

TASTES *of* ITALIA

BASICS OF THE ITALIAN KITCHEN

FALL 2022

HOLIDAY PREVIEW

TASTY TREATS TO GET YOU IN THE MOOD

Torta Caprese with a
Chocolate Glaze
Page 51

**GREAT
HOLIDAY
DESSERTS**

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NATIVE SOIL

CHRISTMAS COFFEE IN ROME

Introduced to Italians in the 16th century by the merchants of Venice, coffee was once a luxury beverage served after every meal, but is now enjoyed as the perfect companion for Christmas confections.

—
BY LAUREN BIRMINGHAM PISCITELLI

Piazza Navona in Rome during Christmas time.

NATIVE SOIL



Tiramisu tastes
even better when
enjoyed with coffee.

I

am sitting in the front row at the Caffé Tazza d'Oro in Rome overlooking the Pantheon with bon vivant, Signor Mario Macera. Mario is an Italian coffee expert who knows everything from coffee beans to roasting methods to mokas (a stovetop coffee pot). Caffé Tazza d'Oro, meaning house of the golden coffee cup, is a landmark caffè on Via Degli Ofrani in the heart of Rome.

Warding off the brisk winter chill under a gas light lamp, we huddle to keep warm until our coffee and confections arrive. It's Christmastime in Rome and the piazza is buzzing with holiday shoppers.

Our waiter arrives serving two espressos with a shot of liqueur. He's tall, dark and wearing a long white bistro apron.

"Try the Aroma di Roma Regina dei Caffè," he says, meaning the aroma of Rome Queen of coffee. "It's a liqueur whose secret recipe includes ancient Roman herbs and spices — nutmeg, cinnamon and cloves — which give it a dark brown color and intense flavor. Romans add this liqueur to their caffè during the holidays and sometimes for no

reason at all. It warms the heart," he adds.

We sip our coffee under the twinkling Christmas lights of the Eternal City while Mario explains his love for coffee.

"My passion for caffè recently led me on a journey that started in Milan and zig-zagged through Italy until I reached Campania, then Sicily, on a hunt for the best Italian coffee. And, as with all good things in Italy, there were no signs or websites anywhere along the way. I learned stories and roasting methods firsthand from artisan coffee purveyors," he says.

"During my experience, I was overly fascinated and left a career in corporate finance to open my own company importing Italian coffee to America," he adds.

"The story of coffee is a long and interesting one," Mario continues. "Coffee beans came from the Middle East and arrived in Venice in the 16th century, brought by the merchants of Venice along with their silk and spices. Coffee was a luxury beverage at the time served after every meal. Initially, coffee was banned by clergymen because it was said to be evil. But when Pope Clement VIII first tasted coffee, he declared it delicious and even attempted to baptize it," Mario says.

"During this time, only the very wealthy were able to purchase the beans and machines to grind and brew coffee. Wine remained the number one beverage competing with coffee, which was not initially accepted into the Italian way of dining. Eventually, Italians began to enjoy coffee after dinner and cappuccino for breakfast. When Angelo Moriondo invented the first patented espresso machine in 1884, it changed the world. I visited many bars this past year during my travels and tasted endless types of coffee. It's a big business and coffee aficionados demand high-quality beans," he says.

The waiter returns to our table with a platter of mostaccioli, tozzetti and pangiallo — Christmas confections along with caffè affogati, hot espressos poured over creamy gelato. He also gifts us with a box of chicchi ricoperti di cioccolato, chocolate covered coffee beans and cappuccino mousse.

These are all things that pair well with the Italian coffee at Christmas.

Mostaccioli are ancient biscotti that were first made by the Romans using honey, hazelnuts, flour, egg whites, pepper and cinnamon. They're made in the form of a rhombus and are a classic Christmas cookie. Italians dip them into coffee, cappuccino or hot chocolate at Christmastime. Tozzetti are another Christmas cookie made with dried fruit, almonds, walnuts and hazelnuts, honey, flour, grated orange peel and pepper. Pangiallo is a traditional Christmas cake made with dried figs, almonds, walnuts, pine nuts, candied fruit, raisins, honey, chocolate and orange and lemon peel. The cake dates back to the ancient Romans who made it during the winter solstice and believed it was a gift to the sun god asking for light on earth until spring arrived.



PHOTO: JAMES BONDAREVSKIS

Coffee expert Mario Macera traversed Italy to learn all that he could about great Italian coffee.

Traditionally, mostaccioli, tozzetti and pangiallo are baked at the start of the Christmas season on December 8, the Immaculate Conception, which is a Holy Day in Italy, to December 13, the feast day of Santa Lucia. They continue being baked until the Epiphany, celebrated January 6, another feast for the Roman Catholic Church commemorating the visit of the Wise Men. Italians attend mass, parades, firework shows and processions that include food and wine.

As Mario and I enjoy our coffee, it sparks conversation and I share my stories with him of Christmastime in Italy.

“In my great grandfather’s village of Pico in Lazio, we flash-fry bread dough in little rounds until golden and garnish with sugar. We also make tozzetti with almonds harvested from the fields. My grandmother’s village of Prata Sannita in Campania is famous for susamielli, a type of biscotti made with cinnamon, nutmeg and cloves. They were made by the Clarisse nuns in the Convento Santa Maria della Sapienza in Naples during the 1600s in the shape of an S. My mom and I keep the tradition of Christmas cooking alive, making over 20 varieties and we share them with family and friends.”

Tradition is important in Italy whatever the subject is — different pastas have their distinct shapes and specific sauces; there is no salt in Tuscan bread, and only a barista makes the coffee.

The Italian barista is the maestro behind the bar who not only makes the perfect coffee but knows each customer’s name and how they like it served. They’re highly trained and have a natural talent, gregariously conversing with each customer daily.

Mario explains the names of each Italian coffee.

“The most important is espresso, a shot of espresso served in a demi-tasse cup. Italians start their day with espresso — ordered at the bar and enjoyed while standing. There’s cappuccino which is espresso served with steamed milk. A macchiato, meaning little spot, is an espresso dolloped with steamed milk on top. For those who like it strong and short, there’s the corretto, a shot of espresso with a shot of liquor. A marocchino is a shot of espresso with a layer of foamed milk and a sprinkle of cacao powder in a cup before the coffee is poured. Lungo,



An assortment of sweets served in Rome during the holidays.

PHOTO: JAMES BONDAREVSKIS

meaning long, is an espresso made with more water. Doppio are two espressos. Ristretto is a short, concentrated espresso. Caffè latte is an espresso made with more milk than a cappuccino but only a small amount of foam. For any hot summer day in Italy, there’s the shakerato, an espresso vigorously shaken with ice. And, if you don’t like your coffee strong, there’s the

Americano, an espresso with hot water added,” he says.

I learn from Mario that each artisan coffee producer has a master who blends and roasts the beans. Italians use the Arabica coffee beans, which have a full flavor and low caffeine content. However, to obtain a stronger taste and higher caffeine content, Robusta beans are blended with Arabica.

Italian roast coffee has a dark brown color and very little, if any, oil. Robusta beans are also roasted longer than Arabica varieties. Lastly, the master roaster is trained to roast not too long or too hot.

“Coffee has played a role in the Italian lifestyle and cooking for centuries, and it’s a key ingredient in many dessert recipes including the classic tiramisu. My mamma Sofia has a coveted secret recipe which we make at Christmastime, and my father won’t let her share it with anyone.”

It’s evening in Rome, and we’ve tasted and enjoyed every type

of espresso, caffè affogato and even the Aroma of Rome Queen of Coffee. I return to my hotel and Mario heads to Antico Caffè Greco on Via Dei Condotti to continue his coffee quest. He’s picked a great spot. Caffè Greco is a historic landmark that opened in 1760 where Stendhal, Goethe and James Joyce enjoyed espressos many Christmases ago.

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