

Italian Reverie

A traveler reflects on the wisdom of a return trip to Florence

By Jessica Colley Clarke



DUSK AT FLORENCE'S
SANTA MARIA DEL FIORE CATHEDRAL

JULIAN BELLOTTI PHOTOGRAPHY/ISTOCK

Strings of lights flickered to life as dusk settled over Florence, Italy. Sitting in an open-air courtyard after dinner, tables cleared except for tumblers of Tuscan wine. I watched imaginary lines between groups dissolve and strangers start to talk to each other. Instead of a restaurant, the courtyard began to feel like a dinner party. Someone translated for those who didn't speak both English and Italian. People talked about politics and travel, made jokes, and kicked off sandals under the table during coffee and dessert.

Ten years earlier, I wouldn't have splurged on dinner here. I'd have looked out over Florence's rooftops from Piazzale Michelangelo with a paper bag at my side. In that bag would have been dinner: some crusty bread, a hunk of cheese, and a few slices of prosciutto. During my first trip to Florence, straight out of college with a heavy pack on my back and not much money in my pocket, an evening's entertainment was people watching on the piazza and counting coins outside a gelato shop to see if I had enough for a single scoop.

Now, a decade later, I found myself in Florence again. Some travelers avoid returning to a place they've visited for fear of spoiling their memories of it, but I wanted to find out whether a return trip might reveal unsung potential. Since I'd seen the major sights, would I now connect more with the Florentine people? With the confidence of age and at a different stage in life, would I observe from the sidelines less and interact more?

In 2008, I stayed in a pensione a few blocks from the River Arno. My morning routine was to take the single *cometto* pastry offered by the modest B&B down to the river and write in my journal while sitting on a stone wall overlooking the water. In my 20s, I was often distracted from my surroundings, giving precious headspace to meeting fellow backpackers or thinking about my current boyfriend. I sometimes shied away from interacting with locals; I was only starting to learn the language and feared fumbling my way through a conversation. I spent silly nights in pubs surrounded by English speakers without an Italian in sight. There's nothing wrong with that, *per se*, but I wanted a more immersive experience now.

By 2018, I had learned that a hotel can be a gateway into a city's history—and my budget wasn't quite as strict as in my post-college days—so I opted for a stay at Il Salvatino, set in a restored 15th-century villa in the hills of Fiesole outside Florence. With its vaulted ceilings, grand staircase, and wood-paneled library, the property sparked my imagination about who lived in this villa in the 1400s. Staying here allowed me to live within that fantasy for a few days.

Part of that fantasy was my breakfast ritual: a table

for one, a basket of pastries, and bottomless cappuccino. At home, breakfast is often a quick piece of toast and a few words exchanged with my husband. Traveling solo in Fiesole, I began each peaceful morning putting pen to paper on the terrace, looking out over the city.

In my 20s, I had ample time to research where to go and what to see. That list usually consisted of major attractions, where I rubbed elbows with other tourists. This time, I wanted to meet creative Florentines and maybe learn something new. The hotel staff connected me with olfactory specialist Antonio Artese at Aqualfor, an artisan perfumery in Florence's Santa Croce neighborhood. I'm not particularly interested in perfumes, but Aqualfor's scent workshop sounded intriguing. After exploring the shop, I met Antonio and descended a flight of stairs with him into a laboratory where I'd create my own perfume.

I sat at a wooden table surrounded by dozens of glass vials of single scents, or essences. We got to work with beakers and droppers, crafting a one-of-a-kind perfume based on my individual sense of smell. "The nose is a receptor, and the brain is like a muscle that improves with use," Antonio said. "So we get better at noting subtle differences in scents." He introduced me to categories of scent—citrus, floral, wooden, greens, minerals—and guided me to push the boundaries of my sense of smell, identifying energetic top notes and subtle heart tones. "Each of these bottles is a note to compose with," he said, passing a bottle across the table. "What chords draw you in with the most force?"

After we finished tinkering with the perfume—the resulting aroma had hints of vanilla and grapefruit—Antonio asked as he bottled it, "Do you feel better than when you arrived?" I paused to consider the question, then nodded yes; I felt more awake, clear-headed, and enthusiastic. "That's aromatherapy at work," he said with a snap of his fingers.

Afterward, as I walked along the River Arno and browsed a flower market, memories of who I had been on my first trip returned to me. I remembered being lost on a certain corner and holding a paper map. I remembered sitting in a square observing two septuagenarians sunning themselves, not talking, just softly smiling at the sun's rays. I recalled how hopeful I was during the first trip, how I didn't harbor a drop of cynicism about what was possible in the future.

The city's familiar bridges and intersections brought the wishes of my 20s flooding back: Many someone



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ITALIAN BREAKFAST



EDDY, THE TRUFFLE-SNIFFING POOCH



IL SALVIATINO

kind who loves to travel, sacrifice whatever you need to in order to write, top the best-seller list before you turn 30.

I stopped at a café in a small square, the kind of elegant place I'd have looked at longingly on my first trip, and ordered a snack. Remembering those innocent dreams made me smile and cringe at the same time. I may not have accomplished all I set out to since I first traveled to Florence, but revisiting the city made me realize all that had changed in 10 years. I was now a slower kind of traveler: I saw more, I listened more. I had shed my shyness and fear of embarrassment. The best-seller list eludes me, but I have found meaning and fulfillment in my work. I married a European who speaks Italian, and we travel regularly.

Looking out at the square, I decided to spend the rest of my trip doing things that my younger self would have only dreamed of doing. I joined a local truffle hunter and his trusty dog in search of black truffles on the grounds of Il Salviatino, then ate them over buttery pasta. I traveled into the Tuscan countryside to sip Chianti Classico and eat ravioli with the winemaker. And with each experience, I took a cue from my younger self and spent some time thinking about what I wanted in the future. I decided that revisiting a familiar place is full of potential, and I wondered who I might be the next time I return to Florence.

Jessica Colley Clarke is a New York-based freelance writer and curious traveler. Her stories have appeared in the *New York Times*, *Ajar*, and *Savour*.

Florentine Facts

Create your own perfume during an informative and fun scent workshop at **Aquaflor** (pictured), an artisan perfumery. About \$250 per person for a group workshop. aquaflorexperience.com.

Venture into the countryside to **Colle Bereto** for a wine-tasting experience in Chianti. Make arrangements ahead of time for a winery visit that includes a leisurely lunch under a trellis. collebereto.it.

Taste Italy's famous gelato at the classic shop **La Carraia**. lacarraigroup.eu/eng.

Experience a contemporary take on local food at **La Ménagère**, a sleek restaurant with a café, flower shop, and store with souvenir-worthy home items. lamenagere.it.

At **Il Salviatino**, in Fiesole, you can relax in a bookcase-lined lounge, stroll manicured gardens overlooking Florence, and try your luck at finding truffles with a truffle hunter and his dog on the grounds. *Truffle-hunting excursions cost about \$106 per person. Starting room rates range from about \$300-\$500, depending on time of year, seasonal offers, and availability. Closed December-March.* salviatino.com.



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