

CAMILLA SOMERS

Photos by Michael Thurin & Lakota Gambill

Florence's Passion for il Caffè

THE CITY'S BEST ESPRESSO, AN IN-DEPTH LOOK, PART 1

Italians, known more for their customary drink-and-go behavior when it comes to coffee, are finally changing their tune, joining the increasing number of baristas, café owners and most importantly, clientele in Florence and around the world who can't get enough of an Italian patrimony: IL CAFFÈ.

Many of the men and women who run Florence's cafés and *torrefazioni* (production companies), are so passionate about coffee that they sniff, swill and close their eyes in pleasure as if handling a glass of fine cabernet rather than a cup of espresso, which, as *Vista* goes to press, costs €1 or €1.10.

All those involved in preparing an excellent espresso are using all means available to make the consumer feel the same way. They want everyone to understand their passion for Arabica and Robusta and every combination in between.

"A superior espresso comes not only from the blend, but the expertise behind the roasting of coffee beans, and the proper selection of an espresso machine as well as its constant maintenance," says Simone Checcucci of OKE TORREFAZIONE.

A CAFÉ TOUR

There aren't many places like CHIAROSCURO, a café located on via del Corso in Florence's historic center that

makes people understand what they're drinking.

Indeed, the café has made a decided effort to transform its clientele into informed coffee drinkers. The menu includes explanations for every flavor

and brew, while the walls display the array of beans available.

Here, the discerning customer can buy coffee hailing from all over the world in the form of a steaming cup or ground to make at home. Mexican coffee beans



●●●●● DITTA ARTIGIANALE, via dei Neri

●●●●● CHIAROSCURO, via del Corso

●●●●● ROBIGLIO, via Tosinghi

●●●●● CAFFÈ GIACOSA, via Tornabuoni

are the favorite, but Guatemalan, Costa Rican, Brazilian, Ethiopian, Indian and Indonesian are also available, as are Fair Trade beans.

Just off of Florence's posh via de' Tornabuoni is the Roberto Cavalli's CAFFÈ GIACOSA, where a plain shot of espresso, however, disappoints. Served in an attractive china cup with a silver spoon, the coffee proved too acidic with an unpleasant aftertaste.

Not far from Giacosa's glossiness is ROBIGLIO on via Tosinghi, something of an oasis among the tourist traps surrounding the Duomo. "This is a typical Italian café," says Daniele Pesato, "one of the few places that maintains that tradition. We don't want to become a museum." This Robiglio—one of four independently owned cafés under the same name in Florence—specializes in extra dark, straightforward espresso, perfect for reviving weary, cobblestone-pounding feet.

The espresso proved to be rich, full-bodied and robust with a smoky and pleasant aftertaste. Robiglio utilizes Segafredo coffee—100% Arabica—and a San Marco coffee machine.

COFFEE PRODUCTION COMPANIES

A *torrefazione*, so small it comprises just a single room, is the family-owned OKE CAFFÈ, located on via Pisana near Porta San Frediano. Founded by Omero Checcucci in 1967, the factory in Sambuca, located in the Chianti region, and store in Oltrarno are now operated by brother and sister team Stefania and Simone Checcucci.

Stefania calls coffee roasting not just a matter of production, but a "poetic work as well," a sentiment that expresses the family's passion for their daily espresso. The Checcuccis roast their beans, which hail almost exclusively from Central America, using a massive contraption that seems like a throwback to the Industrial Revolution. No matter, though, because it produces delicious, gourmet-grade coffee ground for the traditional Italian moka pot, for drip or filter machines, and even Turkish coffee.

"We make our own flavor, our own taste," says Stefania proudly. You can, too, by requesting on www.okecaffè.it your own mix of coffee beans, or by stopping by the *torrefazione* itself, where the door always remains open to welcome clients or inquisitive passersby.

A more centrally located *torrefazione* is COFFEE MAGIC, via Pietrapiana 63/r, while a newcomer on the Florentine coffee scene is 101 CAFFÈ at via dei Ginori 58 near San Lorenzo. 101 Caffè carries a wide range of blends prepared by a number of selected Italian coffee production companies.

THE ULTIMATE ESPRESSO MACHINE

But for a delightful coffee that pleases the senses, with a perfect, smooth *crema*—the reddish brown foam of a freshly made espresso, there is something equally as important than the quality of the coffee bean itself. What is also needed is a trained *barista* with a hand and heart for coffee.

steel or customizable materials, represents a handmade masterpiece, dedicated to coffee shops wishing to serve the best espresso. In Florence these include Mercato Centrale, the JT Café in piazza Pitti, Open Bar Golden View at Ponte Vecchio, Bistrot Le Cocotte in via Nazionale, Le Cocotte and Sarafini on via Gioberti, Pasticceria Così in Borgo degli Albizi and the new tea room in the Santa Maria Novella pharmacy, all of which use a "La Marzocco" espresso machine.

COFFEE CLASSES

In keeping with its mission to educate clients, the owners of Chiaroscuro café offer lessons on the tasting, preparation and ecology of coffee at its *torrefazione*,



With this in mind, in 1927 the Florentine company La Marzocco was established, and today produces espresso machines destined to 35% of the high end niche globally. Sponsor of the World Barista Championships for nine years, the company, which has played an important role in the growing "specialty coffee" sector worldwide for the past 15 years, was recently proclaimed as the "Best Coffee Equipment Supplier" at the European Coffee Awards.

Each machine's innovative technology, encompassed in a case of stainless

Mokaflor, located on the outskirts of Florence at via delle Torri 55. Called "Espresso Academy," the school plays host to Italian professionals and foreign enthusiasts alike.

The lessons offered at Mokaflor are divided into two parts: the first covers quality, or how coffee is cultivated, roasted and blended; the second is the "theater" of coffee, or specifically, how to make those complicated designs on a cappuccino.