

The Cappuccino Conquests: the transnational history of Italian coffee

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The project traced the history of Italian style coffee drinks from the evolution of espresso in the 1900s through to the global popularity of cappuccino and caffè latte today. This success is explained by the properties of the beverages themselves, the surroundings in which they were served, and the meanings constructed around them. By reconstructing the ‘commodity biography’ of espresso, the project demonstrated how innovations in production and preparation (e.g. beverage sizes) interacted with changes in social practices and perceptions within consumer societies (e.g. the image of Italy) to create a diversity of cultures of consumption.

HIGHLIGHTS

- The Gaggia Classica machine of 1948 transformed espresso into a shorter beverage with a head of *crema*, originally marketed as ‘cream coffee’.
- UK coffee culture evolved in relationship to the pub. In the 1950s coffee bars provided an alternative public space for the young. Today, as pubs concentrate on the youth market, coffee shops have acquired customers across a broader age range.
- US speciality operators started serving Italian coffee beverages in the hope of encouraging customers into the world of quality single-origin coffees. However, the success of cappuccino and caffè latte created a new beverage market in which brewed coffee was eclipsed.
- Cup sizes are indicative of different drinking cultures. Typically in Italy cappuccino is served lukewarm in a 6oz. cup ready for immediate drinking; in Britain hot in 8oz. cups so as to sustain a conversation, and in the US in 12oz. mugs or containers designed for takeaway.
- Local entrepreneurs often adopted the coffee shop format prior to the arrival of transnational chains. Café Coffee Day, the dominant Indian operator, is now opening outlets in Europe.

KEY FINDINGS

The emergence of a distinctive, Italian-style of coffee drinking dates to 1905 when Pavoni began manufacturing the Ideale coffee machine in Milan. This produced a beverage known as espresso as it was prepared ‘expressly’ for the individual customer by using steam to ‘express’ hot water through the coffee. The process was transformed by the Gaggia Classica machine of 1948 which used a hand operated piston to drive the water through the coffee under nine atmospheres of pressure producing a new,

shorter, beverage topped by a *crema* of essential oils that was initially marketed as *crema caffè* – cream coffee. A period of intensive technological innovation culminated in the appearance of the Faema E61 in 1961, a semi-automatic machine incorporating an electric pump operated by a simple switch.

This coincided with Italy’s transition to a mass consumer society. The number of bars rose rapidly as they provided centres for socialising for the new urban population. Coffee was popular as its price was controlled by the local authorities (providing it was consumed standing up), while *crema caffè* could not be made in the home. Branded coffee conquered the domestic market as new channels for distribution (supermarkets) and marketing (television) became available.

A shift from using Latin American cartoon coffee beans to endorsements by Italian celebrities in Lavazza’s advertising campaigns symbolised the domestication of coffee’s image during the 1970s. The ‘away from home’ industry remains highly fragmented, however, with local roasters supplying independent bars with blends that reflect regional tastes. There is no one ‘genuine’ recipe for Italian espresso.

It was the Gaggia’s milk frothing power, not its ability to produce *crema*, which impressed English speaking countries in the 1950s. Cappuccino conquered these markets as it was more accessible to consumers used to combining coffee with milk, while its exotic appearance adding to its perceived value.

The key to Italian coffee’s success, however, was the creation of new commercial public spaces around it. In the UK, coffee bars were a refuge for the young who felt culturally excluded from pubs; in Australia, they were given impetus by the bans on drinking after 6.00pm, whereas in

Early Gaggia export model, 1950



the US they often combined serving coffee and alcohol in the same beverage.

Many of the agents involved in these transfers were not drawn from the Italian diaspora community, despite its heavy involvement in catering. This was because it mainly served the more conservative working classes. In the UK the demand was overwhelmingly for tea, making it uneconomic to install genuine coffee machines. It was only with the growth in foreign holidays that Italian coffee became more popular, a phenomenon experienced somewhat earlier in the *Eiscafès* established by Italians in Germany.

In the US, Italian coffee bars were similarly down-market venues – something that partly explained their appeal to ‘alternative’ subcultures. The 1980s, however, saw the spread of a ‘speciality’ coffee movement that presented Italian style coffees as hand-crafted artisan products. Intended to draw consumers into speciality coffee, espresso-based beverages began outselling brewed coffee in the 1990s. *Caffè latte* proved particularly popular with American palates due to its high milk content, often further sweetened by the addition of

syrups.

Italian coffee became a lifestyle accessory amongst the educated upper middle classes, moving from takeaway carts into the coffee shop format popularised by Starbucks. The cleanliness, comfort and lack of alcohol gave this a very different ambience from the old Italian-American coffee bars, one attractive to women, teenagers and autonomous workers. The format has been successfully exported to middle class, younger consumers in the developing Asian economies, where iced coffee is particularly popular.

In Europe, the early 1990s saw a more continentally aware youth culture adopt espresso beverages as an element of ‘Europeaness’ (this can still be seen in Eastern Europe today). Even in the UK, which was most receptive to the American format, local branded chains have successfully competed against Starbucks by stressing their ‘Italianess’. British coffee culture is distinctive in that most consumption takes place on the premises, usually in conjunction with a social encounter, creating a demand for larger, longer-lasting beverages. Inverting the trends of the 1950s, coffee shop usage has spread across

'Speciality' cappuccino



the generations, while a decline in drinking out has left pubs dependent on the youth market.

In Italy, the globalisation of espresso is often lamented as a missed opportunity with calls to introduce trademarks for espresso and cappuccino. However over 70 per cent of commercial espresso machines are made in Italy, while roasters have benefited from the growth of a substantial re-export market since the mid-1990s. Meanwhile the controlled prices and emphasis on pure espresso consumption make Italy an unattractive market for foreign coffee-shop chains.

IMPLICATIONS FOR POLICY

The study has highlighted the interactions between the technological advances in espresso preparation, the uses of Italian-style coffee in different cultures, and the images constructed around it. A key element in the success of these beverages has been the 'value' created by the inability to reproduce them at home. Significantly the bar market in Italy is now suffering as improvements in 'pod' or 'capsule' systems have led to rapid growth in the office and vending sectors. In the UK between 2002 and 2006

domestic pod machine sales rose 260 per cent, and those of espresso machines improved by 30 per cent, while sales of instant coffee rose only four per cent despite many companies introducing instant 'Italian-styled' products.

In Italy, espresso was initially a symbol of exoticism and modernity – today it has become an icon of Italian tradition, precisely because of its recent global success. Beyond Italy the beverages have been used to communicate exotic, ethnic, aspirational and, increasingly, ethical qualities (through the emphasis placed on fair trade and sustainability) while they have at times assumed Italian, Western or European identities, before becoming absorbed into the everyday landscape.

This is indicative of the adaptability and agency of the coffee itself. Espresso, cappuccino and latte have each led a phase in the globalisation of Italian coffee. Yet instead of graduating to pure espresso or speciality single-origin coffees, as many agents had hoped, local consumers within the global market have developed their own taste preferences and cultural practices, constructed around beverages that they have adopted for their perceived quality in the cup.

Findings:

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How do you take your coffee? British, US and Italian cappuccino cup sizes vary enormously



BACKGROUND TO THE STUDY

The Cappuccino Conquests was funded by the ESRC/AHRC Cultures of Consumption research programme (RES-154-25-0015) and ran from September 2004 to February 2007. The principal investigator was Jonathan Morris (School of Humanities, University of Hertfordshire). Claudia Baldoli was research assistant. The project held two public exhibitions, an international conference and two international workshops. For further information visit www.cappuccinoconquests.org.uk

PUBLICATIONS INCLUDE

Baldoli C. 'La crema d'Italia. Esportazione dell'espresso e costruzione di un simbolo dal dopoguerra ad oggi'
Morris J. 'Imprenditoria italiana in Gran Bretagna. Il

consumo del caffè "stile italiano"

– both in: *Italia Contemporanea*, 241 (2005).

Baldoli C. 'L'espresso. Modernità e tradizione nell'Italia del caffè'

Morris J. 'La globalizzazione dell'espresso italiano'

– both in: Baldoli C and Morris J. (eds.) *Made in Italy. Consumi e identità collettive in secondo dopoguerra*. Theme issue of *Memoria e Ricerca*, XIV(23) 2006.

Morris J. 'The Cappuccino Conquests: A Transnational History of Italian Coffee' downloadable at:

www.cappuccinoconquests.org.uk

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CULTURES OF CONSUMPTION RESEARCH PROGRAMME

The Cultures of Consumption Programme funds research on the changing nature of consumption in a global context. The Programme investigates the different forms, development and consequences of consumption, past and present. Research projects cover a wide range of subjects, from UK public services to drugs in east Africa, London's fashionable West End to global consumer politics. The £5 million Cultures of Consumption Programme is the first to bring together experts from the social sciences and the arts and humanities. It is co-funded by the ESRC and the AHRC.

The aims of the Cultures of Consumption Programme are:

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