that the city's heritage and culture—the centuries-old pursuit of those "wild fantasies" that once made the place a hub of civilization—are at risk of being diminished by mass tourism.

"We are one of the smallest global cities in the world, and very fragile," he told me in his office, a grand room painted with Renaissance-era murals in the Palazzo Vecchio, the fortress-like town hall. Just outside the door visitors roamed the palace with antlike intensity, marveling at its vaulted ceilings and array of Medici artifacts. "We don't need more tourists in the city, but more quality tourism. We want people to come here and have a profound experience, not just take photos."

Drive-by sightseeing is, however, the way most people approach Florence. As a cautionary tale of what can happen when culture tips into commodity, Nardella mentioned Venice, where most signs of local life have been eclipsed by the 30 million tourists who pour in each year. "It is quite sad—a real, fantastic place is now a plastic city," he said. "We are still a real city, but we risk having the same problems if we're not careful."

With that in mind, Nardella has devoted much of his energy while in office to finding inventive ways for Florence to flourish and encouraging visitors to stay longer. A higher tax on tour buses has led to an 8 percent decrease in cruise-ship passengers who swarm the town on day trips from Venice and Livorno. And a number of initiatives are now in place to retain residents in the city center. "Because without them," he said, "we are just a museum." In 2016, he passed a controversial bill requiring that 70 percent of the produce served in the UNESCO-protected center must be of local origin. Some saw it as a veiled anti-immigrant measure—a means of curbing the spread of kebab shops run by the city's small Arab population. McDonald's, meanwhile, saw it as an attack; the law put a stop to an outpost that was planned to open in front of the Duomo, leading the fast-food behemoth to sue the city for roughly \$20 million in damages. "Look, I love McDonald's!" Nardella told me with a chuckle. "But food is culture, and we have to protect our traditions. Do we really need a McDonald's across from Brunelleschi's masterpiece?"



Left: Mortegan, a leather-goods atelier in Oltrarno. Opposite, from left: The food halls at the Mercato Centrale; a street artist reproduces Guido Reni's *Saint Cecilia* in chalk.



'THIS IS A PLACE BUILT ON REALIZING WILD FANTASIES,' SAID FABIO PICCHI, THE CITY'S MOST FAMOUS CHEF, 'ON INNOVATION AND INSPIRATION.'



He paused for a moment. "My vision is not a closed, conservative one," he said, noting a variety of efforts the city has taken to expand and elevate its identity. A recent exhibit of a massive Jeff Koons sculpture in the plaza outside his office marked the first time in nearly 500 years that an original work of such scale had been shown alongside sculptures by Michelangelo and Donatello. Meanwhile, a new partnership with Amazon has helped local artisans stay in business by selling their crafts through the online shopping giant. "We now live in a global world—I embrace that," Nardella said. "But we must find ways to adapt that keep the spirit of the city."

This mentality has led to an ambitious revamping of Florence's cultural programming. The new opera house, for instance, is an unapologetically modern, Cubist-inspired structure that stands out with giddy defiance in a city famous for looking much the way it did centuries ago. The Uffizi Gallery, Italy's most popular museum, has been in the midst of an overhaul since 2015, when Eike Schmidt took on the role of director. A studious German, he is the first non-Italian to hold the post, and has been working to streamline the ticketing process, shorten the notoriously chaotic lines, and improve the flow through the halls so visitors can better appreciate the exquisite Botticellis and Raphaels for which the museum is famous. This remains a herculean task, as I discovered when I attempted to visit. Overwhelmed by the mosh pit outside, I opted to pass.

But the Uffizi, for all its world-class holdings, is hardly the whole of the city's offerings. Palazzo Strozzi, Florence's contemporary art foundation, opened nearby in 2006. Many regard its 2016 retrospective on Ai Weiwei, the second-most-attended exhibition in the city's history, as the moment Florence reestablished itself as a prominent force in the global art community. When I visited, a major survey of the video artist Bill Viola was all the more provoking for being set in a palace built in 1538. Wandering through the magnificent chambers was a transporting delight. The space was full but hardly frenzied; I didn't have to dodge a single selfie stick.

"You come to Florence and you need to see the Uffizi and the *David*—it's normal," said Arturo Galansino, Palazzo Strozzi's director, when I met him in his book-lined office on the museum's top floor. "What we offer is an alternative to that model. Because we're constantly changing we demand that you return over and over." A casually debonair gentleman—crisp suit, Wayfarer frames—Galansino hopes that guests will appreciate Palazzo Strozzi not as a progressive outlier, but as a nuanced way for locals and visitors alike to tap into the city's heritage. "The Ai Weiwei show, if you think about it, is really an extension of the city's history," he told me. "Florence was the Empire State Building of the 15th century—the high point of modernity."



From top: Folk dancing in the Piazza Santo Spirito, in Ultrarno; Minjoo Heo, a chef at the Asian-Italian fusion restaurant Cibléo.

HAVING SPENT MY first two days attempting to mainline all things Florence, I took a different approach the rest of the week: settling in, ambling about, letting conversations with locals serve as my primary guide. A headstrong people understandably proud of their roots, Florentines are by no means averse to making sure you visit the city's mainstays, like the Mercato Centrale, a bustling market that's been in operation since 1874. But even here a compelling dialogue between past and present has begun to play out. While the ground floor remains a time warp of fish-, cheese-, and produce mongers, in 2014 a mezzanine was added with stalls serving everything from esoteric beer to truffle pasta.

Still, I found that Florentines reserved their greatest enthusiasm for newly opened places that don't feel beholden to the past, like *La Ménagère*, a restaurant in the center that many locals mentioned as the sort of establishment that was unimaginable until recently. In an airy, sophisticated space of exposed plaster walls and dangling ferns, a multitude of worlds collide: fine dining in the back, a casual bistro in front, a craft cocktail lounge underground—not to mention a florist and a shop selling home goods. I arrived expecting a quick lunch. But after an octopus salad and spaghetti with anchovies, both



sublime, I found myself seduced into sticking around for a glass of wine, then an espresso. By the time I left, the sun was setting.

My accommodations certainly helped me absorb the city in a more languorous manner. Florence has lagged behind its larger European counterparts in offering the sort of hotels that encourage extended stays, but this, too, is changing. I spent the first half of my week at the Four Seasons, which opened in 2008 in a former 15th-century palace. With its original frescoes, outdoor pool, and large private garden, the hotel provided the singular experience of living, literally, like a prince. Then I switched to the Gallery Hotel Art, a sleek, whitewashed boutique establishment at the foot of the Ponte Vecchio where the lobby doubles as a showcase for modern art—a Warhol exhibition, when I visited. The hotel is one of a number of uniquely urbane properties operated by the Lungarno Collection, the hospitality arm of the Ferragamo empire. Another, the nearby Hotel Continentale, is a winking throwback to 1950s Italy. It offers one of the city's best rooftop bars, which I visited several times to sip an aperitif while watching the sun dip behind the majestic skyline.

"We're in the midst of a new dolce vita," said Edgardo Osorio, a Colombian-born designer who has helped revive the city's standing in the fashion world with Aquazurra, his playful line of handcrafted shoes. The dapper 32-year-old was discussing his adopted hometown's current renaissance while giving me a tour of his studio, an eclectic space above his shop. While most Italian fashion is now based in Milan, the country's modern industry was born in Florence. Iconic brands like Gucci began in the city, which remains the center of its production. "I wanted to be connected to that lineage," Osorio said. "Being close to the patternmakers and cutters brings in a human element that you just can't get in New York or Paris."

I thought about this sentiment often while exploring Oltrarno. Located across the Arno opposite the city center, this is Florence's "Left Bank," a swath of labyrinthine streets where I got the distinct sense that the city's residents are as keen on asserting themselves as their mayor. Poking my head into the minuscule storefront studios of the old-school leather craftspeople, cobblers, and papermakers who have worked in the area for centuries often led to impromptu tutorials on their work and technique.

Oltrarno is also the most compelling neighborhood for eating and drinking. The area around Piazza Santo Spirito, a small square that turns into a nightly gathering spot, has become a showcase for budding chefs challenging the city's reputation for stagnant cuisine. →



THE NEW FLORENCE

The city rewards a longer stay than most visitors budget. Once you've taken in the Renaissance masterworks, spend a few days exploring the overlooked corners and outer neighborhoods.

GETTING THERE AND AROUND

There are no direct flights from the U.S. to Florence, but multiple carriers offer connections from European hubs, including Paris and Amsterdam. Though taxi stands abound, one of the pleasures of Florence is that you can get just about everywhere on foot.

LODGING

Staying at the **Four Seasons Hotel Firenze** (fourseasons.com; doubles from \$1,000) was one of the highlights of my trip. Occupying a 15th-century palazzo, the hotel was a lavish, private oasis after a day spent exploring the city. The properties operated by the Lungarno Collection offer a more modern take on luxury. The coolly minimal **Gallery Hotel Art** (lungarnocollection.com; doubles from \$344) is profusely decorated with contemporary sculpture and photography, while the **Continentale** (lungarnocollection.com; doubles from \$370) channels mid-20th-century Italian design.

EAT & DRINK

After years of being regarded as behind the curve, Florence's dining scene has evolved into one of the most compelling in Italy. At **Cibìeò** (ciblea.com; prix fixe \$62), Fabio Picchi, the city's undisputed culinary king, serves up an *amakase*-style mix of Italian, Japanese, Chinese, and Korean tapas. **La Ménagère** (lomenagere.it; entrées \$17–\$34) is a beautiful, airy space with fine dining in the rear and a casual bistro up front, as

well as a florist and a small shop that sells home goods. The Oltrarno neighborhood's casually hip dining scene is anchored by **Il Santo Bevitore** (ilsantobevitore.com; entrées \$10–\$30), where refined takes on Italian classics are served in a cozy space. An adjacent wine bar, **Il Santino**, offers small bites to a boisterous crowd. I particularly enjoyed the inventive menu at **Gurdulù** (gurdulu.com; entrées \$22–\$42, tasting menus from \$65), a stylish spot out of a Fellini film. For cocktails, there's no better place than the rooftop bar of the **Continentale**, with its sublime views of the terra-cotta skyline.

ART & CULTURE


A trip to Florence isn't complete without a visit to the **Uffizi Gallery** (uffizi.it) and a pilgrimage to see Michelangelo's *David* at the **Galleria dell'Accademia** (accademia.org). Thankfully, the city has launched a new website, destinationflorence.com, to make the ticketing process less chaotic. If you feel overwhelmed by the crowds, head for the **Palazzo Strozzi** (palazzostrozzi.org), the city's contemporary art foundation, or the **Gucci Garden** (gucci.com/guccigarden), where a history of the brand sheds light on Florence's role as the birthplace of modern Italian fashion. For a glimpse into the city's new creative scene, check out **Numeroventi** (numeroventi.it), an artists' residency in an old palazzo that opens its doors for monthly exhibitions.

SHOPPING

Oltrarno has long been home to Florence's craftspeople. Seek out **Mortegan** (mortegan.com), maker of exquisite leather goods, and **Bartolozzi e Maioli** (bartolozzimaioli.it), a wood-carving studio that has produced intricately detailed sculptures for the past 80 years. New boutiques have started cropping up in the area. My favorites were **Campucc10** (campucc10.com), which showcases objects and prints by local artists, and **Giulia Materia** (giuliamateria.com), where the stock ranges from clothing to notebooks bound in vintage wallpaper. If you're looking for high-end women's shoes, visit **Aquazzura** (aquazzura.com). Rising star Edgardo Osorio conceives his collections in the studio above the store. —D.A.

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The anchor of this new food scene is Il Santo Bevitore, where dishes like roasted pigeon with foie gras ice cream are served in an unfussy, boisterous room; the restaurant recently added an adjacent wine bar, Il Santino. I ate one of my most memorable meals at Gurdulù, a modish, dimly lit spot on a quiet street. After a gin and tonic that arrived with a sprig of lavender suspended in a hand-cut ice cube, I ordered the tasting menu, leaving my meal to the whims of chef Gabriele Andreoni, whose obsession with unexpected ingredients shone in a cuttlefish salad with apricot bottarga and a succulent duck breast accented with kumquat and wasabi.

Great cities impress in seconds but seduce slowly; Florence is no different. On my last day, I visited Numeroventi, a co-living space for artists that I would never have heard of had I spent only a day or two in town. Cofounded by Martino di Napoli Rampolla, a 28-year-old Italian, and Andrew Trotter, a peripatetic designer from England, it opened in 2016 in a converted palace built in 1510. The organization invites artists, writers, and designers for residencies lasting one to eight months. Once a week it opens to the public for studio visits, a throwback to the days when the elite popped in on the likes of Leonardo da Vinci; the completed works are displayed in monthly exhibitions. To help fund the enterprise, Numeroventi rents out a handful of impeccably designed apartments on Airbnb, making it arguably the choicest (and still

secretive) place to stay for travelers eager to be immersed in the city's latest scene.

"I would like Florence to be what it was in the Renaissance instead of just making money off the past," said Alessandro Modestino Ricciardelli, Numeroventi's passionate, heavily tattooed project manager, when I met him for a tour of the space. The palace already had quite a history before its current incarnation. It was built for a governor, and a Michelangelo sculpture once stood on the pedestal in the courtyard; when the governor clashed with the Medicis, he was beheaded, and the sculpture was repossessed. Today the pedestal remains a hallowed spot where emerging artists show their work. "There are a lot of people here doing cool things, but they're like little islands," Ricciardelli continued. "This is a place where we can come together."

Ricciardelli led me through the studios and shared kitchen, absurdly gorgeous spaces where ornate plasterwork and frescoes contrasted with Modernist furnishings. We walked down a hallway lined with precise drawings of sound waves; on the floor below them were abstract renderings of the same shapes carved from marble. Both were the work of Lorenzo Brinati, an Italian artist and former resident. The top floor still looked much the way it did during the decades when squatters occupied it: dingy, with peeling paint, yet enticing given what was happening there. "Basically, this is a kind of free-for-all gallery," Rampolla said, explaining that artists were invited to use the rooms however they saw fit: painting on the walls, experimenting with mischievous installations. It was the opposite of a museum.

"Making something new," Rampolla said, "is always more interesting than just worshipping what is old." ✕

David Amsden is editor at large for Travel + Leisure.

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