



Indians have never really understood coffee, but that's changing

-Vir Sanghvi

We were in a small village in a scenic - if touristy - part of Italy called Cinque Terre. There were no grand hotels but an enterprising inn-keeper had converted an old monastery into a bed-and-breakfast. Each morning we would go down to the kitchen, where, on a large wooden table, would be laid out a delicious breakfast - bread, salami, torta della nonna and other Italian cakes - along with a jug of juice.

One day, we found a family of obviously distraught Australians staring forlornly at their bread. We said "Good morning" and then my wife, who speaks a little Italian, asked the lady who ran the B&B if it was possible to get some fresh coffee.

The Australians looked startled. "You speak Italian?" one of them asked. My wife said she got by. "Thank God!" said a woman who looked like the mother in the family. "Nobody here speaks any English!" We indicated politely that this should not come as a huge surprise; there were small villages in Australia where nobody spoke any Italian.

But the woman was so relieved to find English speakers that she went into a long monologue about the difficulties her family had faced while travelling through Italy. "And the worst thing is you can't even get a decent cup of coffee," she exclaimed.

My ears pricked up. There are many things that you can complain about in Italy (Rome airport, for instance) but their coffee is far and away the best in the world.

"What do you mean?" I asked, quizzically.

"Well, every time I ask for a latte, all they give me is a cup of milk," she explained.

My wife smiled and pointed out, very gently, that this could be because "latte" was the Italian word for milk. She only needed to ask for "un caffè" if she wanted a single espresso; or "un caffèdoppio" if she wanted a double. And cappuccino is, after all, an Italian word.



Roast with the most : South India is a centre of filter coffee, a wonderful drink, but not coffee in the Western sense in that it really doesn't work without milk.

The Australian seemed less mystified but still dubious. Which was odd because Australia has a great coffee

culture of its own. Italians emigrated to Melbourne early in the last century and established wonderful coffee houses.

But these days, the Seattle-isation of coffee has turned the world upside down. The big-bucks coffee chains create more coffees with silly names than any of us ever dreamt possible. And the pure taste of good coffee has got lost in the hype.

As far as Indians are concerned, you could argue that we never really understood coffee - in the way that the rest of the world does - in the first place.

Coffee is not native to India. Legend has it that beans were smuggled out of Arabia and planted in south India. Over time, south India became a centre of filter coffee, which is very strong coffee that has to be diluted with lots of milk. This is a wonderful drink and has a great cultural history behind it. But it is not coffee in the Western sense in that it really doesn't work without milk.

Whatever its virtues, this kind of coffee never spread far beyond south



India and certainly never reached the north, perhaps because filter coffee is not easy to make and requires not just specialised equipment, but also a degree of patience and some skill.

The coffee that did spread all over India was not really coffee at all. Instant coffee is to genuine coffee what a garden lizard is to a dinosaur. It owes its popularity to the fact that real coffee takes time to prepare and people needed an easy way out. It was only popularised at the beginning of the 20th century, and the brand that most of us know the best, Nescafé, did not hit the market till 1938.

Instant coffee is, in essence, a tasteless, disgusting industrial product, made possible by a variety of factory processes (freeze-drying, etc). Its big advantage is that any fool can mix a few spoonfulls of instant coffee with hot water and obtain a cup of a substance that looks a little bit like coffee. You need no patience and no special equipment.

Why, in a country where we have grown coffee for three centuries and where filter coffee is part of regional tradition, do we drink this industrial rubbish?

Part of the reason is the British. As you probably know, until recently, it was impossible to get a decent cup of coffee in the UK, and even now, something like 80 per cent of all coffee purchased in Britain is instant. (In contrast, instant coffee accounts for only one per cent of all coffee sold in Italy – presumably the one per cent is bought by British tourists.)

But there are other reasons. Unfamiliarity with the real thing (at least in north India) is one. The excellent distribution networks of such multinationals as Nestlé is another. And, at least until this generation came of age, the instant -coffee manufacturers had been able to imbue their product with an air of sophistication and modernity by contrasting its packaging and ease of preparation with the old-fashioned South-Indian way of making filter coffee.

But I've always had the sense that Indians were looking for something better. In the early Sixties, such restaurants as Napoli on Bombay's Churchgate Street imported Italian espresso machines and began to serve Cappuccino. People loved it, perhaps partly because the foam added a certain glamour to the drink.

However, because 'cappuccino' was too hard for the waiters at these restaurants to pronounce, they took to calling the coffee "expresso" (from the name on the machine, perhaps) creating a confusion that has persisted for decades. Even now, when waiters are savvier, if you go to a restaurant and order an espresso; you will be regarded with suspicion. The waiter will size you up: do you really know the difference? Sometimes, he will ask leading questions like "Black or with milk, sir?" just to check that you are not expecting a jhaagwala coffee!

By the Eighties, most educated Indians had become aware of the difference between instant and real coffee even if we did not always drink the real thing. A friend of mine in Calcutta would boast about his Jamaican Blue Mountain coffee beans and though his coffee was always delicious, he made such a ritual of disappearing into the kitchen to make the coffee that all of us began to pull his leg. A post-dinner ritual at his house followed a familiar script.

Host : Would you like some coffee?

Friend : Are you going to make it yourself?



How do you take yours? Chains like Barista and Café Coffee Day (above) have given Indians access to Western-style coffee. We now know the difference in common preparations.

Host (proudly) : Yes. Blue Mountain.

Friend : OK. In that case, I'll have tea.

In those days, we killed ourselves laughing. But, in retrospect, I think we were the losers because we missed out on some very good coffee.

This generation need not worry about finding real coffee. Ever since Amit Judge opened the first Barista all those years ago, Indians have had access to real coffee.

A recent model is Café Coffee Day, which follows a cheap and (well, kind of) cheerful approach to the coffee market. The coffee is not terrific, but it is reasonably priced and as the chain has expanded, you find a Café Coffee Day at nearly every corner.

Now the global big boys are here. Because the Costas and Starbucks have arrived, Indians have access to the same sort of coffee they drink in America and London. I don't particularly like Starbucks' coffee, but who can deny the power of the brand? And other chains have their adherents. I have a friend who swears by the coffee at The Coffee Bean & Tea Leaf. Others argue that the coffee at Dunkin' Donuts is better than Starbucks.

The challenge, however, is to drink good coffee at home. It will never be cheap. But it needn't be as expensive as Starbucks or Costa. Fortunately, technology has made our lives easier. A modern coffee machine is the simplest gadget to operate. You fill water in the tank, shove a capsule into the chamber and press a button. You get terrific, world-class coffee in a minute.

There are many successful brands in the market but I like Nespresso machines because you don't have to use the Nestlé coffee capsules. The machines will take better quality capsules too. I use artisanal coffee capsules made by a young guy called Karan Tibrawalla, an industrialist in



Mister Bean: Karan Tibrawalla (seen with his wife, Chandni) makes artisanal coffee capsules using a variety of roasts. They cost less than a cup at a fancy café.

the infrastructure business, whose passion is coffee. At present you can only get them on the net or by emailing him (hello@freshbrewco.in) but the coffee is so good that it can't be long before it turns up on the shelves of good shops.

Tibrawalla makes 11 different kinds of coffees, all packed into capsules suitable for Nespresso machines. He offers a variety of roasts (French, Medium, Italian, etc) and single-origin beans from El Salvador, Kenya, Ethiopia, Colombia, etc. My favourites, though, are his Indian coffees, which he sources from six different plantations and packages as single-estate coffees.

All this costs as much as the regular, mass-produced Nespresso, which means it is not wildly cheap (around Rs 350 to Rs 550 for a box of ten capsules). But it is a hell of a lot cheaper than coffee from Starbucks and I much prefer the taste.

What you won't get, however, is a Frappuccino or a skinny latte or whatever. Which is fine by me. I like coffee. Not long poncey drinks.

Originally appeared in HT Brunch, February 21, 2016

Reproduced with permission from the author