



THE LOVE ITALY GUIDE N. 003

Espresso

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A true Italian espresso is pulled in about 25 seconds, filling a small cup with roughly 25 to 30 millilitres of liquid under nine bars of pressure - the weight of water nearly a hundred metres deep. That pressure is what forces out the crema, the hazelnut-coloured foam on top that a barista uses to judge whether the shot was pulled correctly. This is Guide 003 in The Love Italy Guide series.

What Espresso Actually Is

Espresso is not a specific bean or a dark roast - it is a method. The word comes from the Italian for "pressed out," and it describes coffee made by forcing hot water (around 90-96°C) through finely ground, compacted coffee at high pressure. The result is a concentrated shot, thicker and more intense than filter coffee, topped with crema.

The machine that made it possible was refined in Milan. Luigi Bezzera patented an early steam-driven design

in 1901, but the modern spring-lever machine - the one that introduced the nine-bar pressure and the crema we recognise today - was patented by Achille Gaggia in 1938 and commercialised after the Second World War.

How Italians Actually Drink It

In Italy, "un caffè" means an espresso. You order it, drink it standing at the bar in a few sips, pay, and leave - the whole ritual often takes under five minutes. Prices at the counter are regulated in many towns and a plain espresso frequently costs around one euro, though sitting at a table typically costs more because of table service (servizio).

The variations follow a logic worth knowing: a macchiato is an espresso "stained" with a little milk; a ristretto is a shorter, more concentrated pull; a lungo is a longer one; and a caffè corretto is "corrected" with a splash of grappa or sambuca. A cappuccino sits apart from all of these.

The Cappuccino Rule

Italians traditionally drink milky coffees like cappuccino only in the morning, and rarely after a meal. The common belief is that a large dose of milk sits heavily on a full stomach, so ordering a cappuccino after lunch or dinner reads as unusual to locals. Nobody will stop you - but if you want to blend in, the after-dinner order is a plain espresso.

Crema, Grind, and What Goes Wrong

Crema forms when the pressure emulsifies oils and dissolves carbon dioxide trapped in freshly roasted beans. Its presence signals fresh coffee and a correct extraction, though a thick crema alone does not guarantee good flavour - robusta beans produce more of it than the finer-tasting arabica, which is one reason many traditional Italian blends include some robusta.

The two most common faults are extraction errors. Water that runs through too fast produces a sour, thin shot (under-extraction, often from too coarse a grind); water that crawls through produces a bitter, burnt one (over-extraction, often from too fine a grind or too much coffee). Baristas adjust the grind daily, since humidity alone can change how the water flows.

The Moka Pot at Home

Most Italians do not own an espresso machine. At home they use the moka pot, the octagonal aluminium stovetop brewer designed by Alfonso Bialetti in 1933. It builds only around one to two bars of pressure - far below a bar machine - so, strictly speaking, it does not make true espresso and produces little to no crema. What it does make is a strong, concentrated coffee that generations have grown up on, and its shape is recognisable enough to sit in a design museum.

Myths Worth Retiring

Myth: Espresso has more caffeine than a mug of drip coffee. Per millilitre, yes - but a single shot is tiny. A 30ml espresso holds roughly 60-80mg of caffeine, while a large mug of filter coffee often holds more overall simply because there is far more liquid.

Myth: A dark, oily roast means better espresso. Roast level is a style choice, not a quality mark. Very dark, oily beans can taste burnt and go stale faster; plenty of excellent espresso is pulled from medium roasts.

Myth: The lemon peel on the rim is a classic Italian touch. This is largely a myth abroad. Rubbing lemon on an espresso cup is not standard Italian practice and is often traced to older habits at bars with questionable dishwashing rather than to flavour.

Frequently Asked Questions

Is it rude to order a cappuccino after lunch in Italy?

Not rude, just unusual. Baristas serve them at any hour and are used to visitors ordering them. The custom is simply that locals treat milky coffee as a morning drink, so an after-meal cappuccino marks you as a tourist rather than causing offence.

Why is espresso so much cheaper at the counter than at a table?

The counter price is often regulated and assumes you drink standing and leave. Sitting at a table adds servizio - table service - which is a separate, higher charge, especially in tourist squares. The coffee is the same; you are paying for the seat and the time.

Does a moka pot make real espresso?

Technically no. A moka pot brews at only one to two bars of pressure, while true espresso needs around nine, so it produces a strong stovetop coffee rather than a proper crema-topped shot. It is, however, how most Italian households make their daily coffee.