

Let's Pause for a Coffee

M.G. P. (April 26, 2014)



Nowhere else is there a coffee culture as rich and varied as in the boot country...

Italians are convinced that, besides pizza, they also invented coffee. Particularly espresso, which is the only coffee Italians drink.

Often, Italians visiting New York will turn up their noses in chains like Starbucks or Gregory's. Italians living here don't always feel the same way ("as long as it's not burnt," they say), even if they often prefer small Italian cafes such as Zibetto Espresso Bar and Via Quadronno.

But it is true that nowhere else is there a coffee culture as rich and varied as in Italy. Every region has its own style. In Milan, a frenetic international city, it's just a caffeine pit-stop at the bar to better face the day. In Venice, once Italy's main trade gateway to the Orient, coffee is flavored with spices: vanilla, cocoa, or dried fruit. In Turin they serve the delicious "Bicerin," a blend of chocolate, coffee, and cream. And in Tuscany, the refined home of Renaissance art, you find a perfectly balanced coffee: not too acidic, not too bitter.



Further south, in Rome and Lazio, the flavor of the coffee begins to grow more intense, the foam thicker and darker. And here comes Campania, considered the capital of coffee. Legend has it that the secret of Naples' insuperable coffee is the water from the slopes of Mt. Vesuvius, but in truth it comes from the love put into its preparation. They say that in Naples coffee is not loved because it is good, but it's good because it's loved.

It is a true cultural phenomenon and as such has its unique rituals and niceties. The cup, for instance, must always be warm, and before filling it you must put a pinch of coffee grounds to add aroma, color, and intensity. And how can we forget Sicily, where the richest, most aromatic coffee fills the famous "cup of friendship:" a coffee for two, where the first sips are for the guest and the rest is for the person who offered the coffee.

In Naples there is a somewhat similar tradition as well, the so-called "caffè sospeso" or "pending coffee." According to tradition, a wealthy gentleman would order two coffees at the bar in the morning: one he drank, the other he left "pending" for someone who could not afford his own. To this day there are people who enter bars asking for a sospeso.

What does it really mean to drink coffee in Italy? In an episode of our TV program i-ItalyNY (every Saturday at 11pm and Sunday at 1pm on NYCTV, Channel 25) our friend and columnist Fred Plotkin, a noted expert on Italian food and culture, described the essence of Italian coffee culture as follows: "In Italy, when you say to someone andiamo a prendere un caffè, what that means is not only let's go and have a coffee, but let's spend time together, let's take a break from our busy lives, share a coffee, and then go on with our lives... they call it la pausa del caffè, the pause for a coffee." It's much more than just a coffee break.

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