

COOL HUNTING

December 24, 2024

Inside Florence, Italy's THE PLACE Firenze Boutique Hotel

By David Graver



Situated on Piazza Santa Maria Novella, with a front terrace that offers a charming vantage of historic Florence, THE PLACE FIRENZE is comprised of 20 distinct guest rooms—many with views—across four floors, as well as enchantingly designed shared spaces and food and beverage outlets. It's a rare Florentine-owned boutique property that continues to evolve. Few can offer as much insight as Claudio Meli, the property's general manager, who was born and raised in Florence. We spoke with Meli about the property's partnership constant state of advancement, enveloping service, partnership with Ginori, and it's unique relationship with The Place of Wonders, its partner foundation that aims to maintain artisan skills in Florence.



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Despite how majestic THE PLACE feels, there's a gentle human touch to everything. Can you explain this?

That's why THE PLACE is not really a hotel. The moment that we become a hotel, I won't be here. Right now, you ring a bell, somebody opens the door and welcomes you home. I always say that we welcome you rather than check you in. A check in is something you do at the airport, with your luggage. When you invite friends to your home, you welcome them. You don't check-in your friends. I love to meet my guests, to sit with them. I love to talk about my love of Florence, because I'm the only GM of a 5-star hotel in Florence that's really Florentine.



There is Florentine design everywhere. So many things are from Florence—whether it is Santa Maria Novella to Ginori 1735. Ginori is everywhere, it's even the soap holder in the bathroom.

We have been Florentine since our first day. I opened this place in 2003. At the time, it was called the J.K. Place Firenze. Since months in, the Babini family arrived as owners. We maintained the original name for years. During Covid, we transformed it into our own brand, THE PLACE. We dropped the initials, because they were not ours, but we kept THE PLACE.

Why “The Place?” What does it mean?

Because we created “this place.” From the very first day, there was an integration into Florence, this specific sense of place. When I travel, there's nothing more important to me. You can get luxury brands in outlets or airports, but if you come to Florence, you get tailoring. It makes a difference because it is something done just for you. It's a unique piece. That's what we are trying to do at THE PLACE. That's why they call us tailors of hospitality, which I really love. We try to be sartorial in the approach that we have to hospitality—and that's why many of the things that you see are made by the artisans of Florence. Ginori for sure, but then all the glass, and so much more.

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We've noticed that every glass is actually different for things like cocktails, or every cocktail has its own type of glassware, really.

Yes, and also, every cocktail has its own specific style of coaster or napkin.



Where are the napkins from?

The napkins are coming from Julia B, which is this beautiful shop that only works with artisans, too, and it's here on Via dei Fossi. We've had the Ginori partnership for ten years, maybe more. Ginori, for me, is like mythology, it's incredible. I'm Florentine! During fashion week, they proposed that they present one of their collections at THE PLACE. They asked me, "may we give you one of our collection to use for breakfasts, or to serve coffee at THE PLACE, during fashion week?" I liked the idea but I told them that I cannot accept.

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They asked me why. I explained that I would love to accept but in a different way. I said, “why don’t we come to you and we mix different collections? THE PLACE is a home. At home, it’s a mix. They said yes. It was the first time they did that. Now they publish a catalog, which is called Mix Match. It’s so fun.



Are there other partnerships like this?

That’s why it came to mind, this idea for the Babini family to create their foundation for artisans, which is called The Place of Wonders. We have so many different artisans. We have a very cool one that just joined—a young guy in the north of Florence that does bespoke sneakers, these made-to-measure bespoke sneakers. You can decide which leather you prefer, which kind of details. You can also bring your own textiles, your leathers. He will make something just for you.



COOL HUNTING has written about The Place of Wonders. The venue seems deeply connected to the spirit of Florence.

It’s born from the passion we have for this city, for Florence, and for our artisans. Other hotels, of course, are doing projects with artisans but our goal is beyond that. It’s to help artisans to survive. When you visit The Place of Wonders, your donation goes to a foundation that’s immediately invested in scholarships with the School of Jewelry, which is in Oltrarno, which is also one of our wonders because it’s so beautiful to visit the school, where these students are for three years. We have incredible students.

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We stayed in room 24, a two-floor penthouse, which felt like the epitome of all the values of THE PLACE. Are other rooms as special and nuanced as that?

Nothing is really standard here, all the rooms are different. That one is unique because we have only one penthouse, and you can see the Duomo. You have the private terrace, which is pretty special. I hope to have the possibility to enjoy also the terrace. But then we have the master rooms that are facing the Piazza Santa Maria Novella. These are bigger rooms in terms of square meters, with three big windows overlooking Santa Maria Novella. For example, master room number one, which is on the first floor, is the only one with a balcony. It's beautiful. It's nice because of the Piano Nobile, the first floor, so it has higher ceilings.

Then we have, for example, a loft, a panoramic loft, which is two floors and two bathrooms. In that room, you can stay with up to four people. It's connected to a junior suite, which is also a duplex. If you close the door, we call it the grand suite and you can stay with up to seven people. It has a fantastic view of Santa Maria Novella. We have another room, which is, in my opinion, the sexiest. It's number 18, and it has this shower that I call the king-size shower because it's huge.



All of your food and beverage outlets have such presence. They're open to the public and one can book if they wanted to have a beautiful cocktail on the terrace?

Absolutely. We do have this incredible terrace, which is 100 square meters. It is the widest patio for a 5-star hotel in a monumental area in Florence. There is no other. We have just 20 rooms, but we have that huge space. That allow us to work a lot with people who are not staying here, but are welcome to come.

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We also host a lot of events. We can privatize so many of our spaces. Usually, the only space that is only for our guest is the 4th floor terrace because we wanted to reserve something for guests alone.



Is your restaurant popular with locals as well as tourists?

Yes. It's very popular, the restaurant, which is called The Kitchen & The Bar. It offers nonstop dining, because we open at 7:30AM until, let's say, midnight. We're very popular for cocktails, too. We have this Negroni experience, which is pretty amazing. You can try seven different kind of Negronis from the usual Negroni, the classic, to the smoking Negroni, which we call The Gentleman.



And the rooms were recently redone, some in 2023 and 2024?

All the rooms are now complete. The hotel is finished. The only part that we will probably redo is the terrace on the 4th floor, but everything is brand new. We started the renovation in 2021, and the last rooms, they were done this year. We reopened in March 2024. In 2025, we will close for two months because we will renovate other areas. We always invest a lot into the property and the Babini family, they always invest because even if everything is working, we want to improve.