Baldoli on Pojmann, 'Espresso: The Art and Soul of Italy (Saggistica)'

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About ten years ago, at a café in the train station in Milan, I assisted in a curious exchange between an American tourist and the bartender, an Italian woman speaking with a Milanese accent. The customer asked for a cappuccino and added that she needed to take it away in a paper cup. The barista told her that this was impossible, and at the customer’s question as to why, she replied, openly irritated by such a request, “perché di no.” This book on the history of Italian espresso and its specific cultures reminded me of that episode.

The author is a history professor and an espresso-lover, already known for her work on immigrant communities and women in Italy and Europe. The book both explores and praises the Italian world of espresso, not least for its capacity to avoid things that happen in the United States (but also elsewhere, in a now globalized café culture): coffee is what Italians most find themselves to be in need of when they are abroad, and Pojmann explains why: a good coffee is “more than the beans, the machine, and the water. It is people, history, and culture” (p. 27); the bar experience needs a “soul,” not just the preparation of a beverage (p. 86).

The first chapter provides some interesting reflections on the role of coffee in modern Italy. For example, the author observes how Italian family-run, independent espresso bars have not been challenged by Americanization. On the whole, the author confirms continuities rather than breaks in Italian coffee consumption. Even the large roasting companies retain the aspect of family businesses and over the course of the twentieth century, none of the traditional ways of making coffee disappeared: it is possible to find in Italian homes percolators and the slow, Neapolitan cucumella, and almost every household contains a moka, even though now the pod or capsule machine can be found too, for a convenient, quicker espresso. Despite all this, the bar retains a fundamental role in daily life and espresso culture is still part of the Italians’ lifestyle and identity.

The success of Italian espresso abroad is linked more generally to the success of the concept “made in Italy.” Years ago, in an interview with the daughter of the founder of Kimbo coffee in Naples, I was inquiring precisely on this aspect, and she explained her views: “I would ascribe the success of espresso to a particular attention for everything that is made in Italy, the Italian cuisine, pasta, pizza. I see this more as an Italian style that is part of a complex of Italian habits. I don’t know if the American chains have contributed, perhaps a bit, but I think that it is more Italian fashion and cuisine.
that have favored the exportation of espresso abroad.”

The second chapter focuses on production and producers, explaining the success of large roasters such as Lavazza in Turin, Kimbo in Naples, and Illy in Trieste; medium ones like Vergnano just outside Turin; and smaller local ones, which generally sell their produce in their own coffee bars in Italian cities. The history of the large companies is also linked to the history of advertising and design, with the employment of well-known public figures as testimonials, which contributed to their export abroad. Small high-quality roasters developed a more niche clientele, counting on local markets and tourism—for example, the Tazza d’Oro near the Pantheon square in Rome.

While Italians continue to use their mokas at home, and the small artisan roasters keep using beans and ground espresso, the biggest impact in the market has recently been the arrival of pods and capsules. Both Lavazza and Illy developed pod machines as early as the 1980s, but only with the worldwide success of the Swiss firm Nespresso have they expanded into the home and office markets.

Besides looking at the roasters and their markets, the book pays attention to the origins of the espresso they use, the countries it comes from, and the variety of blends chosen by the companies, some of which (mainly the larger ones) have dedicated employees who travel to the plantations in person to sample the beans.

The third chapter explores the role of espresso in popular culture, starting with the many Italian films in which the beverage appears, “woven into the contemporary Italian consciousness” (p. 47). Among the first campaigns was advertising with Carosello, in which Lavazza presented its blend through the Caballero and Carmencita stories. The analysis also includes poetry, novels, and music, showing that espresso consumption illustrated not only regional differences but also a certain form of national unity. It also marked the transition from a rural society to an urban and modern one.

The last three chapters delve into local examples: Turin, Rome, and Naples. It starts with the Turinese “salotto” cafes, with echoes of the Enlightenment, and the influence of the Slow Food movement, which aided resistance to Americanization and the global chains. Although Illy is mentioned as a comparison here, there is no chapter on the fourth important geographical region for coffee, that of Trieste. This, perhaps with a study of the very rich Sicilian tradition as well, would have made the volume more complete. The issue of class and political affiliation is very interestingly discussed in the case of Roman cafes, which also show the link between small roasters and local neighborhoods. The chapter on Naples offers fascinating reflections on the generational interconnections between bars now catering to a variety of ethnic tastes and those still proudly serving Neapolitan espresso with all its rituals, all located in the same areas.

One aspect of the espresso world that has been largely left out in this volume is the production of espresso machines. This is also part of the history of the “made in Italy” concept, as well as the history of Italian technology and commercial advertising; the machinery is tightly interconnected with the world of the coffee roasters and the world of coffee bars. However, this is a highly readable book, based on thorough historical research, including oral history. It is indispensable for anyone interested in the history of espresso but also useful to understand aspects of tradition and modernity in postwar Italy and their persistence today.

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