

On the trail of great Italian coffee in Turin

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TURIN, ITALY -- For most foodies, it doesn't get much better than coffee and chocolate. In Italy, one of the best places to go for such a decadent mix is Torino.

Located in the Piemonte region known for its Barolo and Barbaresco wines, Turin is a northern Italian city with a decidedly French influence thanks to the House of Savoy, which ruled Italy from 1861 until 1946.

This city is where vermouth was invented and bars offer aperitivos, a buffet filled with small plates of food if one orders a drink, between the late afternoon and 8 or 9 p.m. It's an eclectic mix of aristocrats and working class, thanks to the massive Fiat presence -- the automotive company was founded here and migrated thousands of Italians up from southern Italy.

It's home to Italian film, the [Shroud of Turin](#) and the [Egyptian Museum](#), which houses the second largest collection of Egyptian artifacts in the world after Cairo. It's also the headquarters of Lavazza, which owns nearly 50% of the Italian coffee market, and helped create the first space-bound espresso machine, ISSpresso, that will go to the [International Space Station](#) in April.

"The coffee is great," says Sheryl Gillett, who was visiting from California with her husband, Stephen Caudana. "So is the food and I wasn't prepared for the beauty and architecture." Although Gillett has visited much of Italy, this was her first time to Turin. "I'm only here because my husband fell in love with the city while working on the Olympics and felt Torino was a beautiful city that had been ignored by most American tourists so he wanted to bring me back here," she says.

As the original capital of a unified Italy, Turin became the epicenter of politics which, of course, is discussed over wine, coffee and slowly savored meals. Maybe that's why there are so many cafes here or maybe it's because of la dolce vita, the good life mentality. Most museums and storefronts close down for a mid-day meal between noon and 3 p.m. As the lunch hour draws near, hundreds of metal garage doors pull closed to cover their shops, as others open to showcase restaurants.

This is the city that masterminded putting chocolate and hazelnut together. After Napoleon blockaded British goods and caused the cost of chocolate to skyrocket, the resourceful [Torinese](#) decided to stretch their chocolate by adding hazelnuts in the early 1800s, calling it gianduja or giandua. More than a century later, a pastry maker named [Pietro Ferrero](#) created Nutella -- originally called pasta gianduja -- in the nearby city of Alba during World War II rationing.

Unique to this area is the bicerin. It's a cold-weather specialty drink made with layered ribbons of liquid chocolate, coffee and cream. Each local store has its own version of the perfect trifecta.

I decided to explore as many as I could while touring the most historical cafes in Turin.

Drink coffee like an Italian

I arrived in Turin a few days before Salone del Gusto, an epic Italian food and wine trade show-like convention that happens every other year in Turin to celebrate the "slow food" movement of eating locally, sustainably and more environmentally friendly. With more than 1,000 exhibitors, it's a gastronomic paradise where every region of Italy is represented.

What I quickly learn is Italians don't drink coffee like Americans. There's no such thing here as drip coffee. If you order a "caffè Americano," it's two shots of espresso with water and Italians will immediately recognize that you are a foreigner.

Most Italians just drink espresso. Not the guzzling huge amounts most Americans consume, but a tiny 2-ounce shot at a time. It is strong, rich and delicious -- not over-roasted and burnt (as my personal opinion is of [Starbucks](#)). When an Italian says they want a coffee, they really mean espresso. Even the small Torino airport has a Lavazza vending machine that offers cappuccinos, espressos and macchiatos with or without zucchero (sugar) for a single euro.

The joke, I was told, is that most Italians need the first espresso to open their eyes to wake up and transform from being a zombie into a functioning human being, and the second espresso is to actually taste it and experience the day. Most Italians have several espressos, sometimes as many as four or six, throughout the day, even after dinner, which doesn't begin before 8 p.m.

Cappuccinos are acceptable to order, but only before 10:30 a.m., since it's made with milk and considered a breakfast drink.

Coffee shops aren't called coffee shops here. They are called bars, and have neon signs that glow through the night. There's one price, typically a euro or two, if you order and quickly drink a shot at the counter and another price if you sit down and enjoy an espresso with friends at a table.

"In Italy, the idea of a coffee shop doesn't exist," says Giuseppe Lavazza, vice chairman of Lavazza. "It's a bar and it's a complex concept, you can have a coffee, but you can also have an aperitivo, brunch, a patisserie or chocolate. There's lots of stuff and it's quite intense."

Where to go

One of the best places to start is Piazza San Carlo. There's a pair of twin churches and a café on every corner. The most famous is Caffè San Carlo. It's ornate with a big chandelier, gold everywhere and decorative baroque-style motifs. I try the bicerin. The coolness of the chantilly cream contrasts to the warm temperature of coffee and chocolate that mix down my throat. I'm told the key to drinking a bicerin is not stir it. "You're supposed to feel the taste of chocolate, coffee and cream separately, otherwise it's like a cappuccino with chocolate," says Anna Colombino, a Turin tour guide who showed me some of the coffee shops. "If you drink it like that you can taste different elements."

On another corner of the square is Caffè Torino with its legendary golden bull imprinted on the ground. Legend has it that if you step on the bull -- in particular, on its male genitalia -- you'll have good luck all year. As I'm staring at the ground, two men beckon me to try it for good luck. "But why," I ask in my limited Italian. "We're not sure," I'm told, but everybody does it.

A few days before I left for Italy, I spoke to [Mario Batali](#), who was visiting the [Eataly](#) in Chicago. "I love Torino, the Piedmontese cuisine and drinking a bicerin on the square," he told me, then encouraging me to go to "the place with the bull."

Just a couple blocks away is Piazza Castello and the intimate setting of Mulassano Bar (also called Caffè Mulassano). The tiny spot has a couple of tables and a marble bar with wood carvings. Colombino tells me the royal family used to dine here and have the curtains closed on the two large glass windows. At the bar I drink the miniature glass mug filled with dense rich chocolate, their house-blended coffee and chantilly cream. It is my personal favorite of the bicerins.

Kitty-corner from there is Baratti & Milano, another historic coffee bar, restaurant and patisserie that dates back to 1858 and is known for its hazelnut-infused chocolates. It's an elegant and opulent setting, with chandeliers and a decorative bar, and waiters clad in white shirts, black bow ties and vests. The bicerin here is hot chocolate on the bottom, followed by espresso and milk froth on top. Instead I try the caffè capriccio, espresso with hot chocolate. It's a delicious shot of caffeine and chocolate.

With its clean lines and ultra-modern feel, San Tommaso 10 is a stark contrast to the earlier spots. There's amaretto-filled coffee caviar that are tiny jelly-like balls that explode in your mouth and espresso nocciolato, which is a mix of espresso, gianduja chocolate and whipped cream, coupled with toasted hazelnuts and cocoa powder.

This is the original site where Luigi Lavazza launched his grocery store in 1895, and eventually sold coffee to stand out and grow. I later ask Giuseppe Lavazza, the great-grandson of Luigi, why he likes coffee so much. "It's probably in my DNA," he jokes. "Coffee, it's like a fever, it takes you step by step, and at the end, you find yourself, a bit bolder."

A few days later, I approach Caffè al Bicerin, which opened in 1763. Many say this is the home to the original bicerin. Even though it's a Sunday morning, there's still a crowd waiting outside to get into this chocolate café before 10 a.m. Next door there's a tiny chocolate shop selling crema gianduja, individually wrapped chocolates and large bars and disks of chocolate infused with hazelnuts. Two women are churning chocolate while the smell of coffee wafts in the air. Eventually I get seated at a tiny one of the eight marble tables inside the café.

After ordering a bicerin, an older Italian man sidles up to me and decides to drink his espresso not at the counter, but at the table where I was slowly sipping each layer of my drink. My Italian isn't good enough for a full conversation, but his body language was clear. After making sure I wasn't getting pickpocketed and trying to politely persuade him to move along, I just clinked my glass with him and embraced Italy.