

COFFEE CULTURE

## Essential Indulgence

As with wine, Espresso culture may be considered a high art of the epicure. The N Magazine presents a guide for the coffee connoisseur by culinary expert Corby Kummer, Senior Editor of "The Atlantic Monthly" and author of "The Joy of Coffee".



# ESPRESSO CUISINE

*e*sspresso is a way of life – much more than the pure, potent drink itself, which is unlike any other beverage in its restorative intensity. Just as with the right glass for wine, the moment of drinking a cup of Espresso is infinitely enhanced by the right accessories – the cups, the spoons, the refined adjuncts like chocolate, water, and even grappa. And where the temperature and kind of glass are about the only decisions to make with wine, when it comes to Espresso the choices are practically dizzying. Sugar or no? How long or short – how much water to coffee? Is the local water good enough for great Espresso, or should you use bottled? And then there is the endlessly disputable question of how much milk goes into Espresso. Of course, what counts most is the company – but the place you drink Espresso can change your habits for life.

Italy is the birthplace of Espresso. Well, not quite the birthplace: The French first patented a machine using the principle of forcing water through coffee in 1843. But Italians soon claimed Espresso as their own. Their name stuck, too: it was originally coined to mean a coffee made expressly for

you, not coffee made in a rush. The pressure of the hot water accounts for the syrupy intensity of the brew, and Italians, being inveterate inventors, kept tinkering with ways to get it stronger and better. By the end of the nineteenth century Espresso machines were producing the fantastic contraptions spouting wings and spigots and spouts – the machines that are still on display at the back of some bars, lovingly restored, and in Espresso-machine museums. Italians treat Espresso machines with something of the reverence they do sports cars, and as early as the 1930s the designs were reminiscent of streamlined trains and then extravagant, sleek cars.

Cup size and material might be a delicate matter, but cups are seldom delicate anymore. The rough and tumble of bar use will usually break them, not to mention the rough and tumble of industrial dishwashers. Now that Espresso has caught on for home use, Ginori, Rosenthal, and other porcelain manufacturers like Bernardaud for Nespresso offer sturdy ceramic cups of the kind they once supplied only to bars, often with snappy and colorful designs. Every bar has two



The cups shown on these pages are the most elegant and classic way to serve Espresso, and after dinner or in the middle of the afternoon there are few nicer ways to welcome guests.



sizes of cup in constant use for Espresso: relatively narrow, for straight Espresso and Caffè macchiato, “spotted” with a dessert spoonful of warm steamed milk and a coffee spoonful of milk foam spread on the top. For Espresso drinks with more milk than the spot in a Macchiato, though, the next size – a proper Cappuccino cup – is essential. “Proper” is the key word here, because outside Italy these cups are seldom seen. They’re not as wide as teacups, and have curved sides like a chef’s sauté pan, so that the Espresso will rest in a dense pool at the bottom. There it will wait for just a few seconds to be softened, smoothed, and enriched by the cashmere softness of well-steamed milk that blankets Espresso in a true Cappuccino, named for the brown and white cowl of a Capuchin monk’s habit. These cups are a pleasure to hold and drink from; they nestle the cupped hand as if made to be cradled.

The Viennese use this cup for their version of a Cappuccino, called a Melange, or for a Brauner – coffee served with a small carafe of hot milk on the side. Always, without asking, any sort of coffee served in Vienna comes with a low faceted water glass full of freshly drawn tap water. This size and shape of glass also nestles in the hand, and it should be a mandatory adjunct to Espresso served anywhere.

Italians would only think of a Cappuccino in the morning – before, say, eleven o’clock, and generally before ten. It’s often their entire breakfast, or they drink it with a cornetto,

the horn-shaped roll made with a dough more similar to a brioche than very buttery croissant dough. After noon at the very latest, any more milk than covers a Macchiato is *vietato*.

Americans, used to very long hot drinks, generally order Caffè lattes, in which the milk is five or six or more parts to one part Espresso, rather than the strict three-to-one milk to coffee ratio of a Cappuccino. In Italy, Caffè latte is served in a glass, not a cup. In America, Caffè latte is served in a sky-high cardboard cup or a large mug. This size is really more suitable for the face-bathing Café au lait, the French breakfast of simply warmed milk served in a bowl diluted with coffee, perfect for dunking a tartine – the rest of yesterday’s baguette, split and buttered with jam.

As at a bar, cups should be hot, if not as scalding as the simmered cups of Naples, where baristas keep upside-down cups half-submerged in lightly bubbling water. In the rest of Italy, cups are kept on top of the wide Espresso machine, where they heat to an ideal warmth, and are usually kept covered with a clean dish cloth. Top-quality home Espresso machines – such as the Le Cube and Siemens in Porsche Design by Nespresso – now come equipped with a warming plate at the top, perfect for the same purpose. Use it if you have one – and if you don’t, fill waiting cups with the hottest tap water or separately boiled water.

Any other sweets with Espresso should be dry and crisp, like miniature amaretti or hard-as-glass biscotti; the lightly roasted nuts in amaretti and biscotti better complement the roasted flavors in coffee.



Small spoons are essential for Espresso, too. Teaspoons slosh around the restrained amount of liquid, and cool it off too fast by churning it and exposing it to air. Slender spoons more efficiently combine sugar with coffee and milk, and help preserve the masterly distribution of steamed and foamed milk in a Cappuccino without deflating the foam.

Even if Italians scorn foreigners who know no better than to order a cappuccino in the afternoon or, heaven forbid, after dinner, the pouring and stirring of sugar before sipping are often an integral part of the ritual. Though Italians rarely stray beyond granulated sugar, often on counters like communal vats, the Swiss, Viennese, Germans, and even the English have more evolved tastes in sugar, often delicately plunking in a small cube of brown “coffee sugar” or even a toothpick of brown rock-sugar crystals that make a delicious stirrer to be sucked on once the stirring is through. In some parts of Vienna, or Budapest – the closer you get to Russia – you’ll frequently see someone dip the cube in the warm coffee and set it between his teeth, slowly sucking deliciously sweet coffee till the cube collapses on the tongue in a thin coating of crystals. (*Editor’s note: Nespresso recommends the use of granulated sugar to sweeten coffee.*)

In almost any restaurant worth its sugar, a cup of Espresso after dinner comes with a thin square of bittersweet chocolate on the side. This addictive tradition took hold in Switzerland and France and England, countries that innovated chocolate-manufacturing techniques with the ingenuity the Italians applied to Espresso makers. Any kind of chocolate worth lingering over and holding on the tongue will do – even sweetened chocolate, though the “sophisticated” preference is for bitter chocolate. The inherent bitterness in Espresso will serve as a counterbalance, especially if the coffee is unsweetened,

or sweetened less, to compensate. The point is to take a bite and then a sip, to let the Espresso begin to melt the chocolate and dissolve into a mocha essence that utterly penetrates the taste buds and remains all through after-dinner conversation.

Strong spirits are a frequent complement to after-dinner coffee. Wine is a poor companion, because its floral and fruity range of flavours needs to be appreciated on its own. But when distilled, the pressed stems of grapes and cooked-down wine in grappa and cognac can intensify the potency of espresso. Italian and French workers will often start the day with a Caffe corretto, an Espresso “corrected” with a slug of grappa. But this is usually to ward off morning cold for physical labour. All classes enjoy cognac or grappa sipped alongside an Espresso, generally of the highest quality they can afford, to both stimulate and relax good conversation. The only important decision is which sip to make last and let linger longest.

Italy has managed to export most of its Espresso traditions with some fidelity. Yes, there’s mistranslation – the persistent appearance of milk after noon, for instance. But the custom that most baffles Italians is lemon peel alongside Espresso. It’s out of the question in Italy: the essential oils add a harsh fruitiness that is even more irrelevant than raspberry jam or even a glass of wine that beautifully expresses the grape. Where did it come from? Theories vie for acceptance – rubbing used cups with cut lemon to “wash” them in places with low supplies of fresh water is a popular one. But it shouldn’t come anywhere near a cup of good Espresso. Chocolate is Espresso’s most natural friend, and milk the best friend they have in common. A great Espresso can consort with both – depending, of course, on the time of day. ☕

