

FLORENCE

ON THE GROUND

From the Renaissance to the radical, this Tuscan town was built to inspire. A chilled Prosecco on a piazza awaits. Words by **Lucille Howe**.
Photography by **Rama Knight**

▣ THE PONTE VECCHIO



42

GET THE VIBE

44

ON THE STREET

46

AT THE HOTEL

48

ON THE TABLE

50

TO THE BAR

53

HIT THE SHOPS

54

IN THE BAG

57

WHERE IT'S AT



GET THE VIBE

A VIEW TO A THRILL

FLORENCE IS AN OUTDOOR MUSEUM,

a resplendent ode to the Renaissance, when wealthy merchant bankers the Medici family patronised the arts and commissioned a veritable booty of civic and religious art and architecture. The centrepiece of the city is undoubtedly the Duomo, the cathedral whose famous dome was designed by Filippo Brunelleschi. You may recognise it from Merchant Ivory film *A Room with a View*.

And what a view. Apart from the magnificent city sights themselves, from the Ponte Vecchio you can make out the lush Tuscan countryside, with its olive and cypress trees, essentially unchanged for almost 500 years. The bridge seems to divide the city in two. One half is an historical treasure trove and high-fashion hub popular with international visitors. The other is home to a more bohemian artists' community, centred around Santo Spirito, and popular with free-thinking 20- and 30-somethings.

Florence is a city where it is safe to get lost, because you will always find yourself stumbling across one of its anchoring landmarks. Perhaps it will be the Uffizi Gallery, the clock tower that rings out on the hour, or the Piazza del Mercato Nuovo, with its leather belts, woven bags and wooden marionettes of Pinocchio. Speaking of noses, the market is also home to a famous bronze boar, which has quite a snout. Tourists ritually slip a coin between its tusks and give it a rub to bring good fortune.

The rhythm of the city takes its cue from mealtimes, with lazy lunches that go on for hours, accompanied by Chianti. The speciality of the city is a Florentine steak, a carnivorous feast to sink your teeth into – tender, bloodied and enjoyed with animated conversation. When I asked for mine to go back to the kitchen because it wasn't yet "well done", I met with a good-natured retort from the waiting staff that there was a "prima donna" in their midst. The Italians like their meat melting, not chewy.

And all agree that as the sun goes down, it is officially Prosecco O'Clock. Sipping a refreshing, fizzing aperitif on a beautiful piazza, or in the bars overlooking the Arno river, marks the end of the day and a reward for your endeavours.



LOSE YOURSELF

📍 Explore the city on foot and soak up the splendid architecture at every turn



ON THE STREET

THE ULTIMATE ART CITY



CROWD PLEASER

- 📍 Tourists hit the Ponte Vecchio for shopping and holiday snaps
- 📍 Perseus and Medusa



Graffiti gold

Not all the best artists in Florence are from the Renaissance era. As you hook a left on your Vespa, you may want to take a second look at some of the street signs. In recent years they have become the canvas for 45-year-old French graffiti artist Clet Abraham, who has been living in Italy for over 20 years. He studied sculpture and oil painting in Rome and spent time in Tuscany before establishing his own studio in Florence.

“A year ago, I was crossing the city in my car and started to think how stupid and primitive the traffic signs were that were ruling me,” he says. “They told us: you can’t go there, you must turn left or right, and nothing more. I decided to give them another meaning.”

Some of Clet’s graffiti references religious iconography, other images are simply cheeky. Look out for his handiwork while you’re in town.

IF YOU HAVEN’T READ THE GREEK MYTHS

since your school days, a walk around Florence’s central **Piazza della Signoria** (1), with its huge statues of Greek heroes, may bring back memories. The bronze statue of Perseus holding aloft the head of Medusa is particularly breathtaking.

It is on this square – a meeting place for guided tours and those who just want to gossip over a *gelato* – that you might think you’ve seen Michelangelo’s *David*. A rookie’s mistake! This one is just a replica, the real *David* is the showpiece of the **Accademia Gallery** (2), where you should head to view for yourself this absolute icon. The pathway to the masterpiece is lined with sculptures of slaves that seem to climb out from the unfinished chiselled stone of their own accord. The closer you get to David, the more buzzing the atmosphere – you know you’re about to see something special.

Your next must-see is the **Uffizi Gallery** (3) (www.uffizi.firenze.it), just off Piazza della

Signoria. There can be a long wait in high season, so it’s best to book on a tour to avoid the queues. Get ready to witness *The Birth of Venus*, by Botticelli. For a more unconventional art space and a cool spot in the heat, check out the medieval **Bargello Palace** (4). A former prison, it became a museum in 1865, and houses sculptures by Donatello, Cellini and Michelangelo on loan from the Medici collection. A fabulous 13th-century staircase takes you up to more treasures, including chessboards, jewellery, ceramics and household objects.

The heart and soul of the city is the amazing **Duomo** (5) – its dome designed by Brunelleschi and its *campanile*, or bell tower, by Giotto. Also well worth a visit are the romantic **Boboli Gardens** (6). They were designed for the stylish and demanding wife of Cosimo de’ Medici, Eleonora di Toledo, and sit behind the commanding **Palazzo Pitti** (7), a vast Renaissance residence housing collections of paintings, sculptures and costumes.

The best place to enjoy the sunset, and snap yourself a new profile pic against a backdrop of the city and the Tuscan countryside, is the **Ponte Vecchio** (8). Originally built in Roman times, the bridge was twice swept away by flooding, before being rebuilt in 1345. Local tradition sees lovers lock padlocks on the bridge before throwing the keys into the river, in a gesture symbolising their eternal love. There were so many the town council had to impose fines to deter the practice, so best to have a smooch instead.





AT THE HOTEL
SUITE DREAMS



FLORENCE HAS ACCOMMODATION FOR ALL

budget and tastes, from charming boutique townhouse hotels to chic contemporary hangouts. Among our top tips is **Gallery Hotel Art** (9) www.galleryhotelart.com, near the Ponte Vecchio, which succeeds in fusing the modern with the magical. Rooms come with all the gadgetry a discerning guest could require, from widescreen TVs to iPod docks, and some suites have a terrace where you can enjoy an aperitif and view over the patchwork of rooftops. There's always an art exhibition going on here, too. For instance, June boasted a collection of black and white images by 1940s photographer Elliot Erwit.

Its sister property, **Hotel Continentale** (10) www.lungarnohotels.com, is situated just 10 paces closer to the Ponte Vecchio. Guest or not, it's the destination to head to for an icy spritzer at the rooftop bar, overlooking the steady flow of pedestrians on the bridge.

If you're here during the biannual Pitti fashion fair you can expect the models and



stylists in town have booked out **JK Place** (11) www.jkplace.com). The communal space of this boutique gem is decked out in trendy monochrome – black leather stools with studded trims, huge white leather armchairs – with coffee-table books on contemporary design to peruse while you sip your morning espresso. Rooms are, likewise, linear and clear of clutter, with touches of Versace-esque luxury. Sexy and stylish, this is one for lovers, commanding executives and VIPs. The Pink Room basement den is the perfect place for a nightcap, where a rose-coloured hue will paint you in the most favourable light.

Florence is cutely compact, so getting out of town can mean only a 15-minute bike ride, and it's worth looking at hotels outside the centre. To the west, you will find the fabulous **Riva Lofts** (12) www.rivalofts.com). The luxurious studio apartments are the project of Alice Nordi and her architect father, who wanted to give tourists visiting Florence an experience that combines the classic and contemporary. The renovated former artisans' studios are decorated with natural colours, artworks and antiques.

Speaking of renovations, the historic **Grand Hotel Villa Cora** (13) www.villacora.it re-opened this spring after a three-year makeover. Past guests have included emperors and princes, so feel free to have a royally good time. Situated in a park near the fairy-tale Boboli Gardens, the hotel comprises 46 rooms, in a 19th-century mansion setting, as well as a wine cellar, cigar bar, and a swanky spa with an outdoor heated pool. *La dolce vita*? You bet.

UP ON THE ROOF

Chill out at Gallery Hotel Art

Hotel Continentale is great for a pre-dinner drink



Brangelina style

Everyone loves Florence, and Hollywood stars are no exception. Last year avid travellers Brad Pitt and Angelina Jolie were in town with their children, and took a suite at the **Relais Santa Croce** (14) www.relaischateaux.com. You can read their names in the guest book.

Guests like Brad and Ange are treated to a slice of life in what feels like a huge private house, living the same indulgent lifestyle as the rich Renaissance families once did.

The centrepiece of this sumptuous palazzo is an ornate drawing room, with its high ceilings, decadent furnishings, original frescoes, decorative mouldings and high windows. Wow.

If your wallet doesn't stretch to a stay here but you fancy taking a peek at this place from the outside, you'll find it close to the church and square of the same name, just north of the Arno river.



“Florence has a ‘magic hour’ just before sundown when the light is just beautiful”

EUGENIO RIGO

GENERAL MANAGER, RELAIS SANTA CROCE



ON THE TABLE
STEAK AND SAUCE



IF YOU COME TO FLORENCE, EAT MEAGRELY before you do so. You'll need the room for a culinary blowout. Eating is an event in this city, enjoyed with friends, with no pressure to hurry. Every morsel, from bar snacks to haute cuisine, seems to be a little work of art in its own way.

The most famous of local dishes is the *fiorentina* steak, from the Chianina cow, and available to try almost anywhere in the city. As a former vegetarian, I took some persuading, but the prime cuts of meat at **Osteria dell' Olio** (15) www.osteriadellolio.com were tender and delicious. The meal is completed by a side of squared, crispy roast potatoes and a drizzle of olive oil for good measure. Just a short stroll from the Cathedral, this restaurant is chic and popular with locals.

If you want a fun night out eating pizza with friends, then roll up your sleeves for a margherita with a difference at **Munaciello** (16) www.munaciello.it), a huge, buzzing restaurant with a wood-fired oven. The pizza bases are Neapolitan-style – thick and doughy and sunk in the middle – with a mouth-watering choice of





fresh ingredients from spicy salami to creamy goats' cheese and porcini mushrooms. The acoustics of the interior mean loud chatter bounces off the walls, which are adorned with Neapolitan paraphernalia, like football shirts strung across a washing line and a vintage ice-cream cart. Small parties can dine in privacy in a hidden room – pull aside the thick velvet drapes to find a decadent dinner setting with baroque candelabra.

You could also try the stylish family restaurant of **Il Santo Bevitore** (17) www.ilsantobevitore.com), run by brother and sister Marco and Martina Baldesi, and their business partner, Stefano Sebastiani. Dividing the original eating area and the newer extension is the 2,000-year-old tower entrance to the city. Lining the walls are rows of wine bottles (all Tuscan), with suggestions for what to pair perfectly with your meal. You can enjoy starters like ricotta flan with radicchio cream and crispy pancetta, and mains like hand-chopped Chianina beef tartare with fresh vegetables. A special mention goes to the La Fiorita Prosecco – fizz so good I drained two glasses of it!

Push the boat out with a last supper at **Alle Murate** (18) www.allemurate.it), situated in the Palace of the Art of Judges and Notaries, where you'll eat top-class Italian cuisine amid stunning frescoes and archaeological remains. Seafood aphrodisiacs for lovers in the city are in no short supply at the **Cestello Ristoclub** (19) www.cestelloristoclub.com), a sumptuous den with moody stone walls and swathes of rich fabric that conceal the restaurant's fish store, where you can choose the ingredients for your dinner.

LOVE ME TENDER

-  Perfect pizza at Munaciello
-  Osteria dell' Olio's mouth-watering meat



Tasty tours

A foodie is so spoilt for choice in Florence, you could do well to hand responsibility for your itinerary over to the experts. I meet Edoardo Giacometti of the tour company **Florentetown** (20) for a chat. "Most of the inner circle of the city is pedestrianised, so it's easier to get around on a bike with the new cycle scheme," he says. A half-day bike tour on their vintage Graziellas includes a stop at the famous **La Carraia Gelateria** (21) for the best ice-cream in town.

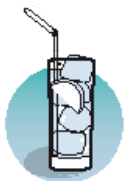
If you want to keep eating like a local when you're back home, a cookery lesson will show you how. First step: the central market to pick the best ingredients and taste local food and wine. Then into the kitchen with chef Giovanni, to make *bruschetta* and fresh pasta from scratch. For more details, visit www.ibikeflorence.com and www.florentetown.com

Oh, and mention this article when booking to get a 10% discount.

**“We serve food sourced
from the countryside that
surrounds our city, which
is some of the richest
land in Italy”**

MARTINA BALDESI
CO-OWNER, IL SANTO BEVITORE





TO THE BAR

APERITIVO TIME



FLORENCE IS A SOCIABLE CITY, AND THE conversation is fuelled by a steady stream of fine wines, spirits and cocktails. Florentines also know that an aperitif like Prosecco prepares the palette and that a digestif like grappa acts as a full stop to a meal. When you're drinking matters as much as what you're drinking. In a city with generously sized pedestrian areas, crowds of drinkers spill out from the bars onto the streets. You'll also find many bars that are high-ceilinged, cavernous spaces, complete with balconies and cellars heaving with people.

Young locals who want to escape the history for some Florentine-style flirting in the open-air head to **Fiò Lounge Bar** (22) www.flofirenze.com, a 2km drive out into the hills, where the chillout tunes won't disturb any ancient foundations. A little bit Ibiza and a little bit LA, the crowd is hip and beautiful. A night at Fiò begins at sundown with a buffet boasting finger food like fresh buffalo mozzarella balls and Parma ham rolls, and then some mingling. Drinks tokens are paid for in advance and swapped for your favourite cocktails. Gradually the music tempo



switches up a gear and the dancefloor is populated by girls and guys all shamelessly gyrating to crowd-pleasing dance tunes from the likes of David Guetta. Artistic director Pierluigi Gorini shows me a photo of Hollywood actress Kirsten Dunst at the club, taken just days earlier.

Another favourite meeting place for drinks is the lively **Volume** (23) www.volume.fi.it) on the Piazza Santo Spirito, where the clientele has real character. Scruffy-haired musos and artistically tattooed girls jostle for one of the coveted tables. As is customary in Italy, free snacks are served at *aperitivo* time. There's live music here, too. Order a classic Italian spritzer of iced Campari, soda water and a slice of orange.

The aptly named **Dolce Vita** (24) www.dolcevitaflorence.com) has been a popular pre-club hangout for years but maintains its fashionable reputation with a constantly rotating exhibition of cool art and sculptures. Check out the wine bar for info on regular tastings from their international list, accompanied by French cheeses and Tuscan salami.

You'll want to take things slowly at the bar of the same name just north of the Ponte Vecchio. **Slowly Café** (25) www.slowlycafe.com) is styled with a touch of Americana, with booths and bar stools filled by a 20-something crowd enjoying classic cocktails. If you really want to be adventurous try the oysters and Champagne –they are to die for.

Finally, you may be in the city but the beach is not far away with **Easy Living** (26) www.piazzart.com), an annual summer pop-up beach on the banks of the Arno. Open by day and night, the bar serves a fine mojito, and there's a changing programme of concerts and art events.

GO WITH THE FLÒ

- Alfresco drinking on Piazza Santo Spirito
- The hills are alive at Fiò Lounge Bar



Pass the Chianti

Gaze towards the horizon from Florence and you will see the beginnings of one of the world's best-known wine regions, producing that perennial favourite, Chianti.

Italians enjoy Chianti with food, and so should you; preferably in large balloon glasses alongside classic dishes like risotto, pizza and Tuscan white bean soup with focaccia bread.

The borders of the Chianti region are not clearly defined, but in general the hillside vineyards, broken up by olive groves and cypress trees, extend across Florence and Siena. Some brands are referred to as Florentine Chianti and others as Sienese, but all are typified by a shimmering bright red colour with a cherry flavour and bite of acidity. Chianti dates back to 1800, when Baron Bettino Ricasoli set the standard as to exactly which grapes should go into it, and in what quantities.

“We like people who dress well but, more importantly, have a good attitude”

ANNALISA DISTEFANO
ONE OF THE DOOR STAFF AT FLÒ LOUNGE





HIT THE SHOPS

HATS ENTERTAINMENT



WITH STREETS THIS CHARMING AND

romantic, shopping in Florence is never a chore. Because of the summer sun and the tradition of long, lazy lunches, you may find some stores closed from midday until 3pm, but they also stay open into the evening, which is the best time to peruse the market stalls, street vendors and boutiques.

Around the corner from the Gallery Hotel Art (see At the Hotel) is the **Lungarno Details** shop (27) www.lungarnodetails.com, which stocks many of the home furnishings from the group's luxury hotels. You'll find art pieces and little homewares items, like a piece of wrought iron shaped into a heart, or a perfect chilli in blown glass. And they ship internationally, too.

An alternative homewares boutique to check out is **Slow Design** (28) www.slow-design.it near the Palazzo Pitti, which stocks eco-friendly pieces like funky paper lanterns, recycled bags and (my favourite), a spoon that



also functions as a tea strainer for the perfect cuppa.



From here, it's not far to carry your shopping to the naggiest hats in town at **Antonio Gatto** (29) milliner's (established 1945). These hats are investment pieces – beautifully handmade by Gatto, from textiles with their own little stories. A military-inspired hat is made from linen taken from 1930s naval jackets, while another is made from wartime postal sacks. There are also cool and quirky straw fedoras in all sorts of *gelato* colours.

The gift shop at the **Uffizi Gallery** (see On the Street) is where to bag yourself all sorts of fun trinkets depicting famous works of art – from *The Birth of Venus* to illustrations by Leonardo da Vinci. Compact mirrors, bookmarks, umbrellas and ceramics – there's nothing here that doesn't have Florentine art stamped on it.

If it's designer clothing you're after, a short bus or train ride into the Tuscan countryside just outside the city takes you to **The Mall** (30) www.themall.it, a large luxury outlet with bargain prices on brands including Armani Jeans, Gucci, Bottega Veneta, Fendi, Balenciaga and more.

Back near the Ponte Vecchio, it's time to grab something for the lady in your life at the exquisite **Ortigia** shop (31) www.ortigiasicilia.com. This Sicilian brand creates a variety of scented bath and body products, and the luxe packaging – which comes in popping colours with shiny silver embossing – is a treat too.

LOTS IN STORE

-  Find some hip headgear at Antonio Gatto
-  It's all about luxury living at Lungarno Details



Hot stepper

In this city one name is synonymous with fancy footwear – Salvatore Ferragamo. The Florentine designer dressed every famous foot in the Hollywood glamour age of the 1940s and 1950s.

Today, in the **Salvatore Ferragamo** store (32) www.ferragamo.com you can buy replicas of these designs. How about a pair just like the gorgeous, handmade silver pumps, designed for Audrey Hepburn? For the larger-than-life showgirl, Carmen Miranda, there are commanding black and gold wedges. You could buy classy navy red and cream stilettos like those made for Marilyn Monroe. But the pair I wish I could swipe are the demure but oh-so-sexy gold strappy sandals designed for Eva Perón.

The store also houses a mini-museum with glass cases that display the originals worn by Hollywood's glitterati. Carrie Bradshaw, eat your heart out!



IN THE BAG

MUST-BUYS FROM FLORENCE



1/ ORTIGIA SOAP TRIO

Ortigia's products are made from natural ingredients, such as almond, olive and palm oils, lanolin, naturally distilled lavender and vegetable dyes. These soaps make perfect pocket-sized souvenirs.

€24

2/ I "BIKE" FLORENCE TEE

If you like to boast "Been there, done that", then this is the perfect T-shirt to help you brag about your bike tour of the city (see page 48). Available in large for men and a more slim-fit medium for girls on the go.

€10

3/ PINOCCHIO MARIONETTE

The Adventures of Pinocchio, first published in 1881, was written by Carlo Collodi, who lived just outside Florence. Pinocchio marionettes are for sale across the city in several different guises.

€12

4/ LEATHER BELT

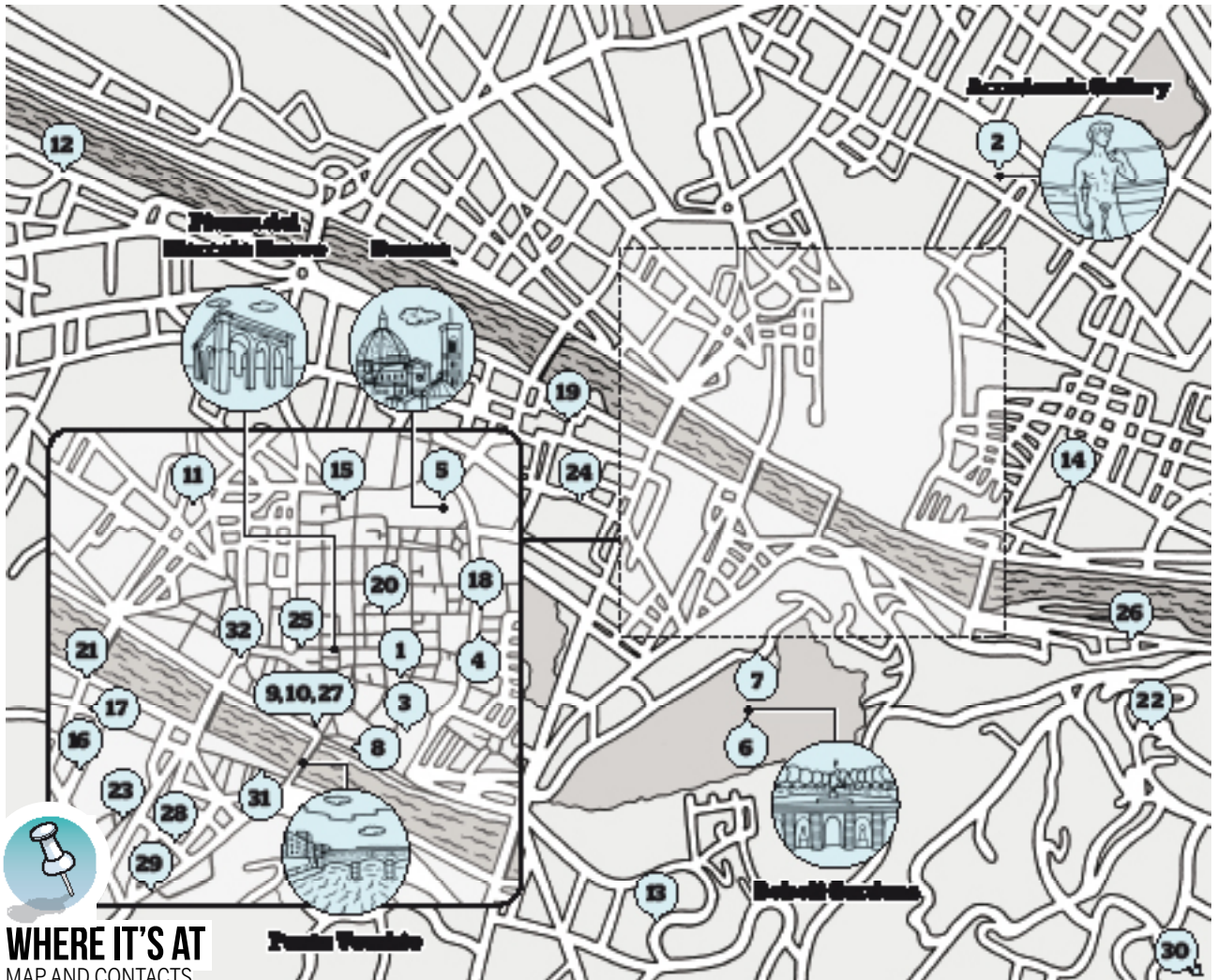
Leather goods are available at all the major markets in town, but we picked up ours at the pretty market on the Piazza del Mercato Nuovo, behind the famous bronze boar statue. Don't be afraid to barter!

€25

5/ COMPACT MIRROR

Visit any of the major gallery gift shops and bag yourself a souvenir featuring Botticelli's *The Birth of Venus*. Use this compact mirror (who better to adorn it than Venus?) to check there's no *gelato* on your nose.

€6



WHERE IT'S AT
MAP AND CONTACTS

1 Piazza della Signoria / 2 Accademia Gallery 58–60 Via Ricasoli, tel: +39 055 294883 / **3 Uffizi Gallery** Piazzale degli Uffizi, tel: +39 055 238 8651 / **4 Bargello Palace** 4 Via del Proconsolo, tel: +39 055 265 4321 / **5 Duomo** Piazza del Duomo, tel: +39 055 215380 / **6 Boboli Gardens** 1 Piazza Pitti, tel: +39 055 294883 / **7 Palazzo Pitti** 1 Piazza Pitti, tel: +39 055 294883 / **8 Ponte Vecchio / 9 Gallery Hotel Art** 5 Vicolo dell'Oro, tel: +39 055 2726 4000 / **10 Hotel Continentale** 6r

Vicolo dell'Oro, tel: +39 055 2726 4000 / **11 JK Place** 7 Piazza di Santa Maria Novella, tel: +39 055 264 5181 / **12 Riva Lofts** 98 Via Baccio Bandinelli, tel: +39 055 713 0272 / **13 Grand Hotel Villa Cora** 18 Viale Niccolò Machiavelli, tel: +39 055 228790 / **14 Relais Santa Croce** 87 Via Ghibellina, tel: +39 055 234 2230 / **15 Osteria dell' Olio** 10r Piazza dell'Olio, tel: +39 055 211466 / **16 Munaciello** 31r Via Maffia, tel: +39 055 287198 / **17 Il Santo Bevitore** 66r Via di Santo Spirito, tel: +39 055

211264 / **18 Alle Murate** 16r Via del Proconsolo, tel: +39 055 240618 / **19 Cestello Ristoclub** 8 Piazza di Cestello, tel: +39 055 264 5364 / **20 Florencetown** 1 Via de' Lamberti, tel: +39 055 0123994 / **21 La Carraia Gelateria** 25r Piazza Nazario Sauro, tel: +34 055 280695 / **22 Flò Lounge Bar** 84 Piazzale Michelangelo, tel: +39 055 650791 / **23 Volume** 5r Piazza Santo Spirito, tel: +34 055 238 1460 / **24 Dolce Vita** Piazza del Carmine, tel: +39 055 284595 / **25 Slowly**

Café 63r Via Porta Rossa, tel: +39 055 264 5354 / **26 Easy Living** 1 Lungarno Serristori / **27 Lungarno Details** 2P–4D Lungarno Acciaiuoli, tel: +39 055 2726 4095 / **28 Slow Design** 13r Sdrucchiolo dei Pitti, tel: +34 055 216758 / **29 Antonio Gatto** 5 Piazza Pitti, tel: +39 334 857 1879 / **30 The Mall** 8 Via Europa, tel: +39 055 865 7775 / **31 Ortigia** 12r Borgo S. Jacopo, tel: +39 055 282129 / **32 Salvatore Ferragamo** 2 Via de' Tornabuoni, tel: +39 055 336 0456

MAP ILLUSTRATION: MATT JOHNSTONE / JELLY ILLUSTRATION