

Excerpt from

A PEOPLE'S HISTORY OF COFFEE AND CAFES

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ESPRESSO!

IN JANUARY 1941 an article appeared in the *New York Times* entitled 'An Ode to Empty Cups' which captured a bit of doggerel that went: 'When in Rome a King held sway, I drank coffee every day. An Emperor he became as well, still I sniffed the coffee smell. When he seized Albania's land, even that mere smell was banned. If Benito stays, I know, even the coffee pot will go.'

Whether or not Italians were actually singing this mournful song in the harsh winter of '41 or if, more likely, it was a creature of the invisible minister for war propaganda, World War II left Italians coffee deprived. Even as far back as 1939, Mussolini's government was urging the people to reduce coffee consumption, barraging them with desperate slogans which aimed to convince a caffeine starved populace that they should return to the customs of their ancestors; rhetorically asking, in scornful tone, 'Did the Romans drink coffee?'

But for all their bravado, the Fascist government knew coffee was a vital commodity for Italians and the lack of a steady bean supply was bad for morale. In fact, Mussolini's plan for a new Mediterranean empire included the coffee rich regions of North Africa where thousands of Italian colonists were encouraged to settle. However, it wasn't as easy

as the legions of old; Ethiopians in particular were less than accommodating and barefoot Abyssinians countered Mussolini's military might with extended guerrilla actions which included destruction of coffee plantations.

Unwilling to use their precious gold reserves to purchase ready supplies of coffee from South America, the Italians had tried bartering with the coffee producing nations trading military equipment, including submarines and fighter planes, for beans. The supplies they gained, however, were far from sufficient to satisfy demand and by April, 1939, a strict rationing regime was in force that limited individual purchases of coffee to seven ounces. By 1941 even that pittance was gone and coffee was essentially unavailable except through black marketeers who brought in haphazard supplies by way of Switzerland.

Coffee didn't return to Italy's grocery shelves until 1946. After a caffeine drought of nearly seven years, Italians were more than ready to renew an enduring romance with their favourite beverage. In the ravages of their war-torn country, cafés with coffee machines that had been coldly collecting dust began to come alive again with a long forgotten zeal. Coffee was back. The nightmare had ended.

The Italian post-war economic miracle was caffeine charged. No matter where the money to fund it came from, nor the Faustian bargain made,

the Phoenix rose once more. From flattened cities with starving kids to a level of prosperity never before witnessed, Italy was on the move. And few things symbolised this extravagant energy as much as espresso.

Italian espresso was more than a drink; it was a way of life. The brew, the special roast and the machines that extracted its essence, connected not only to the gastronomic sensitivities of a population bred on taste as an alternative religion, it also harnessed the energies of communal creativity which had been stifled so terribly by Italy's dalliance with Fascism. What's more, it allowed a renewed bond with the nation's greatest resource – the Italian diaspora.

A 1927 study by the Italian government estimated that over nine million of its citizens were living abroad—one fifth of the entire nation. Vibrant Italian communities had been set up throughout North and South America, Oceania and Africa. Even more communities could be found in Britain and throughout the continent of Europe.

Unlike many immigrants who broke ties with their past and their native homelands, Italians tended to maintain strong connections with their country and their families who remained on Italian soil. Not only did these overseas Italians provide money through remittances sent to relatives back home, they also formed a nucleus for distribution of Italian goods and services.

By the end of World War II, Italian communities in cities like San Francisco, New York, London and Melbourne had re-established links that had been closed off during the conflict. Within a few short years, the war (with Italy, at least) had been forgotten and people whose lives had been put on hold for the duration, if not shattered by the brutalities of battle, rushed to rekindle dreams that had been temporarily forgotten. Artists, writers, painters, poets were energised to make the world anew. It was a time of flowering, a time to let loose after so many years of misery and hardship.

Unlike Italy, people in the English-speaking world had coffee during the war, as the supply line, especially from South and Central America, had never been cut off. But coffee in Britain and North America, at least, was a bog standard, instantised drink that was used more for its effect than its flavour. War-time coffee had little allure except as a habitual substance which could help induce wakefulness. Italy, on the other hand, had hardly any coffee but the little they possessed was cherished and consumed like the finest of wines. There they brewed coffee with care and with pleasure.

And so it was the overseas satellites of the Italian motherland that launched the love affair with coffee and spawned the Espresso Generation in North America, Britain and Australia. But it wasn't only the drink; the post-war cultural explosion of youth that found its home in the Italian style café were just as

intrigued by its centrepiece, the device which made it all possible – *la bella macchina*.

The espresso machine was almost as much a symbol of the age as the brew it created. Able to provide hundreds of cups of powerfully aromatic coffee every hour, it gave instant gratification while extracting an essence that had rarely been savoured before. It was new, it was beautiful, it was chic and exciting. It was big, bold and shiny. It hissed like a magic dragon behind a curtain of ethereal steam. It had gigantic levers pumped by proud Italians who were like Dionysian gods to the pimple-faced kids who gathered inside these new temples of modernity inspired by shots of sugared caffeine.

Not that the machine itself was new. Prototypes had been constructed much earlier in the century. What was new, however, was the technology which allowed for a more efficient system of pressurised extraction without scalding the coffee and embittering the brew. The creation of Signor Gaggia was a process which circumvented this problem by using steam to force a separate flow of properly heated water through the grounds under extreme pressure whereby a unique essence was discovered, a special extract which came to be known as ‘la crema’, coveted by Italian connoisseurs and ignored by most British and American coffee drinkers for whom the finer details of a coffee extraction was hardly what they were after – as it was all covered up by a blob of steamed milk anyway. What mattered to the young

artists, writers and rebels who flocked to the bustling Italianate cafés in San Francisco's North Beach, Melbourne's Carlton, New York's Village and London's Soho was the froth and the espresso-charged atmosphere. The places might have been defined by the substance, but it was the buzzy ambiance that mattered more than the coffee they consumed in gallons once they got there.

Back in Italy, the post-war coffee bars were teeming while outside the motor scooters revved. The cafés of the Italian communities overseas were as foreign to them as they were to the Inuits of Greenland. For an Italian in Italy, a good crema mattered. You stood at the bar, downed a doppio and gave thanks that the war was finally over and you could have a decent cup of coffee again.

