

Michelangelo, da Vinci and Dante will always define its cultural heritage, but a new generation of savants—led by Matteo Renzi, the former mayor, now Italy's prime minister—is dedicated to ensuring Florence's future will be as celebrated as its past. Three decades after his first visit, **DAVID MARGOLICK** returns to find an ancient city with a fresh new look, as seen in photographs by **Massimo Vitali**.

FIRENZE

OUT OF THE PAST...



Florence is a city swamped: Globalization, economic leveling, cheap air fares all converge here. More than ever, the Italian city is a secular mecca, a place that millions of people vow to see before they die, and a few million do every year. No longer are they just Americans or Germans or Brits; in fact, they're also from the BRICs, Brazilians, Russians, Indians, Chinese. The posters for the Palazzo Strozzi's latest exhibitions announce in English, Russian and Chinese that all labels are in those languages, too. The opening of a Furla store near Piazza della Signoria is proclaimed in Japanese and Arabic as well.

Once Florence was a place where people, especially Brits and Americans, stayed. "A celestial sort of flypaper," the American novelist John Horne Burns, who spent his last years there in the early 1950s, once called it. "People have been known to come for a brief stay and end as Tuscan grandfathers."

This didn't happen to me. Recovering from law school, I first came on a yearlong fellowship in the late '70s. I didn't stay beyond that, but the city stayed with me. In fact, it continued to grow on me, and not just the several times I've been back (including on September 12, 2001, when I found a condolence note from my Italian publisher awaiting me in my hotel). Even after my first stay, I continued to live the experience—using, for the next 20 years, the \$5 Bialetti coffeemaker I had bought there, for instance; wearing my frayed Loden coat for nearly as long; and throwing around the little Italian (disproportionately taken from menus) I had retained. Some things, like the art and

The Basilica of Santa Croce, in the heart of the city, is where many famous Italians are buried, including Machiavelli, Michelangelo and Rossini.

the warm Italian light, you know not even to look for elsewhere. Never, though, have I stopped searching for those things—Tuscan olive oil, a genuine cappuccino, almond cookies—you can theoretically find somewhere else though somehow never do. For those, I've always had to return.

Long after Burns's day, and mine, Florence remained a place where folks lingered. Now they arrive in waves, many by bus, many from cruise ships docked in nearby Livorno, and don't stick around at all. They have perfected one art that the Renaissance Florentines never attempted: drive-by, sound-bite tourism. They arrive at about ten o'clock, stand a dozen deep gaping at Michelangelo's *David* at the Accademia or the Botticellis at the Uffizi, then eat a lousy panino or a slice of pizza, buy a few souvenir trinkets to take back home—"an apron with David's balls on it," as James Bradburne, director general of the Fondazione Palazzo Strozzi, put it—and by 3:30 or so, they flee.

Standing in the church of Santa Croce, viewing the Giotto's and contemplating the tombs of Galileo, Machiavelli and Michelangelo nearby, the writer Stendhal famously became woozy; there was simply too much to digest. If these short-termers freak out at all, it's only at the prospect of missing their bus back to the boat. "A new Great Flood of burger-munching, coach-driven, flip-flopped, digital-snapping *maleducati*" is how the British critic Stephen Bayley dyspeptically described them. The local newspaper, *La Nazione*, talks of the "degrado senza sosta" (unstoppable decline) that has come in their train: Is Florence, the locals ask anxiously, becoming *Venice*?

But Florence has been staging a counter-offensive. Part of it came from a charismatic and ambitious mayor, Matteo Renzi, who parlayed the job he did there over the previous four and a half years and a general aura of youth (he's 39) and freshness into becoming, in February, the prime minister of Italy. Renzi banned cars and buses from the historic center of town, extending from the magnificent cathedral—the Duomo, topped by Brunelleschi's famous dome—into the piazzas della Repubblica and della Signoria and down to the Ponte Vecchio. As a result, and if you catch it at the right time of year, Florence has a sparkle and a serenity it hasn't enjoyed since the Medicis. Only rarely these days—say, when a delivery truck barrels down one of its ancient lanes—does one have to duck frantically into a doorway. This is great news not only for pedestrians but also for the monuments themselves.

Renzi also recruited prominent local businessmen to work on garbage collection and graffiti removal, so his downtown became not just quiet but very nearly spotless. Giant machines, supplemented by old-fashioned human sweepers sporting orange pants and long brooms, clean up and scrub, then buff and polish the city's streets, leaving them glistening like terrazzo floors in designer kitchens. Cigarette butts are fetched almost as soon as they are flung. Even the ubiquitous Florentine dogs are cooperating: Those brown smears of varying vintages one used to spot on the city's sidewalks—too often, alas, too late—have magically disappeared.

Florence's air seems cleaner, too. What Percy Bysshe Shelley called the "blue and misty mountains" that envelop the city are bluer and greener than before. The smoke that hung over the entire valley, especially when local farmers burned their olive branches each autumn, was barely visible to me. The whole ecosystem of the place seems healthier. The Arno didn't much impress Mark Twain, a man who knew from rivers—"It would be a very plausible river if they would pump some water into it," he wrote—but these days it gushes vigorously through the city.

Florence's facelift has come at a cost, of course. Walk around its core at midday and you discover Florence without Florentines. The old blind man I used to see selling lottery tickets by the central post office in Piazza della Repubblica, plaintively urging Florentines to try their fortunes, would find few takers these days. The posters commemorating Robert F. Kennedy that popped up there, ten years after he died, would never be seen now: There'd be no audience, and they'd be too messy, anyway. Were friar Girolamo Savonarola to be burned at the stake today, it couldn't take place in Piazza della Signoria because there'd be no Florentines to watch.

Maybe it isn't that the local dogs are so much better behaved but that they, with their masters, have just moved elsewhere.

Few Florentines can afford the usual suspects of stores—Hermès, Dolce & Gabbana, Tiffany & Co., Prada, Bottega Veneta—that have turned Via Tornabuoni and its environs into yet another mall. One morning, while I was sitting in the courtyard café of the Palazzo Strozzi with Alta Macadam, a longtime Florence resident and the author of nine consecutive editions of the Blue Guide, a small band of striking workers marched by, and it seemed quaint, almost staged. In descriptions of Florence, another name has joined Dante and de Medici: Disney. "To me it doesn't feel real," the travel writer Nicky Swallow, who's been there since 1981, told me one evening at **Il Santino** (60R Via Santo Spirito; 39-055/230-2820), a small wine bar on the other side of the Arno, where very few tourists tread. "It is kind of a stage set."

Mass tourism fit in with the proletarian worldview of the left-wing politicians who have long run Florence, but the city loses money on these visitors; the 35 euros or so each leaves behind, Bradburne said, doesn't cover the cost of picking up the wrappers he drops. "We were getting the wrong kinds of tourists," Leonardo Ferragamo, whose father created the famous fashion house, told me. "Everything was very static. We were losing momentum." So eight years ago, he and others from Florence's leading families—with names like Gucci, Pucci and Antinori—set out to change things, specifically to attract better-heeled, repeat tourists.

Since 1995, Ferragamo has introduced a company museum in the Palazzo Feroni and four four-star hotels, with the latest coming in May. Since 2008, in fact, five five-stars have opened, including a **St. Regis** and a **Four Seasons**. (See "Where to Stay in Florence Now," page 64.) In a city that has always been sleepy (even Henry James remarked on how early everyone went to bed) and square, one

finds nascent signs of genuine nightlife and hipness, like the **Fusion Bar** in Ferragamo's Gallery Hotel Art (rooms, from \$400; 5 Vicolo dell'Oro; 39-055/27-263; lungarnocollection.com), which serves Florence's best Negroni cocktail. New restaurants like **Winter Garden by Caino** at the St. Regis (rooms, from \$520; 1 Piazza Ognissanti; 39-055/27-161; stregisflorence.com), **In Fabbrica** (99 Via del Gelsomino; 39-347/514-5468), **Cucina Torricoda** (5R Via Torta; 39-055/265-4329; cucinatorricoda.com) and **Sesto on Arno** (3 Piazza Ognissanti; 39-055/2715-2783; sestoonarno.com) have joined venerable standbys like **Sostanza** (25R Via Porcellana; 39-055/212-691) and **Ristorante Cibrèo** (8R Via del Verrocchio; 39-055/234-1100; edizioniteatrodelsalecibrefirenze.it) to enliven the dining scene. One even sees ethnic restaurants today, which is a switch. Amerigo Vespucci might well have ordered his egg rolls from the tired Chinese joints that were there in my day. The city now has annual trade fairs for food, wine and perfume, too, put together by Pitti Immagine, the organizers of Florence's semiannual fashion week.

"We want people to say, 'I haven't been in Florence in two years, and I want to see what's new,' as they do with Istanbul or Berlin," said Enrico Marinelli, a prominent local businessman and president of the Guild of the Dome Association, which helps care for the Duomo and related Florentine monuments.

If the newer, cooler Florence has an epicenter, it's the **Palazzo Strozzi** (Piazza Strozzi; palazzo.strozzi.org), the Renaissance palace-turned-exhibition and social space that is the city's most original and variegated cultural institution. Florence has never been known for temporary installations; its "permanent collection" always sufficed. But in its eight years of operation, the Fondazione Palazzo Strozzi, cofounded by Leonardo Ferragamo, has awakened the city with a startling succession of exhibits, on everything from Americans in Florence to Italian art in the Fascist era to the Russian avant-garde. A café and bookstore now sit in its long-moribund courtyard; downstairs is a center for contemporary

culture, where hundreds of young Florentines gather on the second Thursday of every month for music and conversation.

Much of the recent effort is the brainchild of Bradburne, a 58-year-old Anglo-Canadian who came to the Strozzi by way of museums in Paris, Amsterdam and Frankfurt, and who, when it comes to Florence's revitalization, is chief theoretician and cheerleader. He is also an outsider in a provincial, clannish and turf-conscious city, one that has always felt ambivalent about foreigners in its midst, or at least all the foreigners claiming to cherish it more than the natives do. Negotiating between the various private and public interests backing him, forced by a shaky economy and fickle public funders to squeeze his budget, continually pressured to be less innovative and more profitable, Bradburne is, as they say in Italy, "walking on a strand of silk." Watching him proselytize and maneuver and endure has become yet another of the city's endless entertainments.

The Strozzi, Bradburne conceded, entices few first-time visitors. Two thirds of those who go there are Italians, half of them from Florence. Mary McCarthy once wrote that the city's austere, standoffish palazzos "hide their private life like misers"; the Strozzi has opened itself up to residents, giving them a stake in the place, reminding them that they live in a real community rather than a tourist trap. With every other show connected in some fashion to the city, and through a variety of accompanying publications and apps, the Strozzi has illuminated many Florences: American Florence, artisanal Florence, musical Florence, culinary Florence, Galileo's Florence, Dante's Florence, Michelangelo's Florence, Fascist Florence. (On view until July 20 is "Pontormo and Rosso Fiorentino: Diverging Paths of Mannerism.")

"Our goal is to get people to see Florence through other eyes, so that they stay longer and come back again," Bradburne said. But he isn't snobbish about what they do once they get there, or the order in which they

do it. "If you want to go buy a Ferragamo shoe before you go to the Uffizi, I say, 'God bless,'" he said. "We believe that Ferragamo is as much an expression of Italian culture as Botticelli." This will relieve those making beelines to the handsome **Gucci Museo** (10 Piazza della Signoria; guccimuseo.com), which opened in October 2011 and is located in what was once the Palazzo della Mercanzia. Many of these folks are indeed more interested in the evolution of Gucci bags than in the progression from Cimabue to Giotto to Filippo Lippi. (The museum also features a souped-up 1979 Cadillac Seville with the Gucci logo on the hubcaps, the hood ornament and the upholstery, and a bookstore, restaurant and café with communal tables and WiFi.)

Of course, fueled by the friendly people, the wonderful food and the gorgeous setting, in addition to all that art, many people needn't be coaxed back to Florence. But how best to manage it?

One way is to go in the off-season. I visited in early November, which is just about ideal. The days are still reasonably warm and long, the light is luscious and the streets are relatively empty, even at high noon. It's the time for truffles, with seemingly every trattoria sprinkling them liberally on pasta. Also, and most crucially, in early November the olives have just been picked, and the new oil, with its distinctive green Tuscan tint, has been pressed. Every foodie in Florence has a favorite producer: For Fabio Picchi of Cibrèo, it's Capezana from Carmignano; for Veronica Ficcarelli, who writes a specialty guide to Florence and Tuscany, it's La Grancia from Montisi, outside Siena. Others have their own trees or buy from friends—friends they trust. Deciding for yourself which is best is one kind of customer survey no one would ever shirk: The famously salt-free, flavorless Florentine

Contemplating the tombs of Stendhal famously became

Galileo, Machiavelli and Michelangelo, the writer woozy—there was simply too much to digest.

bread, celebrated by Dante but holding little charm for me, makes a perfect medium. Better yet, because it gives you an excuse to head to the exquisite Tuscan countryside, is to tour a *frantio*, where the precious stuff is made. I had an exquisite visit to the winery and olive oil producer **Colle Bereto** (*Azienda Agricola Colle Bereto, Località Colle Bereto, Radda in Chianti; 39-0577/738-083; collebereto.it*), an hour or so outside town.

Even in peak season, there are ways to avoid the crowds. By calling 39-055/294-883, you can reserve time slots at the major state museums (including the Uffizi and the Accademia). Also, after enormous difficulties characteristic of Florence—where authority is balkanized and family feuds date back to Guelphs and Ghibellines—the city’s fathers (and the province’s, and the state’s) have created the **Firenze Card** (*firenzecard.it*), which for 72 euros (about \$100) offers 72-hour priority access to many major museums. For the most personalized, hassle-free experience, guides like **IC Bellagio** (*39-031/952-059; icbellagio.com*) or **Città Nascosta** (*39-055/680-2590; cittanascosta.it*) offer private tours of almost any site and even visit the most popular places after hours.

Far simpler is just to get up earlier than everyone else, which needn’t be all that early: Tourists, especially those in groups, aren’t especially stalwart (which turns rainy days into opportunities as well). Early mornings are that magic time when Florentines briefly reassert control of the city center, but you can beat even them. Walking up the Arno into the sun as it rose through the cirrus clouds, I had the place pretty much to myself. The Ponte Vecchio was practically empty. When I reached the Uffizi, there were more figures on its façade—Dante, Petrarch, Machiavelli, Galileo—than in its courtyard. By opening time at 8:15 A.M., the crowd had swelled a bit, but it quickly dispersed inside. Apart from the guard texting nearby, I all but owned *The Birth of Venus* for several minutes and could study all those details—the leaves and blossoms and ripples and even her neatly clipped toenails—I’d missed in the reproductions.

Better yet, venture even slightly off the much-beaten track. The Italian artist and historian Giorgio Vasari once said Michelangelo’s *David* was so extraordinary that once you’d seen it, you could skip every other piece of sculpture. Without necessarily knowing it, many visitors to Florence have pretty much taken Vasari’s words to heart, and extended them to paintings, too. Even

if the masses were more ambitious, so astonishing is the sheer number of masterpieces in Florence that apart from its greatest hits, you can be assured that at any given time most everyone in town is looking at something else. I saw the amazing—because of its positively electric colors—and newly restored Giotto crucifix at **Chiesa di Ognissanti** (*42 Borgo Ognissanti; 39-055/239-8700*) all alone. Ditto, almost, for the multiple Michelangelos in the **Medici Chapels** (*6 Piazza di Madonna degli Aldobrandini; polomuseale.firenze.it*).

But the surest way to beat the crowds is to visit the Florence part of Florence, which is pretty much the entire city. Renzi’s antiseptic focal point is small and easily escaped. Maybe Florence is Disneyland, but only if you’re Goofy enough to stay within the walls of the Magic Kingdom. Walk beyond the pedestrian zone, back into the traffic (it’s really not so bad), and it’s amazing how quickly the city again becomes the Florence it always was.

You can do it on any number of pretexts. One is to go in search of craftsmanship. I toured the **Stefano Bemer atelier** (*2 Via San Niccolò; stefanobemer.com*), maker of bespoke and ready-to-wear shoes, where Daniel Day-Lewis once apprenticed between films. (A pair of these handmade beauties runs you about \$4,000. For that, an associate will bring them to any city to make sure they fit.) Downriver a bit, I visited the **Antico Setificio Fiorentino** (*4 Via L. Bartolini; anticoseificiofiorentino.com*), Florence’s last silk-making factory, where the fabrics adorning Versailles and the Kremlin were woven. But finding something equally genuine yet a little more affordable is not so easy. As the noted perfumer Lorenzo Villoresi told me, the number of artisans in Florence has dropped markedly in recent years, partly because apprenticeships are scarce, partly due to municipal neglect and shortsightedness. So beware of fakes, or, as the Osservatorio dei Mestieri d’Arte, which trains “quality handicraft assistants” to help tourists find the real thing, calls them, “counterfeit imitations.”

Those leaving Florence for the day generally head to Pisa, Lucca or San Gimignano. But for anyone wanting real insight into the larger state of Italian craftsmanship, I would recommend a short (11 miles from Florence) detour to Prato, the city that epitomizes the death

TAKE A DAY TRIP TO FIESOLE

As the No. 7 bus from Piazza San Marco grinds its way up the hill, you feel a twin sense of anticipation: You’re thinking about Fiesole, the quiet, historic town at the end of the line, five miles above Florence. And you’re savoring the view-to-be, which is really a view of the Duomo. Because few buildings are more astonishing, and once you’ve seen the Duomo, you want to see it more, from every possible angle.

You pass the cypress and olive trees behind the ancient stone walls. The air gets cleaner and cooler; it’s why, fleeing the plague, all of Giovanni Boccaccio’s storytellers came this way, and why Florentines seeking to escape the summer heat still do.

Fiesole is several centuries older than Florence. Just off the main square, Piazza Mino da Fiesole, is a Roman amphitheater, which hosts performances every summer. Not far from that are Etruscan ruins and the **Museo Bandini** (*1 Via Dupré; 39-055/596-1293*), which has a newly discovered sculpture attributed to Brunelleschi.

Up Via Antonio Gramsci—it’s no accident that with its Red past, Fiesole named its main street after the famous Italian Communist theorist—Loriana and her *latteria*, where I was once told that the old man sipping cappuccino in the corner was Giovanni Michelucci, who designed Florence’s train station, have vanished. But the **Pasticceria Alcedo** (*39 Via Gramsci*) across the street still makes the best biscotti—those crunchy almond cookies, usually dipped in sweet dessert wine but equally delicious plain, that are a Tuscan specialty.

Any of Fiesole’s unspoiled country lanes are worth walking down. So, too, are the gardens at the **Villa Medici** (*2 Via Beato Angelico; villamedicifiesole.it*), by appointment only. But Fiesole’s main attraction to me remains that view. The day I returned, the circumstances weren’t promising; it was foggy and rainy. But then the ever-changing Florentine weather broke and the Duomo reemerged. And after its bath, it was positively gleaming. —D. M.



One of Florence’s most-visited sites, Piazza del Duomo is home to the Cathedral of Santa Maria del Fiore (with its famous Brunelleschi dome), the Campanile and the Battistero.

and transfiguration—into a largely Chinese operation—of the once-vaunted Italian textile industry. (It is a tale beautifully told in Edoardo Nesi’s *Story of My People* [Other Press].) Such a trip is not for everyone; perhaps it breaks the timeless spell of Tuscany. But at the very least, it brings you to one of Florence’s neglected treasures: its magnificent main train station. Still sleek 80 years after its construction, the building conjures up the modern, efficient image of itself that Fascism liked to present. But it is apparently beyond Renzi’s cordon sanitaire; were its skylights scrubbed as assiduously as Florence’s streets, it would regain its original shine.

Rather than setting out for something to wear, I looked for things to eat or drink. I felt a bit guilty searching for the best *cornetto* (the Italian-style croissant that, with its apricot filling, is endearingly sweeter than its French cousin) rather than visiting Domenico Ghirlandaio at Santa Trinita or Masaccio in the Brancacci Chapel. But food, after all, has become a key component of experiential tourism. For instance, Claire Hennessy’s **Boutique Florence** offers a five-hour Gourmand’s Walking Tour (*from \$170 a person; boutiqueflorence.com*) of establishments selling superior olive oil, balsamic vinegar, cheeses, truffles, chocolates and gelato. **Eataly** opened a Florence branch in December (*22R Via de’ Martelli; eataly.com*), and a fancy new cooking school, **Desinare** (*234R Via dei Serragli; 39-055/221-118; desinare.it*), launched in March. Besides, I was simply honoring James Bradburne’s dictum: If a Ferragamo shoe is a work of art, so are *bistecca alla fiorentina* and *fagioli all’uccelletto*.

Skip the hotel breakfasts, no matter how fancy they may seem, and venture into a local *pasticceria*—or several. It’s worthwhile, at least once, to go to **Rivoire** (*4R Via Vacchereccia; 39-055/214-412; rivoire.it*), on Piazza della Signoria, just for its turn-of-the-century feel (make sure you drink standing up). But the average neighborhood place is vastly preferable, and the busier the better. Don’t be put off by all



The neo-Gothic façade of the Santa Maria del Fiore is by Italian architect Emilio de Fabris, who decorated the cathedral in pink, green and white Tuscan marble.

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the people standing at the bar; no one lingers long, so you can and should.

I never did find Florence's answer to Giovanni Fummo, who is said to have made 12 million cups of coffee at Gran Caffè Gambrinus in Naples. (The banner saluting him there quotes that T. S. Eliot line about measuring out a life in coffee spoons.) But I had just as much fun watching Manuel do his work at **Pasticceria La Loggia** (39R Borgo degli Albizi; 39-055/247-9574). Like the best baristas, he was both perpetually in motion and preternaturally calm. Working on as many as six cups at once, he followed the usual complex choreography: dealing out saucers like playing cards, knocking loose and emptying grounds into a drawer (which he closed with his hip), flicking that lever for fresh grounds, plunging them firmly into the holder and then into the machine, pushing buttons, foaming milk, restocking bags of beans, loading the dishwasher and then unloading the scalding-hot cups for reuse. The percussion of clashing porcelain—no paper cups here!—supplied a bracing soundtrack for his show. It helps that when you order a cappuccino in Italy, “*un cappuccino, per favore*” suffices: no “ventis,” “talls,” “halfs,” “wets,” “dries.” And as you watch such a master at work, you know perfectly well that only a few doors down, and then a few more doors beyond that, others are performing the same wonders.

For lunch one day I visited Sostanza, a venerable place not far from the St. Regis and Excelsior hotels. Trip Advisor, I was warned, had made it nearly impregnable, but on the day I went, it was practically empty. On the tiled wall near me hung tributes from Rob Lowe and Steven Spielberg, but more interesting were framed placemats (or something) signed by Ezra Pound and Marc Chagall. A yellowed article revealed that *The New York Times'* Herbert Matthews (who was to stoke Fidel Castro's fame a few years later) had stopped by in July 1954. “A rough, noisy, crowded, unattractive place,

where you will rub elbows with a taxi driver on one side and a duchess on the other, as the food is thrown at you. But the steak does melt in your mouth!” he'd written. (And it's still true, though few taxi drivers could now afford it.) But the oldest clipping I saw there was dated “1936–XIV,” reflecting the years, respectively, since Jesus Christ was born and Benito Mussolini had seized power.

Matthews could just as easily have stopped by **Trattoria Mario** (2 Via Rosina; 39-055/218-550; trattoriamario.com), a wonderful cubbyhole near the San Lorenzo market that opened in 1953, and which I frequented 25 years later. (A couple of pictures I took back then are in a book the restaurant published last year to mark its 60th anniversary, presented as gifts to loyal patrons.) Mario Colzi, the hyperkinetic paterfamilias who used to march through the place shouting, “*Signori, per favore, chi ha mangiato!*”—a plea to those who'd already eaten to kindly scam—died in 1980 (not surprisingly, of a heart attack), and his wife, Elena, who used to ladle out the *spezzatino* from the oven nestled among the tables in the back, is gone as well. The place is now run by their sons, Romeo and Fabio (whom I photographed washing a wineglass as a little boy), and their families.

Mario's has been remodeled, as much as such tiny quarters allow, with the kitchen now behind glass on the side, and its menu has finally been committed (haphazardly, illegibly) to paper. It still offers the same simple Tuscan fare, but the crowds are larger, the hours are longer and the clientele is less local. It originally doubled as a *fiaschetteria*, or wine shop, but few Florentines still while away their afternoons drinking there. Like much of tourist Florence, Mario's has replaced friends with foreigners: “Recommended” stickers in various languages so blanket its outside windows that you can't tell if the place is open. Romeo maintains his humor—signs in Italian prohibit ordering the *bistecca* well-done or asking for mayonnaise, pizza, coffee or “ketch up”—but he actually misses the Americans, who were, he said, more friendly and **CONTINUED ON PAGE 229»**

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open-minded than the newer tourists. (Such nostalgia for Americans, especially rich ones, is not unusual. “The artisans miss the American,” Tanya Gregory, a veteran tour guide, told me. “Who else would pay 6,000 euros to commission a handmade couch?”)

But clearly the city’s most charismatic restaurateur, someone who bridges Florence old and new, traditional and adventurous, provincial and cosmopolitan, is Fabio Picchi. Chef, locavore, historian, entrepreneur, diplomat, philosopher, author, visionary, impresario—“a cross between Garibaldi and Karl Marx,” Bradburne called him—Picchi began building his culinary and cultural empire in 1979, colonizing the area around Sant’Ambrogio with a restaurant (the highly original and much-celebrated Cibrèò), then a trattoria, then a café, and then, in a refurbished 14th-century convent, the **Teatro del Sale** (111R Via de’ Macci; 39-055/200-1492; edizioni teatrodelsalecibrefirenze.it), his most unusual and special creation.

Officially it’s a private club called the Associazione Culturale Circo-Lo Teatro del Sale; on the walls outside, posted in nine languages, is its credo: “If you like the idea of observing a city, if you like to breathe in the smell of its people, if you like to be one of them, if you like listening to them and feeling yourself engaged with them in the pleasure of being together, in a moment of relaxation, of music, of theater, of eating, and if you live in Lyon or Cambridge, in San Francisco, in Istanbul, in Verona, in Buenos Aires, in Sydney, in Prato or in any other part of this world and you are occasionally...a guest in our city, maybe you already know, or maybe you don’t, about our club and how delighted we’d be to welcome you here.”

But it has its rules. “Any Member discovered in the act of non-communication, or who persists in such an attitude, will not have his/her membership renewed” is one, but so is “Reflective silence will be greatly appreciated, even to the point of being considered

the principle event of our communal life.” Undeterred by the apparent contradiction, in the past ten years 160,842 people—including 33,435 foreigners, 10,560 of them American—have ponied up the \$9.50 to join.

For a mere \$40 more, a few nights a week as many as 99 members enjoy an extravagant multicourse dinner served lunchroom-style. The theater starts long before the show, as with operatic brio Fabio or his son Duccio opens the window from the kitchen and shouts out each new course: “*Schiacciata con lo strutto!*” (flat salty bread with lard) or “*Zuppa di vongole molto molto molto piccante, piena d’aglio!*” (very spicy and garlicky clam soup). I’ve heard reports of misbehavior, i.e., stampedes, but the night I was there, the patrons were perfectly behaved. Fully sated, everyone then turned their chairs to the stage to see Fabio’s hugely talented wife, the cabaret singer Maria Cassi. But so dazzling was the meal that the show was almost secondary.

Things are more serene at Ristorante Cibrèò, where the manager, Cristina Petrelli, sits down at your table and explains with utmost seriousness the highly original offerings to come. One thing, though, she did not anticipate. Midway through my meal, an entourage of ten or so took its place at a large round table near mine. (Enough were wearing black shirts that, had I not known better, I’d have thought it a meeting of some neo-Fascist cell.) And there amid them was Billy Joel, speaking Italian to another of Picchi’s sons, Giulio. Joel and his team, it turned out, had just performed in England, and he told me he’d come to Italy for the same reason he always did: to “cleanse my palate.” As for his Italian, he said he’d picked it up from sheet music and Italian restaurants in New York; in other words, it all began with *adagio* and *formaggio*.

Joel’s Italy was Florence; he’d been coming there for years, he said, and not to perform, which he’d done only once long ago. He keeps returning, he said, for sustenance—his Florence has never changed—and once he arrives, he stays. “Sting has a place out of town, but after two days...” he began, but he didn’t have to finish his sentence. To remind himself of the city’s uniqueness, he said, all he has to do is gaze upward. “I’m not a religious man, but I look at the sky and I see those cloud formations, and the color of the light, and I see God and Leonardo da Vinci,” he explained. “I come here to renew my soul. I have a Renaissance every time I do.” ♦

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