



Story **Marco Ferri** Photographs **Tommaso Sartori**

THE ANCIENT HOUSE OF HEALING

Florence's Officina Profumo-Farmaceutica di Santa Maria Novella, one of the oldest pharmacies in the world, dates back to the thirteenth century. Today, using the highest quality natural ingredients, output still follows the age-old procedures once used by Dominican friars to prepare medicinal remedies, balms, and creams for the ailing



“The stranger will pause here to contemplate the handsome door and the steps that lead into the Pharmacy...” So begins a passage written in 1790 by the Dominican friar Vincenzo Fineschi, in which he describes the door opening off the large cloister of the church of Santa Maria Novella in Florence (which, today, is part of the school for non-commissioned officers in the Carabinieri police force). There are two buildings on the Santa Maria Novella site – the Officina Profumo-Farmaceutica di Santa Maria Novella (pharmacy) and the church. In Fineschi’s time, the pharmacy was regarded as an obligatory stop for erudite visitors on the Grand Tour, because it had been in existence for nearly six centuries and had been run as a business since 1541, as recorded in the first book of accounts.

Medicinal herbs had been grown in the Santa Maria Novella grounds since 1221, following the arrival in Florence of a group of Dominican friars who settled at the church’s monastery. Medications and balms were prepared in the small infirmary at the monastery, beginning a story that continues to the present day.

In 1612, as demand for the medicines increased, Friar Angiolo Marchissi decided he would open the pharmacy to the public using the beautiful entrance designed by Matteo Nigetti, one of the architects of the Medici chapels. Grand Duke Ferdinand II de’ Medici’s family were regular visitors to the premises, which, over the years, had been embellished with frescoes and notable sculptures. The grand duke himself had taken note of the “excellence of the Pharmacy” and

granted it the special title His Royal Highness’s *Fonderia* (distillery).

The link between the Dominican pharmacy and the Medici family predates this moment: back in the first half of the sixteenth century, a special product – *Acqua della regina* or “Water of the Queen” (now sold at the pharmacy under the name *Acqua di Colonia Santa Maria Novella*, using the original citrus and bergamot formula) – was created for Catherine de’ Medici, a distant relative of the grand duke. She later took this particular Florentine speciality, which is thought to be the first *eau de Cologne*, to France with her when she married Henry of Valois, who became the king of France.

By the late eighteenth century, when a new entrance was opened onto the *Via della Scala*, the pharmacy’s reputation had spread beyond national borders, and the Dominican friars’ products had

After renovations in 1848, one of the monastery’s chapels became the sales room (page 20). Below: antique glassware from the pharmacy museum.

Opposite, clockwise from top left: the ceiling in the entrance vestibule; the main entrance hall from the *Via della Scala* opened in the late 18th century; detail

of a Giottoesque fresco by Mariotto di Nardo; portraits of all the pharmacy’s managers since 1612 adorn the walls of the Green Room

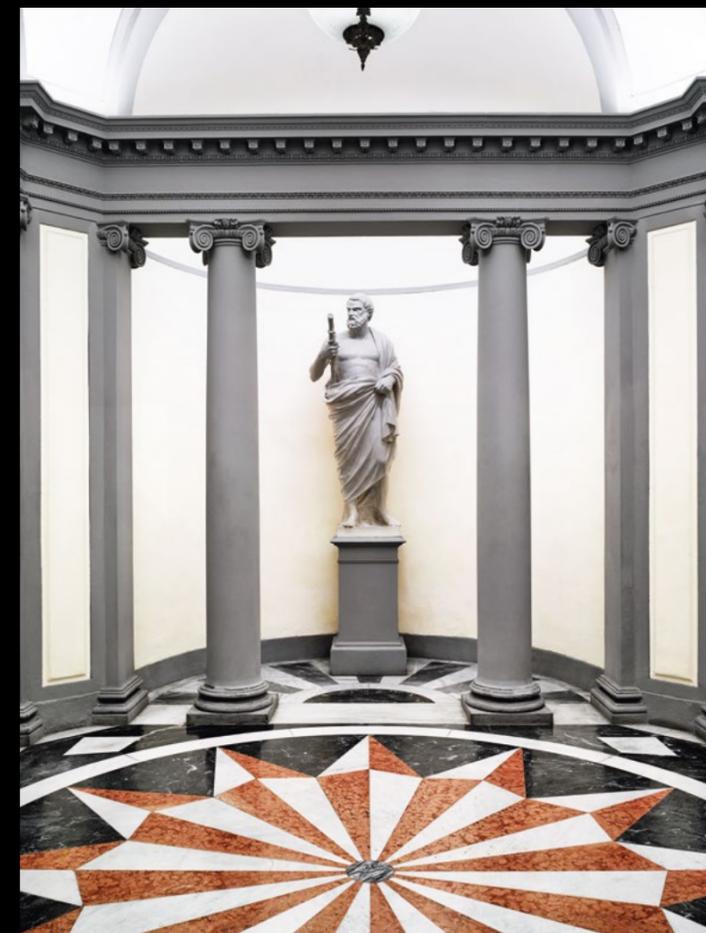
gained renown even in faraway Russia, India, and China; this was thanks, also, to the growing network of travelers who had visited. As a result, production was boosted, prompting a change in the use of the premises: the Chapel of San Niccolò, a place of historic importance where the eight-member group known as “gli otto santi del Popolo di Dio” had taken shelter during the Ciompi Revolt of 1378, became the *Fonderia*’s warehouse.

Some years later, in 1848, the entire structure of the pharmacy building underwent renovation and hence became an even greater attraction thanks to a perfect combination of areas that span the history of the building (via the rooms that house the museum) and the sales room. Today the pharmacy continues to be, above all, a very well-supplied herbalist, where visitors purchase goods in the evocative sales room, having passed through the elegant Green Room – a reception area decorated in an eighteenth-century style and embellished with the crest of the Dominican order. It was in this room that the pharmacy’s drink specialities were served in the eighteenth century: *Alkermes* (a spicy aromatic drink) or *China* (with healing extracts from cinchona bark), but above all a chocolate drink, which was in vogue at the time.

In 1866, as the Italian government confiscated church property in an attempt to reduce the influence of religion on public life, ownership of the pharmacy business passed into state hands. However, shortly afterward Cesare Augusto Stefani, a nephew of the last religious director, took over the tenancy. He bought back the company’s name, goodwill, and movable assets, and the pharmacy was passed down through four generations of his family.

Toward the end of the 1980s, when the pharmacy was going through a difficult patch, an event occurred that would radically change its fortunes. Eugenio Alphandery, an engineer and long-time customer, answered a call to mend a machine that was used to make the pharmaceutical pastilles. He discovered that the company was about to be sold for very little and decided to purchase it, buying out the old partners within a few years. Since 2000, Alphandery has been the major shareholder in what has become a public company with shops and franchises spread across five continents. Despite expansion, the shop in *Via della Scala* is still the hub of the business, occupying nearly twelve thousand square feet on four floors.

Visitors entering via the main entrance and walking down the first few feet of the corridor to the Green Room are about to embark on a unique sensory journey taking in unforgettable fragrances and sights. The essences and scents of medicinal herbs blend and mingle inside the building, generating emotions that are further exalted in the *Antica Spezieria* (old pharmacy) room, where herbal products are sold today. The air is filled with the smell of ancient preparations such as colognes; triple essences and pure extracts; products for the face, hands, feet, and hair; soaps; creams; and the signature pot pourri – still produced using local herbs and flowers.





The grand Antica Spezieria houses the beautiful and ornate original 18th-century cabinets and furnishings in which the pharmacy's products were stored

Viewing the historic interiors of the Via della Scala site, including those recently restored and reopened in 2012 to mark its four hundredth anniversary, is immensely rewarding. For example, an isolated fresco discovered in the well of a former goods elevator can now be admired from the passenger elevator, which stops between floors. The restoration project included the expansion of the museum areas, which now provide an exceptional opportunity to view the old production equipment, precious glassware (including the famous “Florentine bottle,” which looks as if it has come straight from a medieval alchemist’s workshop), hand-painted apothecary jars, and historic copper and bronze apparatus, which have been jealously and carefully guarded at the pharmacy over the centuries. The history of past traditions is backed up, where possible, by the written word, and in this sense the museum’s library, located in the Chapel of San Niccolò, provides a wonderful background to the exhibits. Equally, the room’s wall frescoes by Mariotto di Nardo are now marvelously clear after restoration work completed under the guidance of the art historian Anna Bisceglia. As Cristina Acidini, a former superintendent for Florence’s historical heritage, said, “[Nardo’s] series connects the International Gothic and the Renaissance; [it is] the work of an artist who is still little known.”

May 2014 welcomed the inauguration of the aromatic herb garden, a recreation of the site’s original *hortus conclusus* (enclosed garden), intended to delight all the senses as visitors stroll among trees, flowers, and medicinal herbs. While the sense of hearing is gratified by the guides who describe the pharmacy’s interior and the wealth of history it represents, those seeking stimulation for touch and taste can relish the temptations offered by a number of edible specialties, including various types of honey, jam, cookie, and confectionery, not to mention nine types of chocolate. To drink, there is a choice of liqueurs, blended teas, herbal infusions, and tisanes ranging from age-old recipes to dietary supplements, as well as chocolate and coffee, all of which are available in a tasting area.

But the future of the pharmacy may lie in a formula of tradition and innovation, to which Eugenio Alphantery is firmly wedded. Tradition is strictly respected in terms of the ingredients and recipes used for the various articles on sale, and every one of them is manufactured in the futuristic laboratory less than two miles from the company’s base in Via della Scala. Innovation, on the other hand, is the passport to the future: the company’s products are sold not only in Florence but also in larger Italian cities and around the world. However, “rather than increasing the number of our outlets,” Alphantery concludes, “I am keen to add value to our historic business, because four centuries of history is a heritage that is absolutely unique.” ♦

Translated by Lucinda Byatt

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