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.

Now to quickly help the uninitiated navigate the sea of Italian coffee:

caffè (just a *caffé* means *espresso*) It is a small cup of very strong coffee. Note, the espresso is the base drink for the other variations that follow:

*caffè doppio*double espresso

*caffè ristretto*espresso with even less water.

caffè macchiato'macchiato' means stained or dirtied and so this is espresso "stained" with a drop of steamed milk.

*caffè marocchino*espresso with a dash of hot milk and cacao powder

caffè AmericanoAmerican-style coffee, but stronger; weaker than espresso and served in a large cup

*caffè corretto*coffee "corrected" with a shot of grappa, cognac, or other spirit

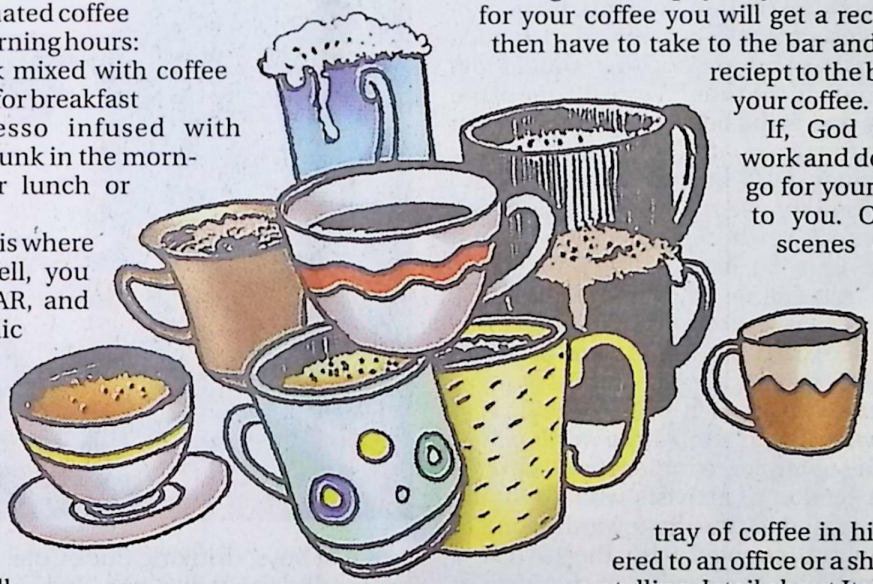
*caffè freddo*iced coffee

*caffè Hag*decaffeinated coffee

Coffees for the morning hours:

*caffè latte*hot milk mixed with coffee and served in a glass for breakfast

*cappuccino*espresso infused with steamed milk and drunk in the morning, but never after lunch or dinner.



The next question is where to go for coffee? Well, you enter the nearest BAR, and in spite of the alcoholic association of the name, most Italians go to the Bar for their regular dose of caffeine rather than a stiff drink. In fact it's in a Bar that many people go to buy milk, cigarettes, phone cards, ice cream, fresh cornetto/croissants, and sandwiches. Once there, you name your poison to the Barrista behind the counter. With the above road map you now know that your choice of coffee lies between the various intensity of caffeine desired by your system, and your tolerance for the presence of milk in it. And these days you can even order a tea at a Bar.

Now to get back to the inevitable question of the cappuccino, which as mentioned above is considered a breakfast drink and thus inappropriate at other times, especially after dinner when so much milk is considered unhealthy for digestion. You might think that every Italian coffee bar makes a decent capuccino, but far from it. Every Italian discovers the perfect cappuccino and sticks to that bar for life. For the record, the perfect cappuccino should be made of 25ml coffee and 125ml of *fresh* milk, with the latter not heated beyond 55°c. The colour will also be regulated to ensure a *'tonalità nocciola tendente al colour testa di moro con riflessi rossicci ornati e striature chiare'*. Less poetically translated, that's a hazelnut to a brown hair colour with reddish clear swirls. And for the history buffs, the name cappuccino derives from a friar called Marco d'Aviano of the Capuchin order wearing the cloak with a hood, which in Italian is called a cappuccio. A little hood is a cappuccino. He participated in the Battle of Vienna in 1683, and after the defeat of the Ottoman Turks, he recovered sacks of coffee from the scene and apparently invented the drink.

One of the strange things about Italian cafes and bars is the process for ordering a coffee. Many of the larger Italian cafes make you pay for your coffee before you go to the bar counter to get served. You first line up at the cash register and pay for your coffee. After you've paid for your coffee you will get a receipt which you will then have to take to the bar and when you give the reciept to the barrista he will make your coffee.

If, God forbid, you are at work and don't have the time to go for your coffee, it will come to you. One of the normal scenes during a weekday would be the sight of a waiter from a nearby Bar, expertly negotiating his way through crowds of people on the street, or crossing the road, with a tray of coffee in his hand, to be delivered to an office or a shop. Which also gives us a telling detail about Italian coffee drinkers, something I still cannot adjust to: they drink their coffee tepid.

In fact if you want your coffee hot, you have to request the bartender to make it not just "caldo" the word for ordinary hot, but "bollente", or boiling. Mind you, this, next to ordering a lunch time cappuccino, is a dead giveaway that you are non-Italian. So, one learns to whisper this request or 'sotto voce'. Unless you get a waiter like mine the other day who shouted out my order to the barman, making a witty reference to the hospital San Eugenio in Rome that specializes in burn injuries: "For table five, one 'caffe al San Eugenio'!" ■