

## **The Globalisation of ‘Italian’ Coffee. A Commodity Biography**

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The global boom in ‘out of home’ coffee consumption since the mid-1990s has generated renewed interest in the world of coffee among both the academic and general publics. The politics of coffee production and market governance have been investigated from a wide variety of stances, notably by advocates of fair trade for whom coffee forms a potent symbol of the perils of globalisation given the collapse in prices following the liberalisation of the world coffee market<sup>1</sup>. Historians have been inspired to investigate the social and cultural history of the coffee house<sup>2</sup>. In Britain, the rise of cappuccino culture has stimulated several publicly funded research projects. Geographers used video footage to compare the ways consumers use contemporary coffee houses with those that Habermas ascribed to their 18<sup>th</sup> Century forebears; while experts in the visual arts and design have begun an investigation into the interiors of fin- de-siècle coffee houses in Vienna with the intention of comparing these to their early 21<sup>st</sup> century equivalents<sup>3</sup>.

What these studies have tended to neglect, however, by concentrating upon the settings in which coffee is served, is that this boom has been driven by a profound shift in consumer preferences from traditional ‘national’ coffee beverage styles to those based upon the use of espresso. Espresso is the product of a preparation process which evolved in Italy over the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, and by now has become almost an icon of the country itself. Italian coffee has thus followed the trajectory of other ‘typical’ foodstuffs, such as pasta and pizza, in projecting Italian cuisine, lifestyle and culture abroad. Yet, as food historians have demonstrated, this was a far more complex and contested process than might seem apparent. Pasta and pizza were essentially regional

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<sup>1</sup> C. Gresser, S. Tickell, Mugged. *Poverty in Your Coffee Cup* (London, 2003) a pamphlet produced for Oxfam had a very strong impact on the image of the coffee trade. The best academic account of the politics of coffee is J. Talbot, *Grounds for Agreement* (Lanham, 2004).

<sup>2</sup> M Ellis, *The Coffee House. A Cultural History* (London, 2004); B Cowan, *The Social Life of Coffee. The Emergence of the British Coffeehouse*, (New Haven and London, 2005).

<sup>3</sup> ‘The Cappuccino Community’ project was based at Glasgow University, while the ‘Vienna Cafe project is being conducted by the Royal College of Art. See the project websites <http://web.ges.gla.ac.uk/~elaurier/cafesite/> and <http://www.rca.ac.uk/viennacafe/>.

dishes whose incorporation into an Italian ‘national’ cuisine, was as much a consequence of, rather than a precursor to, their success abroad<sup>4</sup>. Indeed the ‘globalisation’ of Italian style coffee can also be read as an example of the homogenisation of consumer tastes, a reading whose purchase has been increased by its close association with the coffee shop format that was popularised in the United States and is usually linked to the dominant operator, Starbucks<sup>5</sup>. Consequently contests over the ‘authenticity’, ‘nationality’ and ‘ownership’ of espresso form a key part of this story.

### **Commodity Biography**

Explaining the global success of Italian-style coffee requires us to construct a ‘commodity biography’ of espresso in which the influences of technological innovation and business structures are integrated with an analysis of changing social and cultural practices within consumer societies to explain how, when, where and why ‘Italian-style’ coffee beverages evolved and were transferred into other markets. While recognising the importance of the ‘staging’ of consumption within the coffee house, and the cultural constructions built around the beverages (constructions whose manufacture has often encompassed part of the work of transfer agents), it must also explore these transfers in terms of the material transformations of the nature of the beverages and the technology of their production. As Italian-style coffee has spread into new markets so the beverage recipes have been adapted and emphasis has shifted to the milk-based derivative drinks rather than espresso itself. This was why I entitled my own research project ‘The Cappuccino Conquests’<sup>6</sup>.

In recent years the commodity biography has become a popular genre, providing an effective vehicle for engaging the public’s attention with some of the historical and cultural dimensions of globalisation. Food histories have proved particularly popular:

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<sup>4</sup> See A. Capatti, M. Montanari, *Italian Cuisine. A Cultural History* (New York, 2003); C. Helstosky *Garlic and Oil* (Oxford, 2004) and, in particular, F. La Cecla, *La pasta e la pizza* (Bologna, 1998).

<sup>5</sup> George Ritzer, in the latest version of his *The McDonaldization of Society* 5 (Los Angeles, 2008) has added an entire chapter on ‘The Starbuckisation of Society?’ 211-32, which levels precisely this charge.

<sup>6</sup> Funded by the AHRC/ESRC Cultures of Consumption Research Programme – see programme website at [www.consume.bbk.ac.uk](http://www.consume.bbk.ac.uk)

Kurlansky's work on *Cod* for instance achieved considerable success through its exploration of the transoceanic connections created between producer and consumer communities that have culminated in a contemporary ecological catastrophe<sup>7</sup>. The template for such studies was Sidney Mintz's *Sweetness and Power. The Place of Sugar in Modern History* in which analysis of what the author termed 'outside' factors – the political and economic structures that set 'the terms within which the various forms of sucrose were made available' – and 'inside meanings' – the cultural 'webs of signification' created around the consumption of a particular commodities - were combined to explain the spread of sugar into workers' diets in the industrializing British economy, and the effects of this on the lives of colonial labourers in the cane plantations of the West Indies<sup>8</sup>. At best, therefore, a commodity biography should be able to demonstrate how the relationship between consumers and producers (understood in the widest sense) around the globe has been mediated – both materially and metaphorically - through the product itself.

A well constructed commodity biography must engage critically with a wide range of disparate and at times contradictory sources. A frequent flaw to be found in coffee histories is that the authors are either insufficiently aware of the technical aspects of the industry to challenge their sources, or are insufficiently experienced in history writing to utilise their technical knowledge effectively<sup>9</sup>. Historians have tended to accept at face value many of the stories in the trade press, which are essentially rewritten press releases, or interpreted photographs of Anglo-Italian cafes as proof of an 'espresso revolution', when the machines visible on the counter of these cafes did not make espresso at all<sup>10</sup>. My own attempts to avoid these pitfalls have been premised on the use of oral history as a path into what might be called the 'back stage' view of the coffee industry, and to use my

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<sup>7</sup> M. Kurlansky, *Cod. A biography of the fish that changed the world*, (New York, 1998).

<sup>8</sup> S. Mintz, *Sweetness and Power. The Place of Sugar in Modern History* (New York, 1985), pp157-8, 167-71.

<sup>9</sup> An unfortunate example of a poorly structured history written by a coffee expert is A. Wild, *Coffee. A Dark History* (London, 2004).

<sup>10</sup> D. Tricarico, 'Cucine nazionali a confronto. I percorsi della cucina italiana in Gran Bretagna', «*Storicamente*», 3 (2007), <http://www.storicamente.org/03tricarico.htm>.

understanding of this to assist in interpreting the surviving material evidence of the ‘front’ presentational aspects of coffee culture<sup>11</sup>.

One example of how backstage knowledge can change one’s reading of a text was provided by the appearance of an Italian coffee product in a volume celebrating the UKs 100 ‘coolest’ brands. After speculating on what this told us about consumer perceptions, I asked a company representative what he thought accounted for the achievement of his brand’s iconic status with the British public: ‘That’s easy Jonathan – we bought it’, he replied, explaining that the company simply paid for its product to appear in the book. However even the words of industry experts should be taken carefully: I have been assured that there were lever machines in one country’s cafes two decades before Gaggia first began manufacturing them in Milan<sup>12</sup>. Indeed it is a feature of the coffee industry that while consumers are generally lacking in education about the commodity beyond the basic level, so too many of those who have spent years working in the web of connections and transformations that carry the bean to the cup have little in-depth knowledge of processes and procedures beyond their own specialised activity. This project has therefore become a ‘thick history’ that attempts to bring these components together.

This paper will present that history in two ways<sup>13</sup>. Firstly, the ‘commodity biography’ of Italian espresso will be outlined as a narrative that can be divided into seven overlapping

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<sup>11</sup> Christopher Breward employed this conceit (adapting Erving Goffman), along with a similar reliance on oral history as a tool for connecting front and back, in his study of the evolution of London’s post-war fashion cultures: C. Breward, ‘Fashion’s Front and Back : Rag trade cultures and cultures of consumption in post-war London c.1945-1970’, *London Journal*, 31(1) (2006).

<sup>12</sup> For obvious reasons I will draw a veil over the identity of my informants in these cases.

<sup>13</sup> For reasons of space, I have reduced the references for this summary of the project to a minimum, retaining only the most important direct quotations or citations. For a fuller set of such references, readers are referred to the articles already published as part of the project – notably C. Baldoli, ‘La crema d’Italia. Esportazione dell’espresso e costruzione di un simbolo dal dopoguerra ad oggi’, J. Morris ‘Imprenditoria italiana in Gran Bretagna. Il consumo del caffè “stile italiano” – both in *Italia Contemporanea*, 241 (Dec 2005) 534-40, 540-52; and C. Baldoli, ‘L’Espresso. Modernità e tradizione nell’Italia del caffè’, J. Morris, ‘La globalizzazione dell’espresso italiano’ both in C. Baldoli, J. Morris eds. *Made in Italy. Consumi e identità collettive nel second dopoguerra*, theme issue of *Memoria e Ricerca*, n.23, 2006, 13-26, 27-46. An English language pre-publication version of ‘La globalizzazione ..’ is available from the University of Hertfordshire Research Archive at <https://uhra.herts.ac.uk/dspace/handle/2299/488> while full details of the project, including the final research report and list of primary oral history sources can be found at the project website [www.cappuccinoconquests.org.uk](http://www.cappuccinoconquests.org.uk)

phases, covering first the Italian, then extra-Italian experience, while noting the transnational connections between the two. These phases have been termed Elite, Everyday, Exotic, Ethnic, Speciality, Branded, and Global. Secondly, a set of thematic interpretations will be suggested highlighting the role of a variety of interlocking factors in understanding the progress of the ‘cappuccino conquests’.

### **Elite.**

The history of coffee in Italy long predates that of Italian coffee. Venice was one of the first ports to begin importing coffee into Europe from the 1570s, and shops selling beans had opened by the 1640s, although the first recorded coffee house did not open until 1683, some thirty years after such establishments were set up in Oxford and London<sup>14</sup>. During the following century, famous cafes appeared major cities such as Florian’s in Venice and the Caffè Greco in Rome. Carlo Goldoni’s comedy *La Bottega del Caffè* (1750) captured the cultural phenomenon of the coffee houses while Pietro Verri’s Milanese journal *Il Caffè* (1764-66) was at the centre of the Italian enlightenment. In the 19th century the coffee houses of Turin hosted meetings among leaders of the *Risorgimento*. Yet while these cafés are justly celebrated for their splendour and tradition, they were in many ways parallels of a common European experience as seen in the role of cafes in the French revolution or the culture and politics of the Habsburg Empire. The coffee served in the Italian coffee houses was prepared and served in pots using infusion-based methods consistent with the prevailing practices across Europe<sup>15</sup>. Hence, while these cafes form an important part of the history of coffee in Italy, they do not form part of the history of ‘Italian coffee’.

This history began with entry of the first commercial espresso coffee machine into production: the 1905 La Pavoni Ideale, based upon a patent filed by the Milanese engineer Luigi Bezzera in 1901. A gas heated brass boiler produced steam that was condensed into hot water at the group head, passing through the coffee cake under a

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<sup>14</sup> Ellis, *The Coffee House* 82; F. and R. Illy, *From Coffee to Espresso* (Milan, 2002) 114.

<sup>15</sup> For an extensive account of the history of coffee pots and coffee makers see E and J. Bramah, *Coffee Makers. 300 years of Art and Design*. (London, 1995).

pressure of around 1.5 atmospheres. The resultant beverage was known as espresso because it was prepared expressly for the individual customer, although this was also linked to the notion that the water had been expressed through the coffee, and played on the notion of speed – notably the idea of an express train. However the coffee produced was very different from espresso today. It was black, lacked any of the *crema* mousse associated with modern espresso, and tasted burnt due to contamination from the steam and the high temperatures in the group head of around 130-140°C.

The machines were developed in response to a growing use of so-called ‘American bars’ amongst the working urban bourgeoisie as places to socialise while transacting business, or at the end of the day. Whereas coffee in the traditional cafes was served by waiters to seated guests at a table, in the American bar, the clientele stood on one side of the enclosed bar and purchased drinks from an attendant who served them from the other. The espresso machine facilitated this speedier service and stood on the counter itself – often adding to the decor and theatre of the establishment as the large size of the machines afforded plenty of space for decoration. Coffee drinking, particularly ‘away from home’ remained largely confined to the Italian bourgeoisie, however, whose relatively limited size led the main manufacturers, principally Pavoni in Milan and Victoria Arduino in Turin, to become heavily reliant on exports to France, Germany and Central Europe. Within Italy consumption increased very gradually up until the late 1920s when the brief prohibition on the purchase of machines for use in bars presaged the Fascist drive towards autarchy that saw a progressive fall in coffee imports until an outright ban was introduced with entry into the war in 1940. Nonetheless it was during the Fascist period that a key word in the coffee vocabulary was introduced as ‘*barista*’ made its appearance in Italian as an alternative to the American *barman* – no doubt in deference to the regime’s desire to purge the language of foreign influences<sup>16</sup>.

## Everyday

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<sup>16</sup> According to Alfredo Panzini, whose collections of new words entering the language, provide a way of charting this history, the word ‘bar’ was exempted from the Fascist tax on the use of foreign terms on shop signs due to the fact that the nearest corresponding Italian term tavern did not capture the particular characteristics of such establishments. See Panzini, *Supplemento ai dizionari italiani* (6.ed. Milan, 1931), 56.

Espresso was literally transformed by entry into production of the Gaggia Classica machine in 1948 that eliminated the use of steam. Water was drawn direct from the boiler at  $c92^{\circ}\text{C}$  by a hand operated piston that forced it through the coffee at around 9 atmospheres of pressure. The result was an espresso as we know it today, topped by a characteristic head of *crema*, which led to the beverage first being promoted as *crema caffè* (cream coffee) to emphasise its distinctiveness in relation to previous coffee beverages.

Gaggia was the proprietor of a Milanese patisserie with an interest in coffee, and had purchased a patent for a new machine from the widow of an inventor named Cremonesi registered in 1938. There was no point in going into production until the end of the war, however, when Gaggia sought help from Ernesto Valente, head of a small engineering business named Faema. In 1950 Valente split with Gaggia and began making his own so-called lever machines: other manufacturers followed suit. After a decade of intensive innovation, Valente launched the Faema E61 – the first successful semi-automatic machine – in which the piston was replaced by an electric pump that the operator controlled by use of a simple switch. While the barista maintained control of the brewing process, s/he was no longer responsible for powering it. The machine drew water directly from the mains, pressurised it, then passed it through a heat exchanger set in the boiler, enabling ‘continuous erogation’ i.e. the delivery of coffee on demand. The semi-automatic machine became the standard commercial coffee making machine throughout Italy.

These innovations coincided with the transformation of Italy from an agricultural to an industrial society, provoking massive migration from the countryside to the cities, and the subsequent emergence of a mass consumer society. Small ‘bars’ appeared in the cities, providing a social space for the incomers to meet and watch the first television broadcasts, using a cup of coffee – the cheapest item – as a price for entry.

Frequently these were known as ‘Bar Sport’ – places in which the customers gathered to watch or listen to their favourite teams, set up fan clubs and place bets on the government

operated football results game, Totocalcio. A new coffee cocktail, Caffè Sport appeared in the 1950s to accompany this activity. During the day, the rituals of consumption established in the American Bar were maintained, albeit it adapted for the new working class customers, who drank their coffee standing up at the counter, on the way to, or during breaks from, their work. In part this pattern of consumption reflected the limited time available to customers, and the nature of the drink itself; in part, it was occasioned by anti-inflation laws gave local authorities the right to impose a maximum price for a cup of coffee, but allowed proprietors to charge extra for additional services such as being waited upon while seated. In 1961, the numbers of licences for cafes and bars overtook exceeded those for restaurants and inns for the first time: the gap has continued to widen ever since.

The 1960s also saw a take-off in home consumption as coffee became more available and affordable, with the Bialetti moka pot (originally designed in the 1930s) becoming an accessory in most Italian kitchens. Lavazza became the first national roaster, establishing its position by exploiting the new means of communication (television) and distribution (supermarkets). While brands began to chase out the practice of selling loose coffee in the grocers, the roasting sector remained highly fragmented, with an estimated 1,000 plus roasters exploiting the profound differences in regional taste preferences with southerners preferring a darker roast and greater robusta content in their coffee. Indeed Lavazza developed different brands in attempt to appeal to these diverse markets. Nonetheless 'out of home' consumption continued to form an usually high element of the market compared to other countries – driven by the difference between *crema caffè* and the coffee made in the moka which was closer in style to the pre-war espresso.

By the 1970s, coffee-drinking in and out of the home had become embedded in Italian consumer society. Lavazza shifted its advertising from emphasising the product's exotic origins in Latin America through the use of animated cartoon characters, to endorsements by Italian celebrities, such as Luciano Pavorotti, that were staged in strictly domestic settings in 1977. Beyond the home, as inflation hit Italy, consumers' organisations campaigned for boycotts of bars deemed to be charging excessive prices for an essential



component of everyday life. Meanwhile the comic novelist Stefano Benni published his best selling collection of stories about the characters who meet up in a *Bar Sport* in 1976, celebrating the centrality of these localities within Italian culture.

## **Exotic**

The 1950s saw the first exports of the new-style espresso machines overseas. It was relatively easy to introduce *crema caffè* to Mediterranean markets: indeed Gaggia and Faema both established subsidiaries in Spain during this decade. In general, however, companies left the export trade in the hands of local distributors who were free to adapt their own strategies for promoting the product. Thus when coffee machines travelled to the English-speaking world, they assumed an exotic aspect, placed at the centre of a new coffee-drinking culture based not on espresso, but cappuccino.

In Italy cappuccino was originally used as a slang word for coffee with milk, which was usually prepared at home using brewed coffee and milk warmed on the stove (in effect, not dissimilar to *caffè au lait*). Only gradually did cappuccino acquire the connotations of involving frothed milk using the steaming power of the espresso machines: originally the steam wand was primarily used for preparing ‘hot toddies’ i.e. warm cocktails. Cappuccino was largely regarded as a ‘ladies’ drink’ up until the 1980s, while its role as purely a breakfast beverage remains entrenched in Italian culture – not least due to the belief that milk is too heavy on the stomach to be consumed after a meal<sup>17</sup>.

Conversely, in Britain, cappuccino proved extremely popular – nearly all photographs of coffee bars in the 1950s feature cappuccino rather than espresso drinking. There were several reasons for this. One was accessibility – the British already preferred to add milk to their hot beverages, be these tea or coffee. The second was theatricality – the use of the steam wand and the appearance of frothed milk added to exoticness of the product. The third reason was functional. The beverages needed to last longer as they were served in ‘destination venues’ – places where customers met to socialise, rather than simply

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<sup>17</sup> Interview Sergio Guarneri, La Cimbali, Binasco, 27 Jan 2005.

refresh themselves. Consequently cappuccino was served hot, rather than lukewarm, leading an Italian waiter at the Moka Bar (home of the UK's first Gaggia) to comment that he could have a shave in the time it took for the coffee to cool to a drinkable temperature<sup>18</sup>.

The first proprietors of the Moka bar were Maurice and Rose Ross, a Jewish couple from Leeds. Like most of those involved in the coffee bar explosion, Ross came from outside the catering trade, and was not a member of the Italian or Anglo-Italian community, although he had holidayed in the country which is where, it is believed, he acquired the machine in the first place<sup>19</sup>. The man who acquired the Gaggia concession for the UK was Pino Riservato, an Italian commercial traveller about whom we know little other than that he was reportedly inspired by the poor quality of coffee available in London. Although Riservato entered into partnership with several Anglo-Italians to set up the Gaggia UK company, this soon allied itself with the leading British roaster, the London-based Kenyan Coffee Company (known colloquially, and later officially, as Kenco), which created the leading espresso blend Moka Ris, as well as setting up around 30 coffee houses of its own across the country.

This rapidly expanding market targeted those customers excluded by law or custom from the traditional pub-centred drinking culture. Night clubs serving coffee stayed open after the pubs were forced to close at 10:00pm, department stores and pastry shops installed the machines to cater to women who wanted to meet and socialise together, while, unlike most public spaces, coffee bars appeared to offer the possibility for blurring class boundaries. In particular, the young adopted the coffee bar as a place in which they could meet and listen to their own music without interference from the older generation. Most of the proprietors were unconventional entrepreneurs, often caught up in the youth subculture itself. The journal *Coffee Bar and Coffee Lounge*, established in 1959, contained three times as much advertising for juke boxes as it did for coffee machines

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<sup>18</sup> 'Guerra e Pace a Soho attorno al Caffè Espresso', *La Voce degli Italiani*, December 1954, p.5

<sup>19</sup> Email correspondence with Sue Selwyn, 22/23 August 2007.

and products. Significantly there were virtually no features on coffee's properties and preparation techniques.

By the mid '60s, however, cappuccino culture was already fading. 'At home' entertainment increased with the spread of television, pubs became more youth-orientated, drinking restrictions were eased, and coffee bars morphed into cafés that sought to increase their income by emphasising food and drink. The first branded 'informal eateries' appeared, while caterers turned to quicker and simpler methods of coffee preparation such as pour and serve coffee brewers. No Faema or similar semi-automatic machines featured in *Coffee Bar and Coffee Lounge* prior to its demise in 1963 - indeed they hardly appeared in Britain prior to the 1980s.

## **Ethnic**

During the initial exotic phase of espresso overseas, the Italian origins of the beverages were not heavily emphasised. As we have seen, many of the agents involved in its transfer were non-Italian, while, conversely, Italian-origin catering enterprises were often slower to adopt espresso and cappuccino.

This is best explained through reference to the class of their customers. In the UK the Anglo-Italian café was primarily targeted at the British manual worker whose overwhelming preference was for tea. Italian cafes often offered 'frothy coffee' – brewed coffee plus steamed milk, using the machines made by Still and Son of London, which provided abundant boiling water for tea, a reservoir for bulk brewed coffee, and a steam wand with which to froth milk.

Furthermore Italian proprietors were keen not to overemphasise their identity after the second world war when many had been interned. Tony Hancock captured this in his radio script *Fred's Pie Shop* of 1957, progenitor of the famous 'uno cappuccino, no froth' scene of his movie *The Rebel* (1960), in which a 'continental' coffee bar furnished with

the usual exotic decorations and staffed by cockneys was contrasted with Fred's pie shop whose proprietor was 'Italian only by birth'.

Once the fad for cappuccino died, however, the beverages became increasingly associated purely with Anglo-Italian cafes, even if the reality was that much that was served there was still frothy coffee, or simply 'milky coffee' as the Grosvenor cafe in Glasgow – the legendary haunt of the city's student and bohemian citizens – dubbed it.

It was only in the 1980s as their clientele became more middle class, and the image of Italy grew more sophisticated, that the bulk of London's Italian cafés replaced their Stills with espresso machines as part of increasing the 'Italianess' of their offer<sup>20</sup>. Cafés renamed their 'white coffees' as 'caffè latte' – the same beverage but served in a glass – a move that had less to do with authenticity than replicating events in America.

## **Speciality**

Espresso in the USA had likewise moved through an exotic and ethnic stage, the latter linked to the literary Beatnik movement of the West Coast. Regular brewed coffee continued to dominate both 'at home' and 'out of home' markets, but consumption levels declined from the 1960s. This led some industry independents to form the Speciality Coffee Association of America in 1982, campaigning to improve the quality of beans sold for domestic consumption. To promote these speciality retailers started serving in-store samples and installed espresso machines, primarily for their theatrical value.

The speciality coffee movement repositioned Italian coffee as a premium product, placing emphasis on the quality of both the coffee and its preparation. Beverages were presented as a hand-made products, crafted by artisan baristas. The most popular beverage was caffè latte – which by virtue of its using steamed, rather than frothed, was sweeter and closer to American tastes than cappuccino, while still using an espresso based that delivered a stronger flavour than the traditional cafe au lait made with brewed coffee and

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<sup>20</sup> Interview Stefano Soldani, Bar Centrale, London, 23 August 2005

warm milk<sup>21</sup>. The use of Latte art: hand-poured designs on top of the beverage further enhanced its appeal, as did the use of syrups to flavour the product. By 1994 the espresso-based beverages were outselling traditional brewed coffee in the gourmet retail sector.

These became popular among a new generation of educated, young, upwardly mobile consumers concentrated on the coasts: a group labelled ‘bourgeois bohemians’ who used coffee and coffee houses as a vehicle for communicating their lifestyle values as captured in the phrase ‘latte-drinking liberals’<sup>22</sup>. The centre of this revolution was Seattle, where, by 1990 there were over 200 coffee carts serving the software professionals commuting to work on the ferries and the monorail. However the carts were eclipsed by the burgeoning number of coffee shops that provided both drink-in and take-away service. Coffee became a crucial element in the identity of the city, as the central role of the coffee house in the successful network TV series *Frasier* – itself an indication of the city’s rebirth - confirmed.

The Speciality Coffee movement appeared to have sparked a benign revolution by raising coffee standards and convincing customers to accept higher prices for quality. At the same time, it was a triumph for independent operators, many of whom had become ‘entrepreneurs because they couldn’t be employees’<sup>23</sup>. It had also, however, effectively separated espresso from its Italian roots to place it at the centre of an American retail format.

## **Branded**

The spread of speciality coffee was driven by the emergence of branded chains, notably Starbucks. Originally a boutique roaster and bean retailer based in Seattle, Starbucks moved into the coffee shop business after new owner Howard Schultz was impressed by

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<sup>21</sup> Caffè latte or caffelatte was the term that replaced cappuccino as the designated term for home brewed coffee with milk within Italy: it is very rarely served in bars: indeed one could say that the nearest Italian equivalent would be to ask for a cappuccino with no froth in the manner of Tony Hancock!

<sup>22</sup> David Brooks, *Bobos in Paradise*, New York, 2002.

<sup>23</sup> Interview Ward Barbee, Publisher, *Fresh Cup Magazine*, London, 24 May 2006

the ‘experience’ offered by Italian coffee bars. Schultz adapted both the beverages and the setting in which they were served to suit the US market, however. A Starbucks small cappuccino is twice the size of a regular Italian one – thus softening the taste while apparently increasing the value; while the chain introduced ‘healthier’ choices using low-fat or soy milk that were not then part of Italian bar culture. It standardised beverage types and invented new ones, often dubbing them with Italianate names. At the base of most (not all) of these is an espresso roast that is far higher than that used in Italy resulting in a bitter-tasting shot that can still be tasted through large quantities of milk.

Meanwhile Schultz positioned Starbucks as the embodiment of a ‘third place’ between work and home, in which customers could relax sitting at sofas, read the papers, listen to music or simply use the bathroom facilities, while a prohibition on smoking and an absence of alcohol made this into a ‘safe’ environment that was far removed from that of the Italian or indeed Italo-American bar. The costs for these services were recouped in the price of the coffee.

For consumers, branded chains offer the benefit of security. It is impossible to judge what the quality of coffee served in an establishment will be like until it is tasted. Branded chains offer consumers the likelihood that the barista has been trained to prepare the beverages to a certain style. In the UK, when pub chains began offering much cheaper cappuccinos, the chains responded by stressing that their staff had the benefit of much greater training. In fact, market research consistently shows that the public are relatively price insensitive to coffee, prizing perceived quality above price.

However, the so-called non-specialist sector has become increasingly prominent in the market as the advent of ‘supra-automatic bean to cup machines’ have enabled supermarkets and sandwich bars to offer customers the choice of coffee beverage they now expect. Even Starbucks has taken this route in an attempt to reduce the training costs associated with its high staff turnover and rapid expansion, thus de-skilling its operators in preference to the assured control of the machine.

Branded coffee shops began appearing in the UK in the mid-1990s set up by local independent entrepreneurs inspired by developments in the USA. While some were branded in the American style, others tried to differentiate themselves through the construction of 'Italianess'. Costa Coffee, established by two Italian brothers in 1971 had already begun opening espresso outlets on mainline stations at the end of the 1980s, but was bought by the Whitbread conglomerate in 1995 as a vehicle to translate the Starbucks formula into the UK. Its communications materials continued to stress its Italian heritage, however, even though the beverages were served in American styles and formats.

Caffè Nero marketed itself as the Italian Coffee Company, reinforcing this message through its furnishings, staffing and smoking policies, despite having no connection with the country. Its strategy built on the use of coffee as one of a number of points of entry into a pan-European youth culture that evolved in the early 1990s, linked through music, cheap travel, and increased student mobility.

Indeed the question of what constitutes an 'authentic' espresso is highly contested within the UK coffee community. Italian coffee roasters such as Lavazza argue this only their product was roasted and blended in the country; Anglo-Italian roasters, notably Costa, suggest that a combination of their heritage and techniques make them the genuine providers, whereas locally-based roasters such as Matthew Algie – suppliers to Prêt à Manger and Marks and Spencer lay stress that the freshness of the product and quality of the blend are the keys to authenticity.

In 1998 Starbucks bought out the Seattle Coffee Company (set up Americans based in the UK). At this point the UK branded market was still largely London based, with independents dominating the rest of the country. Ten years later, however, although independent outlets still just about form the majority of outlets, growth has been overwhelmingly concentrated in the corporate sector. Between December 1997 and April

2007, the number of independents increased from 3,900 to 4,992, but those of branded outlets rose from 371 to 2,973, while the non-specialists have grown from 485 to 1320<sup>24</sup>.

## **Global**

The coffee shop format, with Italian coffee at its centre, has been adopted across much of the developed and developing world: however significant differences can be observed in the consumer cultures that surround these.

The UK is notable for the amount of ‘dwell time’ spent over the drinks, which are overwhelmingly consumed on the premises in contrast to the US where much of the trade is takeaway. This has increased significantly over the course of the last decade as, for example, mothers prefer to meet at the coffee shop than invest time in entertaining at home. Although patronage is now fairly equally spread across all generations below retirement age, it remains heavily tilted towards the educated and professional classes. The incorporation of Italian coffee into daily life was confirmed by the inclusion of Caffè Latte in the cost of living index in 2003 at the expense of Newcastle Brown ale.

A similar dramatic shift in drinking out preferences has occurred in Germany and the Nordic states where traditional consumption of black filter coffee has been overtaken in the away from home market by the milk-based espresso drinks among the under-45s. This has not been driven by branded chains, but as part of a youth culture attracted to a ‘European’ mode of socialisation. In Eastern Europe, branded chains offer a short-cut to this: Coffeeheaven, a leading chain in Poland, Latvia, Bulgaria and Slovakia claims its coffeehouses ‘feel as familiar and relaxed as a café in London, Paris or Rome. ... the Coffeeheaven concept combines the best of two converging worlds: Western experience with ‘new’ Europe’s aspirations, talent and youth<sup>25</sup>’. However, in Hungary, the new coffee culture has been appropriated in an attempt to restore the fortunes of the pre-Communist coffee houses, in contrast to the dreary, post-war Eszpresso-bars.

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<sup>24</sup> Allegra Strategies, *Project Cafe 7*, (London, 2007)

<sup>25</sup> [www.coffeeheaven.eu.com](http://www.coffeeheaven.eu.com)



In Asia and the Middle East, coffee houses serve as centres for the younger middle classes to affirm their affinity to Western consumer culture, in contrast to the traditional tea house. The most favoured beverages are often chilled in order to fit the temperate climate. It is noticeable that indigenous entrepreneurs have often played a key role in developing the market: the leading coffee house chain in India is Café Coffee Day which has recently opened outlets in Austria.

So how has this globalisation impacted Italy? Initial participation in the speciality revolution was low. Faema famously refused to back Schultz arguing Americans would never learn to drink espresso. The US public's enthusiasm for milk-based coffees created a surprising beneficiary in the small Florentine machine-making company La Marzocco whose machines featured two boilers, one of which could be used exclusively for milk foaming. Marzocco machines became so popular in the US that American investors acquired a controlling interest in the company and set up a subsidiary in Seattle. This was closed when Starbucks switched to bean to cup machines, but Marzocco remains revered in the speciality coffee world, while between 70-80% of commercial espresso machines are still 'Made in Italy'.

Similarly globalisation opened up new possibilities for the Italian coffee roasting industry at a time when domestic growth appeared to have run its course. Exports of espresso roasted in Italy rose from 12m kg in 1988 to 110m kg in 2005 – and now effectively subsidise domestic prices. Espresso's overseas success has led to its adoption as an icon of Italianess – seen in domestic communications campaigns that use foreign celebrities to enthuse about Italian coffee ( for example Dustin Hoffman and Caffè Vergnano).

However, there have been complaints that the country has failed to capitalise on its heritage, because of 'unfair competition' from other suppliers of 'Italian-sounding products'. The WTO, however, has rejected calls to protect 'Italian espresso' on the grounds that the coffee itself is a blend of beans from many countries. While the fragmented structures of the Italian coffee industry has prevented it from nurturing an

Italian Starbucks (although some roasters are now developing licensed concepts, particularly in international markets), the distinctiveness of Italy's coffee culture – centred on rapid consumption of a low-priced espresso incorporating the minimum of additional services - has equally enabled it to resist the international coffee shop business model.

## **Interpretations**

This project has demonstrated how the cultures of consumption surrounding Italian coffee and the meanings attached to them, have been created via the interplay of technological advance, market structures and consumer lifestyles, highlighting the variations between these throughout time and space. In conclusion, however, I should like to try and isolate some of these factors and demonstrate the nature of the contribution of each of them to the process of the cappuccino conquests.

## Technology

The contribution of technology has been invaluable in maintaining the separation of the drinking in and drinking out coffee cultures, and thereby adding value to espresso and its derivative beverages due to the inability to reproduce them at home. Hence the importance of the superseding of the old-style steam boiler machines by the lever-operated pressure machines producing *crema caffè* just as the stove-top Bialetti *moka* began spreading into Italian kitchens, claiming to be able to produce a coffee 'just like that at the bar'. While the latest phase in the cappuccino conquests has seen a huge increase in demand for domestic machines, with sales of so-called capsule machines increasing by 260% in the UK between 2002 and 2006, few domestic machines are able to deliver the necessary levels of pressure to produce a pure espresso, still less the steaming power needed to successfully froth milk for a cappuccino (even assuming the operators have the skill to use the equipment). Ironically these machines are having their greatest impact in Italy where the milk-handling capacity is of far less consequence.

### Adaptability

The ease with which espresso beverages can be adapted to local markets has been a key to their success. As we have seen, espresso, cappuccino and latte have each led a phase of the globalisation of 'Italian-style' coffee, maintaining a patina of exoticism and authenticity, despite refinements in the size, strength and composition of the original Italian recipes in order to fit with the consumer preferences existing in different markets. Perhaps the most interesting example is the 'Americano' – a beverage made by floating a double shot of espresso on the top of a cup of hot water. This was originally an ad-hoc development of Italian barmen attempting to meet the demands of visiting tourists for a longer, weaker, dark coffee: it now serves the same function in British coffee shops which have simply abandoned brewed coffee, and instead present it as a sophisticated Italian beverage with a history of its own.

### Consumption Spaces

The evolution of drinking out formats is clearly a critical part of the success of Italian coffee. We have seen how, within the country itself, there was a shift from old-style cafes to the original 'American bars' and on to the post-war 'Bar Sport' that became a feature of the Italian landscape. Similarly the 1950s Anglo-American coffee bars which operated primarily as destination venues, trading long into the night, have been superseded by the coffee shop format with its emphasis on daytime trading, the exclusion of alcohol, and a separation of coffee consumption from coffee retailing. These changes reflect an alteration in leisure and working patterns which have increased opportunities for daytime socialisation, while reducing those in the evening. Thus longer working hours and commutes, especially amongst the professional classes, combined with the increased autonomy of work itself as a result of the computer, laptop and wireless revolutions have all contributed to the current success of the coffee shop; though the numbers of customers now using the coffee shop as a second office is now seen as a threat to the format itself.

### Marketing

Producers have played an active role in creating a set of values around coffee consumption that have been tailored to the aspirations of local markets. In Italy, the image of espresso was shifted from an expression of exoticism, to an everyday item, and is now presented as an icon of Italianess whose position has been validated by its international success. Branding has played a key role in this global success, but has reflected very different (and at times contested) points of reference: for example, between the role of coffee as an element in ‘continental’ culture in Europe and as part of an American lifestyle in Asia.

### Cultural Positioning

Intertwined with this ‘official’ manufacturing of value around the beverages and their retail formats, there has been a process of broader cultural construction of images around the consumption of espresso-based beverages which has at times helped to promulgate their success, but can also threaten it. In the 1950s and 60s the incorporation of cappuccino into British youth culture both ensured its success, but also limited its spread into a broader market. Its association with the Anglo-Italian café during the 1970s cheapened the image of Italian coffee, an image never better encapsulated than in the 1980 television comedy sketch show *Not the Nine O’Clock News* in which a clearly Anglo-Italian waiter was depicted crouching down behind his Gaggia, making frothing noises while stirring powdered milk, cigarette ash and washing up liquid into an instant coffee and blowing bubbles into it with a straw. Conversely the role of television shows imported from the US such *Friends* in re-establishing drinking espresso-based beverages as a trendy practice amongst young adults cannot be underestimated.

### Agents

One of the functions of commodity biography is to restore to history, people whose importance within an industry is often hidden. In the context of Italian coffee, contrary to the image of a beverage at first imported by émigré Italians, and then re-exported by corporate giants, the dominant narrative of the spread of Italian coffee is that of its importation by local agents, many of whom were from outside the mainstream coffee industry. While this is especially true of the many independent operators within the

business, it is also the case that local corporations have generally preceded multinational ones in opening up new markets. This is an important part of any discussion of glocalism within the spread of espresso coffee.

### Agency

One final feature needs to be stressed, that of the agency of coffee itself. As stated at the outset, this is not so much a history of the spread of coffee, as the replacement of one form of coffee preparation by another. Espresso's success ultimately reflects the fact that it is an intensely flavoured essence in contrast to the weaker taste of conventionally brewed coffee. The success of the speciality revolution in the USA was not a result of advertising (of which there was very little), but of customer experience, often furthered by simple techniques such as sampling. An early indicator of the takeoff of the speciality sector was that office workers preferred to go out to buy takeaway beverages from the coffee shop, rather than drink the free brewed coffee made available at the workplace.

McDonalds, after years of trying to compete with coffee shops by undercutting prices, or emphasising the simple i.e. ordinary virtues of their coffee against the sophisticated beverages served in a Starbucks, have only recently started improving their coffee sales by converting their own coffee offer to that provided in the coffee shop format. Conversely Starbucks, after a period of poor results, has been perceived as having lost its way due to venturing too far down the route of the McDonaldised quick service chain, and has sacked the CEO it recruited from Walmart to drive its expansion. Howard Schultz has resumed this role, promising to reintroduce the original format of high-value coffee preparation, using semi-automatic machines, with skilled and knowledgeable baristas. In returning to the stress on individually prepared, high quality beverages, Schultz is acknowledging the fundamental truth behind the cappuccino conquests – that the most critical form of agency in the globalisation of espresso is that exercised over consumers by the coffee itself.