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On The Table #16

Espresso Coffee - A New Cuisine

Dear cyber reader, Espresso has two meanings in classical Italian. One being, quick or rapid, and the second, something made especially for you. Thus, *caffè espresso* is a tiny cup of thick coffee made quickly, and especially for you, to the preference of the customer.

These shades of meaning were relayed to me on the train into Rome by Italian food critic Bruno Moschella, and punctuated by quick, stabbing gestures with his small black reading glasses. I was on my first culinary pilgrimage to Northern Italy in 1989.

Espresso is a machine coffee. Advances in espresso are wedded to advances in boiler technology and the ability to control water pressure and temperature with great precision.

Machine designs debuted at the Milan Fair of 1906 by Bezzara and La Pavoni, often cited by coffee historians as the beginning of espresso, relied on steam to create pressure on the coffee. Although these early machines featured coffee "made especially for you," ie, one cup at a time, direct steam pressure resulted in very high brewing temperatures. High temperatures, above 205 degrees Fahrenheit burned up aromatic compounds during brewing. And, on occasion the machines exploded.

Machines of this type were made obsolete by a patent filed in 1946 by the Gaggia Company of Italy. I date the arrival of the *caffè espresso* on the world scene to this 1946 patent to create pressure with a spring piston assembly. Thus, temperature could be independently adjusted and we see the emergence of true espresso crema.

Coffee before this patent, from 1906 until 1946 I call "*caffè express*" as it is made especially for you, but is lacking in the red-brown crema that characterizes *caffè espresso*.

For centuries aristocrats, persons of royal descent, and various layabouts with extra money and time on their hands, have been seduced by the aroma of freshly ground coffee. They all wanted that aromatic experience to be heightened into a flavor you could drink. The history of human attempts to seduce the aromatic essence of freshly roasted

coffee into a cup is wildly inventive, producing machines of great visual beauty and a variety of clever approaches, all of which fell comically short of the goal. (For a history of the coffee machines see Edward Bramah's "Coffee Machines of the World.")

Only pressurized brewing water held at a precise temperature throughout the brewing cycle can come close to transporting all of coffee's sublime aromas into a cup. To paraphrase Signor Pierro Bambi, president of LaMarzocco, the goal is to preserve all of the aromas through the rigors of brewing.

As professional in this new cuisine I can attest that there are a host of techniques and variables to be controlled masterfully to approach a sweet coffee. The cuisine is so delicate, displaying Jekyll and Hyde characteristics to the hapless suitor, you can think of it in terms of a sauce so rarefied that an error in pan temperature of two degrees would result in a sauce that tasted fantastically bitter.



Fig. 1: Espresso coming out of the porta-filter is a dense foam the Italians call **crema**.

Enjoyment of Caffe Espresso

Espresso Ristretto-the straight shot

In Italy the shot is called ristretto-the short pour, "restricted" to the finest flavors the coffee has to offer. A single espresso ristretto is about one ounce total volume, though may be even smaller.

Forcing water at nine bars of pressure through hard packed fresh ground coffee produces what the Italians call "crema". Impossible to define, it has been described as a polyphasic colloidal foam. Polyphasic means changing states, going through phases. With over a thousand aromatic compounds continuously breaking down and combining and a foam structure that is releasing its gas and aromas with each passing second, espresso is a perfect cuisine to have developed in the second half of the 20th Century. It is a superb example of chaos. You can guess at what it is by determining its chemistry relative to an exact time after brewing-but by the time you have picked up your pencil it is something else. Espresso is a culinary chimera.

The ultimate coffee extract is as thick as honey and can be enjoyed in a single bracing mouthful. Espresso should offer a taste balanced between varietal flavors of the regional coffees used in the blend and the nuttiness presented by the degree of roast. A sweet complexity is the roasters goal.

The darker the roast is the more bitter the final coffee will be. Coffee roasts found in Italy vary from a very deep brown with a light sheen of oil on the surface of the beans in Southern

Italy, to a mahogany brown with a dry bean in the north. Espresso coffee is always made from a blend of different varietal coffees, and traditional Italian blends always contain some robusta coffee to enhance the life of the crema. Crema, the red-brown foam that is the index of full flavor in espresso, traps the more noble flavors present in the roasted coffee in a cup, as well as offering the palate a pleasing, thick texture to the coffee. Crema should be very thick featuring a velvet mouth-feel, and it should remain in the cup for at least two minutes after brewing. Of course for full flavor you should enjoy the espresso right after brewing. The Italians usually have espresso with a bit of sugar.

In Italy the espresso connoisseur pays a lot of attention to the aftertaste present in the mouth following the espresso. More subtle flavors will emerge on the palate for up to a half an hour playfully competing for the attention of the gourmand. The reason for this phenomenon is the extremely low surface tension presented by the crema. It literally infuses down in-between the pupia on your tongue forming a layer of imbedded coffee flavor that gives up its secrets one at a time. Again, ever changing...

Espresso Macchiato

A single shot of espresso marked with a dab of milk or milk foam. Served in a traditional Italian "tazzina" of perhaps 1 and 1/2 ounce total volume. It is the mid-morning coffee.

Steamed milk and espresso coffee are a classic combination as the act of steaming sweetens milk which softens the impact of the espresso coffee. In addition, coffee drinking has been shown to leech calcium from the body, something that milk contains. The effect on the straight espresso flavors is to emphasize caramelized sugars and reduce bitterness or astringency. However you lose all of the varietal complexities in the blend, and the enjoyable aftertaste.

Cappuccino

Steamed milk with a single shot of espresso coffee served in a porcelain, wide mouth cup of no more than seven ounces total volume. While generally featuring a velvet textured heavy milk foam, cappuccino can be ordered without foam in Italy. It is the Italian breakfast coffee enjoyed with brioche.



Fig. 2: As in any cuisine, presentation is important. This is a caffè latte featuring a **rosette** pattern.

Seattle Style Caffè Latte

In Northern Italy they are a small cup people. Enjoying diminutive portions of very strong flavors from the Grappa liqueur to the espresso coffee. Here in The States, a young frisky part of the world, we are a big cup people. For better or for worse we associate something bigger with something better.

Thus, Caffè Latte is born. Featuring steamed milk and a double shot of fine espresso served in a cup of 10 to 12 ounces, to satisfy our need for a big cup while preserving Italian brewing standards to preserve the coffee's sweet flavor.

Caffè Latte can be ordered with chocolate syrup, creating a caffè mocha. Caramel syrup, can be added to make a caramel latte, and on and on.... The customer is able to choose from a pantheon of syrups from Irish cream to licorice, with predictably varying degrees of culinary merit. It can be prepared with non-fat milk to whole milk and still produce a beautiful rosette pattern.

Espresso is a superior coffee method due to the pressurized brewing water, combined with a short brewing time, separating out undesirable flavors and excess caffeine from the sweet coffee flavor. It is a world unto itself offering the coffee lover repeated trips to the "bar" without stomach upset or over caffeination occurring.

Once accustomed to enjoying coffee in the form of well prepared caffè espresso there is no going back to drip cones or the French Press. Longer brewing times and larger quantities of water tend to extract too much caffeine and bitterness from the coffee and hide its sweet flavors. Good espresso ends up being a more gentle way to worship the roasted coffee bean, something we like to do.

Ciao for now!

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