



EXTRACTED FROM

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New York's Best Espresso?

By WILLIAM GRIMES

AM not a fanatic about espresso. To begin with, I drink more tea than coffee, and at the end of a meal I almost always order a plain American-style coffee. Still, about once a week the urge for an espresso made the Italian way hits hard. Like a vague tingling in the sinuses that develops into a 90-megaton sneeze, this little hankering cannot be ignored. It's a want that becomes a need. And there's the problem. It is almost impossible to get a decent cup of espresso in New York.

How can this be? The city has more Italian restaurants than parking spaces. All of them serve espresso. Delis serve espresso. Groceries serve espresso. About the only place you cannot get espresso is a Chinese restaurant, and I'm not even sure about that. I am sure, though, that the chances of getting an espresso worth drinking hover perilously close to zero.

Here's what I want. A few sips of coffee, full bodied verging on syrupy and so rich it needs no sugar, topped with a thick layer of khaki-colored cream. Here's what I get. Way too many ounces of thin bitter liquid with ragged scumlike traces of foam.

After years of complaining, I decided to get to the root of the problem. Why can't New Yorkers, who demand the best, get even passable espresso?

To arrive at an answer, I talked to Italian coffee makers. I talked to cafe owners who care deeply about espresso. I talked to New Yorkers who shed tears of frustration every night, people for whom the espresso deficit ranks up there with high-priced real estate and violent crime as the most undesirable aspects of living in this city.

After my listening tour, followed by a tasting tour, I think that I now understand the problem — and why there will probably be peace in the Middle East before we work our way out of the current crisis.

First, the thing itself. Espresso is a way of making coffee. Water heated to a precise temperature is forced at a precise pressure for a precise period of time through beans reduced to a precise grind. The liquid that emerges should be very dark, thick and rich, with a tan layer of emulsified oils and proteins on top that the Italians call crema.....



In Italy, making espresso is a profession and an art. In New York, it's a lousy job. And part of what makes it a lousy job is that New York does not really have an espresso culture. The consumer is undiscerning. Cafes do not dare serve a one-ounce espresso for fear of being accused of shortchanging their customers. Some deliberately grind their beans coarsely so that the water moves through it more quickly. Customers do not then have to wait an interminable half-minute.....

No one complains, because the local taste has adapted to harsh, watery coffee, as often as not served in a little paper cup that looks as if it came from a doctor's office.....

Lazy operators fail to warm the espresso cup. They don't clean the machine daily. And even if they do clean the machine, they don't get the settings right. And even if they do get the settings right, the place doesn't sell enough espresso to keep the machine humming along at highway speed, where it's happiest.....

For the calcium problem in New York, Illy has developed a cartridge, like a water filter or purifier, which contains resin, calcium and a sodium charge. Water passing through the cartridge picks up calcium, but sodium bombardment prevents it from adhering to the espresso machine's walls. If this sounds a little obsessive, that's the hallmark of espresso lovers. For years, in my fruitless search for a decent cup, I have chased down leads supplied by a friend, Frank de Falco, who is fluent in Italian and demanding about espresso. Like a birder, he calls in sightings from time to time.

Mr. de Falco's latest enthusiasm is Via Quadronno, on 73rd Street, near Madison Avenue. Real Italian atmosphere, he promised. It's just like leaning up against the bar in a Roman cafe. But make sure you go in the morning, when the young Italian guy is making the coffee. I did. It's good espresso, a Trieste blend called Antica Tostatura Triestina.



Espresso drinking is a stand-up activity at Via Quadronno in Manhattan.

Barbara Alper for The New York Times

Another de Falco tip led me to Higher Grounds, a cafe in the far East Village. I asked for an espresso. "A short one?" the owner said. His eyebrows told me that the right answer was yes. His eyes had the overfocused look of someone who takes in a lot of caffeine every day. He began tamping down grounds in the espresso handle. He poured scalding water into a ceramic espresso cup. He began monitoring the mouse tail of coffee that flowed from the machine. Then he aborted the entire process, yanking the handle from the machine, dumping out the coffee and starting over. "The grind's not right," he said. "It was damp outside earlier, and now it's drier. I need to adjust."



Eventually I got my espresso. It was the real thing, although the blend was idiosyncratic, based on Nicaraguan coffee. I added the place to my list, although Avenue C is not exactly on my beaten track.....

My wanderings produced the usual disappointments. Cremcaffè, in the East Village, had been recommended as the one place in the city that made espresso using Cremcaffè coffee from Trieste. It was so-so. The espresso at Fauchon, formerly Sant Ambroeus, Madison Avenue and 77th Street, I found wretched, a textbook case of far too much liquid, with a burnt bitter flavor. The once-promising Terramare Cafe, a Euro hot spot on East 65th Street, failed to deliver, and at a high price, too.

Other failures: the brand-new Crestanello Gran Caffè Italiano, across from the main branch of the New York Public Library; Cafe Bari in SoHo; and, leading the hall of shame, Caffè Dante, near New York University, where the brew tastes exactly like liquid cardboard.

Honorable mention must go to Dean & DeLuca in SoHo, which served a good, solid cup, and Café Gitane on Mott Street, where the Lavazza espresso has a pronounced winy character. Starbucks seemed about average to me, perhaps a little better, but marred by the burnt over-roasted quality that seems to be the company style. Restaurants did not figure into my quick survey, for practical reasons. No one wants to order a meal to get to an espresso.....

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DINING IN, DINING OUT/STYLE DESK

FOOD STUFF

By Florence Fabricant (NYT)

An Espresso From Italy

Kobrick's, a coffee company in Jersey City, is importing **Antica Tostatura Triestina espresso coffee, a wood-roasted blend from Trieste, Italy, that is full-bodied and flavorful with a beguiling sweet aftertaste.** Roasted beans from Kobrick's come in one-kilogram (2.2 pound) bags for \$28.95; decaffeinated is \$30.95. Tins of the coffee finely ground for espresso are \$10.95 for 250 grams (about 8 ounces), or \$11.95 for decaffeinated. Shipping is extra. To order: (800) 562-7491. **The coffee can be bought at Kobrick's, 693 Henderson Street, Jersey City.**