



the flavor of florence

Best-selling author and culinary connoisseur **Kim Sunée** takes us on a tour of her favorite spots for gourmet fare and the most divine gelati

PHOTOGRAPHED BY ROBERTO FRANKENBERG

Florence skyline (top) photographed by Jeremy Woodhouse





after

more than 10 years living and eating in Paris and Provence, I always feel a bit guilty when my heart races at the thought of France's luscious neighbor. I dream of Italy's curves and hillsides promising brunello; Chianti; and sweet, fresh *ricotta di pecora*. In the cab ride from the airport to the hotel **Continente**, I remember all that I miss about Tuscany, and Florence in particular. A woman in high heels rides past on a shiny blue bicycle. Men wave to me with a robust "Ciao, bella!" It sounds unbelievable, but everyone here seems happy and purposeful—from the newspaper vendor to grandmothers choosing *schacciata*, flatbread warm from the bakery ovens. It could be the light as it reverberates off the Arno River or the sun-drenched frescoes that surprise you at every turn.

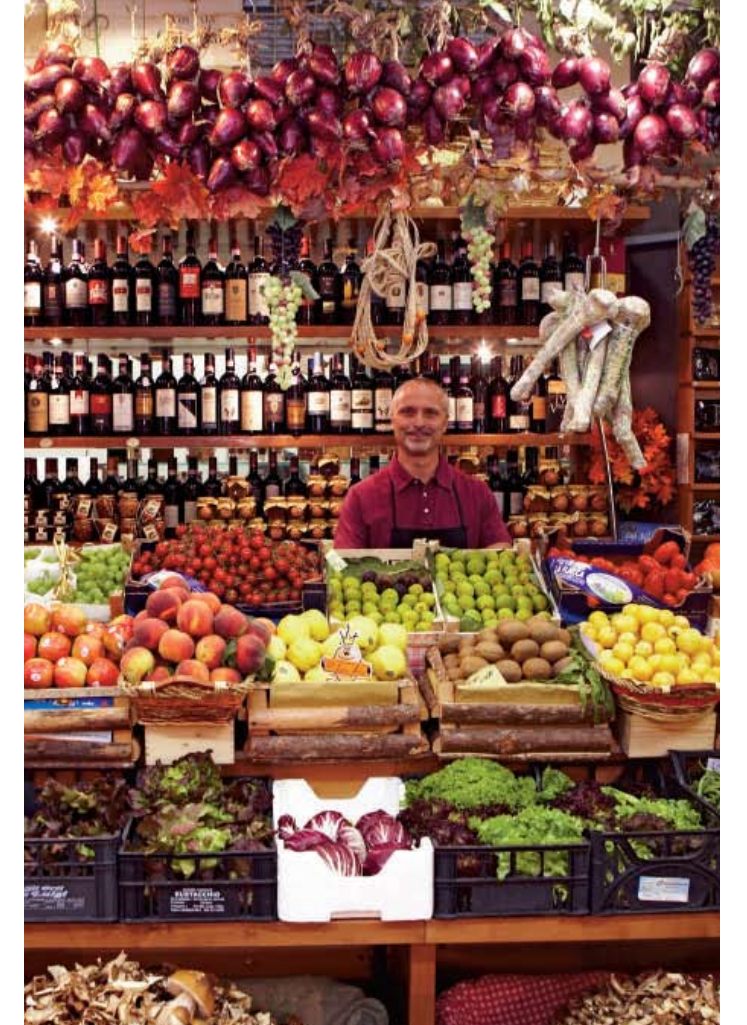
We speed past displays of fresh produce, and I am already tasting fried yellow blossoms of squash, sweet cured ham, and handmade confections. "The land of Dante and Petrarch," the driver reminds me. As he carries my luggage into the lobby of the sleek yet cheerful hotel, owned by the Ferragamo group, he adds, "I may be cabdriver, but I am poet in the heart."

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Poetry is abundant here—it's in the beauty of Renaissance art and architecture, in the impeccable design of luxury goods, and in the kitchens of home cooks and chefs. But at this particular moment, as I open the balcony doors of my room to look out over the Ponte Vecchio, my focus is on Chiara Massiero, a sturdy, handsome woman who is crossing the bridge toward one of my favorite restaurants, **Cammillo Trattoria**.

"How many days you stay here?" the bellman asks. I do a quick calculation in my head: "About 12 meals' worth." He nods approvingly as he hands me a city guide.

It's almost lunchtime, so I gather my camera and head over to Cammillo. Several years ago, a friend encouraged me



to have dinner here. After discovering that they offer the best *crostini di fegatini*—toasted bread topped with warm chicken livers—I ate there three days in a row. Each time, I was rewarded with a perfect rendition of this lusty Tuscan appetizer, followed by white beans with grated *bottarga*; pasta with fresh peas and cream; juicy, tender bits of fried rabbit; and fresh potato crisps. This time, Chiara tells me how her grandfather started the restaurant in the 1940s, down the street from its current location. "I was tending the cash register when I was 12," she says, setting down a chunk of pecorino sprinkled with sugar and torched like *crème brûlée*. She drizzles it with aged balsamic vinegar before allowing me a taste. "Ah, there's

Above: Stefano Conti's stall at the Mercato Centrale, with its beautiful display of Italian produce, is a must-stop for food lovers. Opposite page: Looking into the 16th-century palazzo of Enoteca Pinchiorri, you know you're in for a spectacular meal. Previous pages, clockwise from top left: The Duomo dominates Florence's skyline. Author Kim Sunée strolls the streets of the city. Enoteca Pinchiorri's Michelin-starred cuisine: polenta-filled *agnolotti* with scampi, tomato, and olives. The mustachioed Fabio Picchi of Cibrè and Teatro del Sale creates wonders in the kitchen. Sicilian sun-dried tomatoes are a perfect gift to bring home from the Mercato Centrale.



Above: One of the original portraits of Dante is said to be on display at Alle Murate, an elegant restaurant/museum. Below: Of the many wonderful gelaterias in Florence, Sunée's favorite is Carabé. Opposite page: Indulge in marzipan and fruit tarts at Caffè Gilli, a favorite spot to stop and recharge after sightseeing.



Massimo.” A man in coral linen pants appears in the doorway. Massimo, Chiara’s husband, smiles and begins to usher plates of his homemade pancetta to the regulars, including me. “You are like family,” he affirms.

Down the street, I discover another type of family at **Olio & Convivium**, a co-op run by Tommaso Vezzani and friends. Part gourmet food shop, part catering company, it is dedicated to preserving Tuscan and Florentine culinary traditions. Tommaso shows me his choice selection of prosciutti, olive oils, and sauces, and makes me promise to come back for a bite after browsing the antiques shops.

It is impossible for me to visit any town without stopping in at the local food market. In Florence I head to the **Mercato Centrale**, where Stefano and Grazia Conti offer some of Tuscany’s best olive oils and vinegars, along with dried cherry tomatoes from Sicily. Across the way, I stop at **da Nerbone**, where a standing room crowd devours superb sandwiches of boiled beef and the much-loved tripe.

For a seated lunch or dinner, Fabio Picchi’s empire includes the elegant **Cibrè** restaurant and the more casual **Trattoria**. However, for me, the real fun is to be had at **Teatro del Sale**, the private club across the street. The evening begins with a cornucopia of antipasti—carrots and potatoes; chickpeas with lemon and olive oil; potato bread; tomatoes with olive oil, vinegar, and herbs; beets; and pan-fried *pepperoncini* (*friarielli*). Then when I least expect it, a bell rings, and Fabio appears at the kitchen window, yelling, as if announcing the day’s most important news: “*Attenzione!* In five minutes, come to the window for the best *polpettine*.” He hands out small plates of the lightest savory veal meatballs you’ll ever put in your mouth. Then there is another series of beckoning at the window with promises of *salade russe*; confit of sweet *cipollini*; eggplant with capers; steamed mussels from Sardinia; rotisserie chicken and sausage; and finally, a bright lemon sorbet made with, as Fabio tells me, “love and other ingredients.” At around 9 p.m. plates and dishes get cleared





and, as if Fabio weren't enough of a performance, a show commences, everything from tango to poetry to an aria from a favorite opera.

For another extraordinary dining experience, I make reservations at **Enoteca Pinchiorri**, where French chef Annie Féolde reigns supreme. Not only do Annie and her husband, Giorgio Pinchiorri, offer some of the finest cuisine in the region, but their wine cellar also houses about \$34 million worth of wine, including the largest collections of Henri Jayer Vosne-Romanée Cros Parantoux and Richebourg.

One of my favorite ways to take a break from sightseeing is with a refreshing cocktail at **Caffè Gilli** on the Piazza della Repubblica. Or, after visiting *David* at the Accademia, I head to my favorite gelateria, the Sicilian-style **Carabé**. The first time I tasted anything from this unassuming gelateria, it was 4 p.m., and I was departing the next morning. After one bite of almond granita and upon hearing that they closed at 7 p.m., I walked around the

Duomo, returned for another serving, walked around again, and came back for one more bite.

This time, owner Antonio Lisciandro greets me. “Keem,” he calls. “Come and taste this one—cantaloupe. And this one—fresh whipped cream.” I am in heaven but so animated with this tasting frenzy that I end up twisting my ankle.

“Sit,” Antonio tells me as he packs some gelato into plastic wrap and places it on my bruise. As I contemplate the difference between the healing powers of gelato and a pack of frozen peas, he shows me blueprints for the gelato school he plans to open this year. “You will come to visit, yes?” he asks. Yes, I nod. I will follow this man anywhere if he will feed me spoonfuls of granita and gently ice down my ankle with handmade gelato. “You will come back,” he says again, and this time it's not really a question.

I've learned that Florence is a city of affirmatives. A city of return, a place where everyone wants confirmation that you will love their produce, shop their markets, visit their galleries, and always come back to grace their tables. ■

For Resources, see page 103.

Above, left to right: Cheese, truffles, and butter at Olio & Convivium—what more does one need? If you have room for dessert, try the cheesecake with orange marmalade at Cibrè. Opposite page: Cammillo Trattoria has been serving Tuscan specialties since the 1940s.