

Proceeding Paper

Regional Variations in Italian Coffee Culture: Historical Influences and Contemporary Preferences for Robusta-Arabica Blends [†]

Mariano Peluso 

CoffeeBI, Via Messina, 47, 20154 Milan, Italy; mariano@coffeebi.com

[†] Presented at the International Coffee Convention 2024, Mannheim, Germany, 17–18 October 2024.

Abstract: *Coffea canephora*, or Robusta, plays an important role in the Italian coffee scene, particularly in the preparation of espresso, contributing to the coffee's intense flavor and rich crema. But why do Italians prefer this type of coffee? Why does this preference not emerge in the same way in neighboring countries such as Germany, France, Austria, and even Spain? And why are there so many differences in coffee tastes among regions within Italy? The northern part of the country prefers lighter and longer coffees with a major presence of Arabica, while southern regions prefer shorter and darker coffees with a larger presence of Robusta. This kaleidoscopic coffee culture traces back to historical events linked to the introduction of coffee beans in Italy and to its varied regional landscape. Within the folds of history lie the origins that have shaped the Italian coffee identity. This journey presents an intriguing case study.

Keywords: *Coffea canephora*; Italian coffee; espresso; regional coffee tastes; Robusta; Italian coffee history; Neapolitan coffee; coffee cultures; coffee identity

1. Introduction

Coffea canephora, commonly known as Robusta, plays a crucial role in Italian coffee culture, particularly in crafting espresso, contributing to the coffee's intense flavor and rich crema. The preference for Robusta in espresso blends varies significantly with regional tastes within Italy. The north favors the delicate notes of Arabica beans while the south prefers the robust, bitter profiles that Robusta enhances, which is reflected in the darker crema and fuller body of the coffee. This regional variance not only reflects Italy's coffee history but also embodies the country's diverse culinary tastes.

2. Materials and Methods

This study employs a historical analysis approach to understand the regional variations in Italian coffee culture. Through examining historical records, trade documents, and cultural texts, the introduction and evolution of coffee preferences across different Italian regions is traced.

3. Results and Discussion

3.1. Northern Italy

In the northeastern part of the peninsula, coffee is characterized by its light roast, striking a delicate balance between slight bitterness and aromatic notes of chocolate and vanilla. This results in a harmoniously sweet cup with gentle acidity alongside fruity and spicy undertones. Similarly, coffee from Piedmont is distinguished by its subtle bitterness and robust body, embodying the region's nuanced approach to coffee roasting and blending. Milan is at the forefront of embracing global coffee trends, including 'latte art', cold brew, and specialty coffee varieties. Milan also claims the origin of the internationally acclaimed 'caffè latte'.



Citation: Peluso, M. Regional Variations in Italian Coffee Culture: Historical Influences and Contemporary Preferences for Robusta-Arabica Blends. *Proceedings* **2024**, *109*, 9. <https://doi.org/10.3390/ICC2024-18022>

Academic Editor: Dirk W. Lachenmeier

Published: 28 June 2024



Copyright: © 2024 by the author. Licensee MDPI, Basel, Switzerland. This article is an open access article distributed under the terms and conditions of the Creative Commons Attribution (CC BY) license (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>).

3.2. Center and Southern Italy

Both Roman and Tuscan coffees share characteristics such as a robust body and a discernibly bitter taste, achieved through a blend of Robusta and Arabica. A defining feature of Roman coffee is its rich brown 'crema' adorned with hints of dried fruit. Neapolitan espresso is characterized by its profound intensity, dark hue, and rich aroma, crafted from darkly roasted beans predominantly Robusta. This endows it with its hallmark robust body, distinctively bitter flavor, and iconic brown crema. Neapolitan coffee distinguishes itself not only through its unique preparation method but also through its cultural significance, making it a distinct type of coffee [1].

3.3. Historical Context

To explain these differences, it is necessary to consider the historical background when Italy was fragmented into several small states, allowing the coffee culture to spread at different rates. Coffee was introduced to Italy through Venice in the 16th century, facilitated by the city's thriving trade with North Africa and the Middle East. One of the first Italian coffee houses, Caffè Florian, opened in Venice in 1720 [2].

The Austrian influence on Italian coffee culture is significant, especially in the introduction of coffee houses that opened from the northern part of the peninsula to Rome, such as Caffè Greco, founded in 1760. The spread of coffee culture was initially slow due to opposition from some religious figures who, citing its origins in the Muslim world, saw it as religiously and culturally divergent from Christian Europe.

There was also a general distrust of new and foreign influences, especially those associated with stimulant properties that could alter one's state of mind.

In Naples and in the south of Italy, the introduction of coffee was slower and initially flourished within small, exclusive circles of the aristocracy and intellectuals [3]. Here, apart from the church's skepticism, the dark color of coffee also contributed to superstitious beliefs. The black color of coffee was associated with negative connotations, such as the occult or forbidden substances. These beliefs made some Neapolitans reluctant to embrace coffee in their daily lives [4,5].

3.4. The Role of Chocolate and Naples

To comprehend the evolution of these preferences and the contemporary prevalence of Robusta coffee consumption among Italians, it is essential to undertake a comprehensive examination of Italian history. For example, Naples and its history with chocolate play significant roles [6]. When coffee began to spread, Neapolitans were already significant consumers of chocolate. Records from 1771 indicate a considerably higher expenditure on cocoa imports compared with coffee, nearly threefold [7].

This underscores the local palate's preference for richer, creamier flavors. The history of cocoa in Naples is part of a broader narrative about the introduction and evolution of chocolate in Italy. Notably, Italians have innovated various chocolate dishes, including the creation of the chocolate sorbet in Naples in the mid-1700s [8].

To achieve a creaminess similar to traditional chocolate drinks, local coffee producers began blending 'Arabica' with some 'Robusta'. This blend, preferred in Naples, differed from the lighter Arabica coffee infusion favored in Trieste [9].

It was a success. This innovation encouraged roasters to increasingly use more Robusta and to experiment with darker roasting processes.

Within the kingdom, particularly in the southern part of Italy, coffee began to be appreciated across all segments of the population. After the unification of Italy and subsequent emigration, the use of Robusta in coffee spread and was also appreciated in other parts of the peninsula.

At the beginning of the 19th century, superstitions surrounding coffee had faded. Coffee became a symbol of hospitality and friendship [10]. The Neapolitan innovation in blending different types of coffee showcased the adaptability of coffee culture to local tastes and highlighted the creativity in crafting a distinct coffee experience.

4. Conclusions

In summary, the study of regional variations in Italian coffee culture reveals a rich tapestry woven from historical influences and contemporary preferences. The distinct preference for Robusta in the south and Arabica in the north reflects not only regional tastes but also deep historical roots. The introduction of coffee through Venice, the influence of Austrian coffee houses, and the unique cultural context of cities like Naples and Milan have all played significant roles in shaping Italy's coffee landscape.

The north's inclination towards lighter, more delicate coffee blends contrasts with the south's preference for robust, intense flavors, highlighting Italy's diverse culinary heritage. This study underscores the importance of historical context in understanding contemporary preferences and offers valuable insights into the broader cultural significance of coffee in Italy.

Implications of these findings extend to both cultural historians and the coffee industry. For historians, the intricate connection between regional history and coffee preferences provides a deeper understanding of Italy's cultural evolution. For the coffee industry, recognizing these regional preferences can guide product development and marketing strategies, ensuring they resonate with local tastes and traditions.

Future research could further explore the socio-economic factors influencing coffee consumption patterns and the potential impact of globalization on regional coffee cultures. Through pursuing further research into the historical and cultural aspects of coffee, a more nuanced understanding of and appreciation for the multifaceted richness of Italian coffee culture can be achieved.

Supplementary Materials: The following supporting information can be downloaded at: <https://www.mdpi.com/article/10.3390/ICC2024-18022/s1>, conference presentation (PDF).

Funding: This research received no external funding.

Institutional Review Board Statement: Not applicable.

Informed Consent Statement: Not applicable.

Data Availability Statement: No new data were created or analyzed in this study. Data sharing is not applicable to this article.

Conflicts of Interest: Author Mariano Peluso was employed by the company CoffeeBI. The author declares that the research was conducted in the absence of any commercial or financial relationships that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest.

References

1. Mereu, C. *The Italian Coffee*; International Coffee Organization (ICO): London, UK, 2015.
2. Giuli, M.; Pascucci, F. *Ritorno alla Competitività Dell'espresso*; Franco Angeli: Milan, Italy, 2014.
3. Forgione, A. *Made in Naples*; Magenes: Milan, Italy, 2013.
4. Petrini, S. *Il Simbolismo Magico del Caffè*; Armenia: Milan, Italy, 2013.
5. Allen, S.L. *La Tazzina del Diavolo*; Bompiani: Milan, Italy, 2015.
6. Corrado, V. *Il Credenziere di buon gusto—La Manovra della Cioccolata e del Caffè*; Internet Archive: San Francisco, CA, USA, 1794. Available online: <https://archive.org/details/b22016594> (accessed on 25 June 2024).
7. Galanti, G.M. New Historical and Geographical Description of Sicilies. Available online: <https://books.google.it/books?id=Omc5AAAacAAJ&pg=PA336&dq=cacao+Bilancio%C2%A0del+Commercio+esterno+del+Regno,+fatto+d%E2%80%99ordine+del+Re&hl=it&sa=X&ved=0ahUKEwi0nMy8xaveAhWLAcAKHfOJAdwQ6AEIKzAA#v=onepage&q=cacao%20Bilancio%C2%A0del%20Commercio%20esterno%20del%20Regno,%20fatto%20d%E2%80%99ordine%20del%20Re&f=false> (accessed on 25 June 2024).
8. Italy Magazine. Chocolate's Italian History. Available online: <https://www.italymagazine.com/featured-story/chocolates-italian-history> (accessed on 25 June 2024).

9. Mancusi Sorrentino, L. *Il Caffè e Napoli*; Grimaldi & C Editori: Naples, Italy, 2017.
10. Mancusi Sorrentino, L. *Manuale del Perfetto Amatore del Caffè*; Giunti: Florence, Italy, 2018.

Disclaimer/Publisher's Note: The statements, opinions and data contained in all publications are solely those of the individual author(s) and contributor(s) and not of MDPI and/or the editor(s). MDPI and/or the editor(s) disclaim responsibility for any injury to people or property resulting from any ideas, methods, instructions or products referred to in the content.