

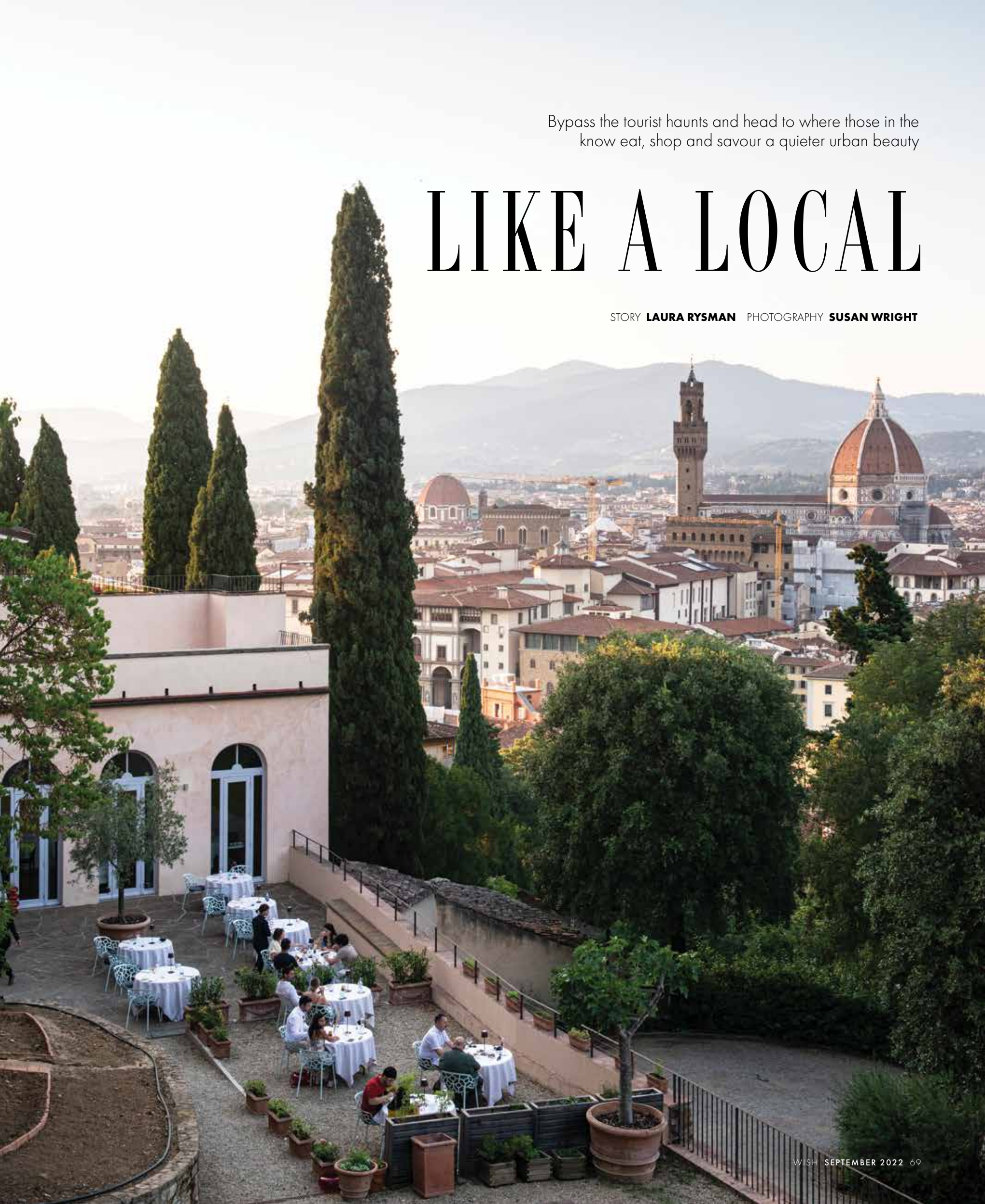
FLORENCE



Bypass the tourist haunts and head to where those in the know eat, shop and savour a quieter urban beauty

LIKE A LOCAL

STORY **LAURA RYSMAN** PHOTOGRAPHY **SUSAN WRIGHT**





Florence is a miracle of preservation, a centuries-old cityscape where modern architecture has made few inroads among the spindly medieval towers, palazzos in pink and honey ochres, and the eclipsing majesty of Brunelleschi's brick dome. So much of humanity's artistic legacy is still safeguarded in this undersized enclave, where Michelangelo, Leonardo Da Vinci, Raphael, Botticelli, Giotto and an extraordinary cluster of talents created a tidal wave of art and ideas

that changed the world. Yet a city can be too beautiful for its own good. In Florence's case, its charms are also its tragi-romantic downfall: everyone wants to visit.

Living in this city stamped by tourists means finding the byways where denizens appreciate the quieter side of its loveliness, pompously clucking about the tourists, as even I do now I've relocated to this otherwise grace-filled capital of the Renaissance. Beyond its sightseer draws, Florence's dowager beauty is only more evident. My adopted hometown is full of classic haunts, vibrantly modern locales and lavish getaways, but they belong to the cognoscenti – the Florence of the Florentines.

Which is not to say that the greatest hits aren't still worth a visit. The Uffizi, Pitti Palace, the Duomo and other destinations remain transcendent, if more so outside the European summer months, but wander beyond them and you'll appreciate the beauty spread throughout this city – the serene gardens of the Villa Bardini, the masterworks painted for Santo Spirito's private chapels, the Ghirlandaio frescoes illuminated for the cost of a

coin in Santa Trinità, the dizzying ornamentation of Santa Annunziata, the soaring grandeur of the Biblioteca Medicea Laurenziana, designed by Michelangelo, and the spiritual intimacy of Fra Angelico's murals for the monks' bedrooms of the San Marco convent. But such sites are in the books (recommended: the acutely detailed *Blue Guide* and *Florence: The Paintings and Frescoes*), so let's stick to urban life favourites gleaned from locals.

"Foreigners are always surprised that in Florence we're so particular about getting our vegetables and meat from small farmers, but good ingredients require minimal intervention to make good food," says Luisanna Messeri, a beloved cuisine guru. Messeri is part of a team of chefs giving lessons at Desinare, a wonderland of a design showroom where locals go to decorate their kitchens and travellers go to learn local cooking, along with key insights such as that drinking wine at 11am will "open your appetite". Messeri begs visitors to stray from the tourist drags and look for restaurant menus with pigeon, innards and other perhaps unappetising-sounding but sincere Florentine specials, even if they order something less daunting. "The identity of a city is represented in its food," she asserts. "Italian cuisine isn't singular. Globalisation hasn't managed to take that away from us yet."

Tourists flock to the overrun Mercato Centrale with its mall-style food court and stalls of mass-produced leather bags, but to the east, the Mercato Sant'Ambrogio and its surrounding streets maintain the affable, residential feeling of a genuine neighbourhood. With daily arrivals of fresh ingredients to market stands, it has

instilled a culture of excellent eating, anchored by Cibrè and the ever-expanding dominion created by chef Fabio Picchi and now run by his son Giulio. From the original upscale restaurant with its historically-minded menu, Cibrè now rules the piazza with a casual cafe, a theatre dining club, the organic C. Bio grocery, and a Tuscan-Asian restaurant called (to the chagrin of some) Ciblè, all with farm-sourced fixings. As Giulio explains of their recipe for gastronomic success: "The backbone of Italian cuisine is our outstanding agricultural supply chain."

Today Cibrè has also made inroads in Florence's centre, with a flashy cafe and restaurant on the ground floor of the recently remodelled Hotel Helvetia & Bristol. In the hotel, the spa, built on the grounds of Roman thermal baths, is also a welcome edition in a city short on such amenities. Elsewhere in the neighbourhood, haute dining in Florence has gone high design. The Gucci Osteria, under the auspices of top chef Massimo Bottura, brings the eclectic exuberance of the fashion brand to the dining room, with star-awarded cuisine by Bottura grads Karime Lopez and Taka Kondo, and a cozy cocktail bar – Gucci 25 – now open on the corner. At Oro d'Arìa, long a favourite Michelin destination among locals, chef Marco Stabile used the pause of the pandemic to repaint the vaulted ceiling of his intimate dining room with a contemporary gold-flecked fresco by illustrator Gianluca Biscalchin.

More orthodox Tuscan eating can be found at Trattoria Armando, where Giovanna Pieralli, daughter of the Armando who founded it in 1957, is



Above: The cathedral and Brunelleschi's dome
 Opposite, clockwise from top left: Castorina artisan workshop; Church of San Lorenzo; Moleria Lacchi glassware workshop; Porta San Frediano; Antica Occhialeria; Fountain of Neptune, Piazza della Signoria; Galleria Romanelli; Belmond Villa San Michele; Castorina artisan workshop



still in the kitchen cooking up homestyle recipes – a remarkably chic grandmother who gives an elevated touch to Tuscan specialties such as fried cow brains (more popular than you think) and papardelle with wild boar. Papered with signed photos of actors (and Armando fans) from Florence’s theatres, the restaurant has made faithful clients of Florentines for generations.

One of the city’s insider secrets for supreme dining, Enoteca Bruni occupies a petite dining room nearby on an unassuming stretch of Borgo Ognissanti, but the small space contains multitudes: one of Italy’s best-stocked cellars for natural wine, exquisitely sourced and hyper-local ingredients from Tuscan farms and the restaurant’s own nearby garden, and a tasting menu (with a superlative wine pairing, of course) of creative Italian cooking with eye-opening flavours. It’s a brilliant contrast to the tourist-skewed trattorias serving a repetitive and loveless menu of ribollita and Fiorentina steaks. “We’re trying to remind people how to use their sense of taste with the quality and originality of what we’re offering here,” says Stefano Bruni, who heads the restaurant with his brother Alberto.

Enoteca Bruni is one of the few outposts for natural wine in Florence – even as Tuscany’s natural wine producers flourish, the region’s capital is still dominated by conventionally produced chiantis and montalcinos. A courageous exception is Vineria Sonora, Florence’s only natural wine bar. Owners Andrea Marsico and Laura Giovinetti serve dozens of different wines by the glass each week, encouraging tastings and discovery at their pocket-sized locale in a 19th century butcher’s shop close to Mercato Sant’Ambrogio, soon to expand with a second location across the street. “It’s a challenge to operate such an unconventional place in such a conservative city,” says Marsico, “but the bar has brought together a community of like-minded people since we opened.”

Another unstuffy establishment to catch up with Florentines is the youth magnet of Manifattura Tabacchi, where a sprawling Rationalist-era tobacco factory is now home to the Polimoda fashion institute, designers’ studios, special events and concerts, and a bar that fills the courtyard with a buzzy flock of punters.

Across town, Serre Torrigiani offers a leafier place to unwind, with a polished crowd gathering in the garden bar to sip bubbly at this southern corner of the Oltrarno district, Florence’s left bank of old artisan ateliers, with lively bars and restaurants. On this side of the river, find young locals gathering at the Santarosa bistro, a patch of greenery secluded behind the city’s crenellated medieval wall, and in Piazza della Passera, just down the block from Palazzo Pitti’s tourist throngs. A recommended pitstop here: Gelateria della Passera, peddling an ice cream so exquisitely delicate in flavour – a grainy marzipan of almond, or apples in cream with orange blossoms – that it’s best savoured with eyes closed.

Florence is the city perhaps most associated with Italy’s illustrious craftsmanship and its workshops are a cherished part of the urban fabric. Visitors have an opportunity to take home something exceptional by patronising its artisans. The spirit of craft is particularly entrenched around the Oltrarno’s workshop-rich area of San Frediano, though the numbers are dwindling. “There used to be so many of us on the block; you could just give a whistle to find whatever type of artisan you needed,” says Lamberto Banchi, polishing an elaborate handmade candelabra inside his brass workshop, named Duccio Banchi after the son following in his footsteps. “Today there are just a few of us left,” he sighs. He’s been

fabricating metal objects for six decades in this room stacked with doorknockers, picture frames and statuary.

A few doors down, a small, densely stocked bonanza of fanciful objects animates the warren of rooms belonging to Luca Rafanelli, the Renaissance ideal of the artisan-artist, who restores antique treasures – an 1870 wooden mannequin, a 17th century Saint Sebastian statue – and also paints and sculpts his own poetic creations. Around the corner the Galleria Romanelli, a sculpture-making studio since 1829, holds a surreal menagerie of statues of every size, collected under the former church’s soaring vaulted roof, where pale plaster creations – life-sized busts of Napoleon and Dante, monuments such as a 13-foot copy of Neptune originally sculpted by Giambologna – are all for sale (prices: a mere €25 up to at least €45,000). Sculpture courses in the workshop offer visitors the chance to dig their own hands into clay.

In the neighbourhood, note the tiny apse-shaped windows. Now sealed, these were Florence’s “wine windows”, where wealthy families dispensed wine bottled at their country estates to customers on the street, exchanging flasks and money through these diminutive openings in their palace walls while shielding themselves from exposure to plague and theft.

At Sartoria Vestrucci, 84-year-old Loris Vestrucci oversees a new generation of tailors trained in his bespoke art of the single-pleated, Florentine-style suit – a hand-sewn magnum opus of menswear that requires three fittings and up to 48 hours of manual work. And at Castorina, a family of woodworkers – “artists of wood” as they call themselves – have been handcarving and gilding ornate frames, curious animal figurines and decorative sculptures of all kinds since 1895. Further afield at the foot of Belloguardo, the renowned glass workshop of Moleria Locchi blows, hand-grinds and engraves drinking glasses with delicate feathery designs.

The Ponte Vecchio spanning the Arno is known as one of the world’s oldest jewellery districts, yet few actual goldsmiths and artisans still work on the bridge. At its northern corner, however, there’s a workshop still committed to carrying on the traditions and exacting techniques that have made Florence a jewellery lover’s destination since the Renaissance. At Nardi Orafi, the handcrafted goldwork is finely sawn into lacy lattices

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Opposite, from top left: **Piazza Santo Spirito; aperitivo hour, Piazza Santo Spirito; La Loggia restaurant, Belmond Villa San Michele; Butterfly Terrace, Il Tornabuoni Hotel; Florence on a plate; Basilica of Santa Croce and Piazza Santa Croce; La Leggenda dei Frati restaurant; stained glass details with the Medici crest, Biblioteca Medicea Laurenziana; Lucrezia suite, Il Tornabuoni Hotel**

with intricate engraving – a Florentine specialty. “The history of this workshop and of Florence is founded on the work of artisans,” says Daniela Messeri, whose family has run Nardi Orafi since 1948. “It takes tenacity to carry on this way of making things, but we know the value of our past here so we’re willing to make the sacrifice.”

A handful of artisan workshops embrace contemporary styles as well, like the eggshell-thin tableware of JHA Porcelain, each piece made by Dutch potter Jacqueline Harberink. And the popular eyewear shop Antica Occhialeria maintains an archive of historical and vintage styles but also manually fabricates its own range of tasteful new spectacle styles, collaborating with designers from Dolce & Gabbana and Bologna’s Officine del Poggio. For women’s clothing, Boutique Nadine has made an art of creating sophisticated new duds from high-quality deadstock fabrics with Florentine seamstresses, and Loretta Caponi, famed for its finely hand-embroidered nightwear, now offers a line of equally refined women’s clothing for daytime.

The post-pandemic reopening of the city to travellers has included an array of glamorous new hotel options, the most spectacular being the ambitious Palazzo Portinari Salviati, set inside a 15th century palace just steps from the Duomo. After falling into disrepair, this antique residence that was once home to Dante’s muse Beatrice Portinari has returned as a luxury hotel after an intensive two-year rehab by a vast team of artisans and restorers under the guidance of architect Federico Spagnulo. It features Rubinacci brocade curtains, a plethora of rare artisan specialties such as seminato marble floors and marmorino trompe l’oeil painted walls, and a painstaking restoration of its many frescoes, including painted ceilings. “You can feel that this palazzo was brought back to life with a lot of love for the city and its history,” says Spagnulo, standing beside a towering statue of Cosimo de Medici at the heart of the ground-floor lounge.

Other new hotel additions – the brilliantly hued Il Tornabuoni, a transformation of a J.K. Place into The Place and its piazza café, the definitely not for everyone Dante’s Inferno design of the 25 Hours – are hoping to attract a more eclectic and upscale stripe of traveller beyond Florence’s day-tripper masses.

Topping locals’ lists of recommendations are more niche accommodations. Numeroventi, close to the Bargello Museum, is perhaps the most unusual, as a 500-year-old family palazzo turned artist residency, exhibition space and guesthouse, where the airy and graciously contemporary suites are appointed with art and design by many of the creatives who have spent time here. Numeroventi’s rotating exhibitions, and the newly opened Salotto lounge, are a magnet for a keyed-in Florentine and international set, and travellers who rent rooms here get a piece of the atmosphere.

Across the river in the Oltrarno, Ottantotto feels like a welcoming homestay. Each of its seven handsome rooms is distinctively bedecked with old-fashioned British botanical print fabrics and antique Italian finds, and most overlook its lush little backyard.

Florence is more than a checklist of masterpieces, it’s a singular city – small yet cosmopolitan, storied yet bubbling with modern life. It’s also my home, and a place I recommend you get to know beyond its must-sees. The whole city, after all, fostered the artistic revolution we’re still admiring today, and it continues to nurture a dynamic if small cosmopolis of creatives and intellectuals, exchanging ideas over pasta and wine, just beyond the tourist crowds. Come find us. ☺