Coffee Break

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Life is full of difficult questions. In Italy, the hardest ones concern that magic bean: coffee. For a country that produces no coffee beans, Italy has created, if not some of the best drinking coffee in the world, at least some of the most intricate coffee based attitudes and habits among coffee drinking societies.

So, you would think that in the list of Life's Tough Questions topped by "Who Am I?" the second position would be occupied by: "What kind of Coffee do you want?" Wrong. If you know what kind of coffee you want you don't even need to answer that first and primal question. And most Italians already know who they are because they know not only what kind of coffee they want but when and where to order it. Thus, after their shot of caffeine taken standing up at their favourite Bar at their usual time, they are free to concentrate on Life's Really Big Question. No, not "Who am I?" silly, but "How can I overtake that red car which dares to be in front of me?"

Here in Italy, coffee is almost a kind of religion, with a certain type of coffee for every mood, personality and time of day. The coffee taken during the day is treated like some kind of a drug, gulped down in one or two shots standing at the counter. Lingering over a café is done after dinner.

Therefore, the difficult question of what kind of coffee one wants is not for the Italians but those uninitiated to the coffee culture of Italy. If you know how to answer it, you are ready to face life and its lesser questions.

Actually, the most difficult question *even* for Italians is the deceptively simple "Coffee anyone?" And this is a tough one not from the point of view of the drinker but he who raises the question or takes the order. Yes, whether you are a Barrista, a waiter, a secretary or friend asking that question of a group of hard-core coffee drinking Italians, I truly don't envy the person taking the orders. There is a double cartoon that illustrates this. In part one captioned 'Elsewhere in the world' someone at an office meeting asks "Coffee anyone?" The answers are 'yes' and 'no' and a few dissenting 'teas'. The next cartoon headed 'In Italy' shows the same innocent question being answered by a cacophony of replies with ten speech balloons saying: *'un espresso,' 'un café doppio,' 'café latte', 'café macchiato', 'café corretto', 'café ristretto', 'café marocchino', 'café Hag', 'café Americano' and one 'café freddo.'* You get the idea. And please note that unless the orders are being taken before 11 there are no orders for what the rest of the world think is a quintessential Italian coffee----the cappuccino.

That's the stuff mere tourists drink. Sure, Italians drink it too, but discreetly in the morning before lowly tourists are up and about indiscriminately ordering that milky stuff after 11, imagine! Scandalous! But more about cappuccino later.

Yes, the Japanese have their tea drinking ceremony and the Italians have their coffee drinking rituals. Here in