

# Barista Cool: Espresso Fashion Transformed

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## Abstract

In many parts of the world today, being a barista is cool. Young, bearded hipsters, tattooed artists, and pretty but disaffected teenage girls serve up their latte art specialties while dressed in attire worthy of fashion blogs. Some coffee brands prefer a distinctive uniform that reflects their marketing strategies while others recommend a look or allow for self-expression. Barista cool is a relatively new phenomenon, however. It appears to have been launched in youth-oriented cultures, such as in the United States and Australia and then re-crafted, like artisan coffee, in trend-setting countries, such as Japan, and re-imagined in countries with long-standing coffee cultures, such as Italy, the birthplace of espresso. Historic Italian espresso producers now encourage branding through uniforms that combine personal style and Italian fashion. New espresso bars in Italy moreover reflect the influences of third wave coffee and global fashion trends. This article seeks to analyze how and why espresso and cool fashion have only recently converged through the use of a variety of sources, such as archival research, interviews, and participant observation.

**Keywords:** Espresso; Barista; Third Wave Coffee; Coffee Fashion; Made in Italy.

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Barista Ken is cool! Indeed, Mattel's latest career doll marks this historical moment of how cool being a barista is! Ken's light brown (mocha) skin, amber eyes, and man bun/undercut are indicative of a recent cool aesthetic. He wears a denim apron with a coffee mug emblem and is long and lean with not overly developed muscle tone. He has no tattoos, although many of my friends think he should. All-in-all, he is a non-threatening, cool, male companion to Barbie. (Fig. 1)



Figure 1: Barista Ken by the Mattel Corporation (Photo by Author)

There is, not, however, a Barista Barbie. She is undoubtedly a client. Mattel may not always be on the leading edge of cultural trends, but their designers certainly know something about aesthetics and image! In fact, since I first posted Barista Ken on my @wendysespressolife Instagram account, I have heard from several baristas<sup>1</sup> who look just like him. A Turk working in Belarus even changed his profile picture to Barista Ken because he is nearly identical!

There is little doubt that being a barista is cool today. It has been in the United States since at least the mid-1990s when Starbucks stores were appearing on every corner and college students applied for jobs in droves. I have students who work at Starbucks in part because they love coffee and consider the employment terms better in comparison to other food/beverage service jobs but also because it is cooler. They are happy to say they work at Starbucks. Dunkin' Donuts, another chain popular in the US for its coffee, does not carry the same cache.

But what about in Italy where the figure of the espresso-pulling barista was born? When I was a college student and fell in love with espresso and Italy the barista was a figure that did not leave a particular impression. The barista was generally much like a waiter in a traditional uniform in the more upscale cafes or espresso bars or dressed casually in the family-run or residential neighborhood shops. Today,

1. The plural of barista in Italian is baristi, but I will use the Anglicized version baristas in this article.

there is much more attention to branding that is cool in a globalized way. That is, the fashion is more fashion than uniform, hairstyles trendier, attitudes slightly disinterested. Caffè Vergnano, one of the *torrefazioni* (espresso producers) I visited outside Turin, has been at the forefront of re-imagining the Italian barista. The espresso bars that carry the Vergnano brand now have baristas dressed in gray, button-down shirts, gray jeans, black aprons with the logo, and Justin Timberlake-like fedora hats. The baristas are overwhelming young, tattooed, and male. (Fig. 2)



Figure 2: Barista for Caffè Vergnano at Bar Baffo in Rome, Italy (Photo by Author)

But when did this happen exactly?

I want to explore how and why the role of the barista, created in the birthplace of espresso, has only recently become “cool” in its country of origin. In my estimation, the development of espresso and fashion cultures in Italy, the export of “made in Italy” worldwide, the growth of the multinational Starbucks chain and third wave coffee, and the impact of urban youth fashion in countries such as Japan and Australia and hipster aesthetics in the US and Europe have all contributed to a re-thinking of the barista in Italy. The Italian barista is now cool because “he,” and I will discuss why the “cool” figure is usually a man, is re-positioned in a national context transformed by cultural exchange across continents. In this article, I trace the histories of Italian espresso and Italian fashion, examine the growth of coffee culture in other parts of the world, and seek to connect cool coffee to cool fashion. Modernization and globalization run through this history that also seeks to understand how youth culture, meanings of masculinity and femininity, and ideas about work and class are tied to coolness. My research includes articles from popular and trade publications, participant observation, and informal interviews as well as relevant scholarly publications. Other contributions to this issue grapple with meanings of “cool” and theorize its aesthetic sensibilities. Here I put forward the idea that the “cool” barista is young, male, fashion forward and globally aware but coolness in other areas of fashion are certainly divergent from the model I discuss. The historical context is thus key to understanding how and why a particular narrative of barista cool came to be.

The first espresso machines were invented at the beginning of the 20th century, but espresso became part of mass consumer culture during the 1950s.<sup>2</sup> A recognizable Italian fashion tradition was born at about the same time; most scholars date it to the 1951 Giovannbattista Giorgini fashion show in

2. Jonathan Morris, “Making Italian Espresso, Making Espresso Italian,” *Food & History*, vol. 8, n. 2 (2010): 155–83.

Florence.<sup>3</sup> Importantly, both the postwar espresso and fashion industries took the lead in the creation and development of the “made in Italy” phenomenon based on high quality artisanal traditions and expanded to larger markets. As business writers, Temperini, Gregori, and Palanga note, “The words ‘made in Italy’ evoke in consumers’ minds attributes that positively characterize the image of Italy as a country — in particular, the attributes of creativity, aesthetics, quality, and sophistication ...”<sup>4</sup> In the fashion and food and beverage industries, Raffaella Paciolla and Li-Wei Mai note that “‘Italian’ brands have been characterized by a large brand name awareness and special image and reputation, capable to positively impact on trust, satisfaction, and attachment towards those brands by consumers.”<sup>5</sup> Decades and sometimes even centuries old traditions were ripe for entry into a burgeoning consumer market as the Italian economy recovered after World War II and enjoyed a boost from growth in other leading western capitalist democracies.

In espresso making, the selection of coffee beans, the development of roasting techniques, improvements in storing and transporting espresso as well as technological and design developments in espresso machines resulted in what became a distinct way, an Italian way, of preparing and drinking coffee. Although several Italian espresso roasters, such as Lavazza 1895 and Caffè Vergnano 1882, trace their histories to the late nineteenth century, coffee and espresso drinking during the first decades of the twentieth century remained fairly limited. Few families consumed coffee at home and the coffee and tea houses in major cities tended to attract mostly intellectuals or well-heeled social groups. Service took place at waited tables and lingering was the norm. Coffee consumption patterns did not change much until after World War II as coffee shortages ended and leisure time arrived, especially for the growing middle-classes.<sup>6</sup> New machines powered by a pump produced what is now considered espresso, that is, a rapidly extracted hot coffee drink with a light layer of *crema* (foam) on top.<sup>7</sup> Some patrons continued to enjoy table service, but the espresso bar counter became the site where individuals, and more often, small groups could enjoy a brief pause and a quick re-fueling during the demands of a busy day. Espresso came to mean quick preparation but also quick consumption and was integrated into the routines of the day as espresso bars popped up in large cities and small towns across the country. The sociability of the espresso break was important since Italians preferred to share their brief coffee moment with other people rather than take a to-go cup and run, alone, back to their routine.

The social aspects of espresso drinking meant that the barista was at the center of the culture of the postwar espresso bar. In larger establishments, the barista underwent training in the preparation and serving of espresso and other beverages. An efficient barista needed to be quick, detail oriented, and energetic. He was required to wear a smart uniform, often consisting of tailored, pressed items and an apron. As is the case for food servers, the Italian barista worked on a fixed wage, tips not making up a significant part of his earnings. And if the barista became good at his craft, he could expect it to be a long-term vocation; a recent survey showed that more than half of baristas had been employed in the role for more than 10 years. A barista named Giovanni Fummo of the famous and historic Gran Caffè Gambrinus in Naples, for example, has pulled more than 15 million espressos in the more than 50 years he has worked there!<sup>8</sup> At very small family-owned bars the atmosphere, including barista garb, was more casual and the barista perhaps more of a confidant, but the role retained a respectable more than cool air to it. That is, the barista was known as someone who works hard in the service sector industry and can make a living wage. This is the image that dominated from the economic boom onwards.

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3. See for instance, Eugenia Paulicelli, “Italian Fashion: Yesterday, Today and Tomorrow,” *Journal of Modern Italian Studies*, vol. 20, n. 1 (2015): 1–9.

4. Valerio Temperini, Gian Luca Gregori, Paola Palanga, “The Brand Made in Italy: A Critical Analysis,” *Management Studies*, vol. 4, no. 3 (May–June 2016): 93.

5. Raffaella Paciolla and Li-Wei Mai, “The Impact of Italianate on Consumers’ Brand Perceptions of Luxury Brands,” in *European Advances in Consumer Research*, eds. Alan Bradshaw, Chris Hackley, and Pauline Maclaran (Duluth, MN: Association for Consumer Research, 2011), 364.

6. Claudia Baldoli, “L’espresso, modernità e tradizione nell’Italia del caffè,” *Memoria e ricerca* 23 (September 2006): 14–26.

7. Andrea Illy, *Il sogno del caffè* (Torino: Codice Edizioni, 2015).

8. Interview by Author with Michele Sergio, Gran Caffè Gambrinus (Naples, June 21, 2016).



Italian public perceptions of the work of the barista have been similar to those of waitstaff, in fact. Being a barista is seen as highly physically and mentally demanding, consisting of long hours on one's feet, carrying heavy items, such as 15 kilogram bags of coffee beans and trays of heavy mugs and saucers, offering cordial service to the public, and maintaining order and organization in the face of rushes or difficult clients. Close interaction with the public has also meant becoming skilled in the art of listening. Barista work has not, however, generally been held to be conceptual work or valued in the same way as other skilled tasks. Antonello Serani of the Roman specialty coffee shop *L'Artigiano del Caffè* points out that "for many Italians the barista was considered a job for someone who did not pursue his education and perhaps had few options for work."<sup>9</sup> Today, many baristas in Italy study coffee production, the industry, roasting and brewing techniques and obtain certifications from national and international entities but this is a recent and expanding development.

By the 1970s, the number of independent espresso bars had grown to over 100,000 and more than 70% of Italians consumed at least one espresso each day in one of them.<sup>10</sup> Espresso bars thus became part of mass culture during the 1970s and 1980s, but the clothing style of the barista retained its mostly uniform characteristics. During the same period, the Italian fashion industry also entered mass culture. Italy's design and fashion center shifted to Milan, the figure of the *stilista* (designer) grew in importance (think Versace, Armani, Valentino, etc.) and Italian *pret-à-porter* distinguished itself from the French version, relying on quality fabrics and production but selling at lower prices.<sup>11</sup> Italian style came to mean elegant, yet wearable, classic, yet modern. Fashion magazines featured new versions of the 1960s idea of the Italian *dolce vita* as models posed in front of recognizable Italian landmarks and outdoor cafés in perfectly fitting garments that highlighted the high quality of Italian textiles and the attention to the human form by leading and up-and-coming designers.

By the 1990s, some interesting shifts occurred at the national and international levels that affected both the espresso and fashion industries. Starbucks, founded in Seattle in 1971, began to find a new segment of coffee drinkers in the United States, where coffee sales had been in decline. In 1987, Howard Schultz took over the company and started to implement his dream of offering an Italian coffee experience to Americans. That meant serving espresso and so-called specialty coffees, but also re-imagining the figure of the barista based on his observations in Italy. Schultz, in fact, looked toward professionalization, offering training, better salaries and benefits than fast food workers earned, and implemented American corporate branding to make the stores, as well as the baristas, part of a Starbucks experience. As soon as Schultz took over, his interpretation of the Italian espresso barista uniform became black or khaki pants, a white or black collared shirt, and a black bow tie and included the Starbucks mermaid logo green apron. This aesthetic replaced the cut-offs and flip flops that had been typical of the first Starbucks employees.<sup>12</sup> Now the baristas, borrowing the Italian term, were to maintain a decorous look, with mainstream hairstyles and limited body art.

The package of new coffee, new looks, and new rules worked for the company, which grew astronomically during the 1990s, opening its first overseas store in Tokyo in 1996 and then nearly two stores daily around the world afterwards. In some large cities, Starbucks stores sometimes even faced each other across the street. Wherever they were located, Starbucks became a desirable place of employment, especially for young people, who regarded it as a step up from most food service jobs. The company's genuine interest in coffee, support for youth culture, which included for instance, pumping the latest music through the stores, and relaxed atmosphere generated a new global coffee culture. Being a barista was cool. But, Starbucks did not make it to Italy during the period of rapid expansion despite the company's many attempts to penetrate the market. It was, after all, Howard Schultz's dream to sell his coffee in Italy. But, the Italians knew they had better coffee at lower prices and tended to reject global chain

9. Interview by Author with Antonello Serani, *L'Artigiano del Caffè* (Rome, May 24, 2019).

10. Morris, "Making Italian Espresso," 172.

11. Simona Segre Reinach, "Italian Fashion: The Metamorphosis of a Cultural Industry," in *Made in Italy: Re-thinking a Century of Italian Design*, eds. Grace Lees-Maffei and Kjetil Fallan (London: Bloomsbury, 2014), 239–51.

12. Heidi Peiper, "The Story Behind Starbucks Iconic Green Apron," *Starbucks Stories & News* (July 21, 2017), <https://stories.starbucks.com/stories/2017/story-behind-starbucks-iconic-green-apron/> (accessed: July 28, 2019).

stores, particularly in the food and beverage sector. McDonald's and later Burger King made some inroads, but they were selling a product the Italians found had some American charm and did not directly compete with an existing Italian product.<sup>13</sup>

In addition to Starbucks, other specialty coffee houses proliferated during the 1990s, especially in larger American cities, and offered an even more laid back, youth vibe than that of Starbucks. Central Perk, the fictional coffee shop featured in the popular sitcom series *Friends*, represents the idea of the easy, casual, café job fitting for young people without many aspirations but with a current fashion sense. American youth coming of age during the 90s generally did not follow the big fashion house trends. Instead, second hand, vintage, and urban styles entered the mainstream and could be seen on Jennifer Aniston and Lisa Kudrow's characters as they not always adeptly served coffee to clients seated on a large orange couch. Italian fashion, meanwhile, suffered as buyers showed less interest in the latest pret-à-porter collections but now took inspiration from the past and other cultures.<sup>14</sup>

By the 2000s, "made in Italy" coffee and fashion culture on one hand enjoyed global recognition as high quality products, particularly in the luxury sector, and on the other hand faced new global challenges. Italy's largest espresso exporters, Lavazza and Illy, expanded their reach across Europe, north America, and even into Asian markets despite the spread of Starbucks. Smaller, independent roasters and coffee shops popped up as well, offering clients a more "authentic" espresso experience and new ways of drinking filter coffee. This so-called third wave of coffee appeals to coffee lovers interested in organic, fair trade, and single-origin beans, roasted in small batches, and "extracted" by brewing methods, such as pour over, said to release the purest flavors of the coffees.<sup>15</sup> Cortados and nitro cold brew are part of this new coffee culture, which in many ways parallels the expansion of craft beer and attracts the same youth segment, often labeled hipsters.

Hipsters are skeptical of the mainstream and corporate global culture in many facets of their lives, coffee and fashion being two of them. And they are often on a search for origins and "authenticity." Hipster culture itself may have originated in the 1990s in Brooklyn but is now especially associated with American cities such as Portland, Oregon and European cities such as Brighton, England and Bordeaux, France. A recent study of perceptions of Italian products in the UK found that the English deemed Illy and Lavazza the most "authentic" espresso brands, with young people seeing them as associated with "the traditional, stylish and elegant 'Italian lifestyle'."<sup>16</sup> In Japan, China, and Australia, espresso from Italy merged with youth culture as well to create a new trendy barista, especially skilled in the creation of elaborate latte art, sometimes inspired by the *kawaii* (cuteness) trend so popular among Asian youths. The barista style transformed as well with clear hipster, urban, and street styles working their way into coffee shops: tattoos, beards, and glasses; leather aprons; colorfully dyed hair; skinny jeans and Vans or Converse; Mao caps and fedoras; scarves, lots of scarves.

Italian fashion and espresso cultures, though immensely popular and generally admired, also faced some criticism from the global communities by the second decade of the 2000s. On developments in Italian fashion, Simona Segre Reinach points out, "While in other countries youthful styles blend with the mainstream of fashion, in Italy this is more difficult, for historical reasons, because the success of Italian fashion is based on the ability to make large-scale industrial production aesthetically important."<sup>17</sup> Italian clothing continued to enjoy a leading position as stylish and classic but at the same time some observers noted a lack of innovation in the industry. Styles evolved little and seemed, in fact, to fall behind. Fashion stayed in "safe" territory with designers remaining tied to classic styles and traditional methods that appealed to consumers who preferred a put-together look over an edgier street style. Ca-

13. Alessandro Bonadonna, Simona Alfiero, Massimo Cane, and Edyta Gheribi, "Eating Hamburgers Slowly and Sustainably: The Fast Food Market in North-West Italy," *Agriculture*, vol. 9, no. 77 (2019): 2–3.

14. Reinach, "Italian Fashion," 245.

15. Emily McIntyre, "What (Exactly) is Third Wave Coffee?" *The Coffee Magazine* (January 19, 2017), <https://magazine.crema.co/third-wave-f6479681dcf9> (accessed: July 28, 2019).

16. Paciolla and Mai, "The Impact of Italianate," 364.

17. Reinach, "Italian Fashion," 246.

sual elegance, professional neatness, and high fashion gracefulness dominated. Risk adverse designers and consumers stuck with what had always worked for them. The result though was that freshness in Italian fashion fell behind as designers in other countries took new visions to the runways and translated them for the masses.

Perceptions of Italian espresso, too, began to change even among Italian critics who, upon looking at the appeal of third wave coffee, questioned the nearly universal support in Italy for espresso that, frankly, was not always ethical (trade practices) and not always good (because not prepared well). Many espresso producers and espresso bars knew they could count on a steady flow of consumers who rarely thought about the origins of their trusted beverage or the processes that went into having it appear in their cup on the bar counter. Lower quality coffee beans worked their way into espresso blends, even those by some of the leading manufacturers, and roasting practices in some companies became more automated and thus faster. The result was espresso that tended to be bitter or stale.<sup>18</sup> Because of the popularization of espresso, espresso bars had proliferated to meet demand. Some owners had profits in mind over quality and therefore tended to offer lesser quality coffee blends. Other owners simply did not receive enough training themselves or train their baristas on how to clean the machines and use them correctly. Some bars failed to follow industry guidelines about storing and grinding beans. And as in the fashion industry, coffee in Italy remained true to its traditions. That is, espresso dominated with little room for other blends, roasting techniques or extraction methods. Italian espresso and fashion, when good, continued to surpass the competition in many other countries but, when the clothing or espresso were bad, spokespeople could dismiss problems behind the generally strong reputation of these Italian industries.

Enter Starbucks. In 2018, after years of trying, Howard Schultz finally realized his dream of opening in Italy and, in fact, stepped down as CEO right afterwards. The third Roastery (the first is in Seattle and the second in Shanghai) is located in Milan's Piazza Cordusio, in the old post office building, and is a flagship store in the great tradition of Milanese design, featuring tasting areas, roasters on view, and specialized bars with third wave and espresso beverages (no frappuccinos!).<sup>19</sup> The Roastery barista uniform combines elements of the original Starbucks uniform, newer Italian fashion influences, and touches of the world of the hipster third wave coffee shop! A fitted, blue-gray button down shirt, latte colored pants, and a longer, coffee-colored apron, with the new Starbucks Reserve brand logo characterize the barista uniform while the roasters wear a leather apron and a cap. The Hardmill company based in Seattle designed the aprons and some of the leather décor elements for the Milan roastery as they had done for the other roastery locations. Starbucks chose Hardmill because of their common roots in Seattle, artisanal practices and American manufacturing as well as for the aesthetics. The look is slim and put-together in a classic Italian way but modernized by the new aprons. Baristas are also allowed to work in some elements of personal style, such as facial hair, tattoos and colorful hair dyes. In fact, a 2016 Starbucks dress code for the regular stores demonstrated that the company is now drawing from broader fashion trends, albeit falling slightly behind them, by allowing baristas to wear denim, cuffed jeans, and beanies.<sup>20</sup> The professional with a touch of personal style look is now the Starbucks norm.

Starbucks is not the only coffee flagship store in town, however! Italian companies Lavazza and Faema and the Swiss boutique espresso brand Nespresso all line the chic streets of Milan offering their own take on a globalized "made in Italy" coffee and fashion experience. Nespresso baristas wear all black or black and white. The men usually have a tie. Lavazza has adopted a very elegant, traditional uniform for its baristas with a crisp white button down shirt, black pants with a black ribbon racing stripe, and aprons that have a tuxedo vest appearance with velvet collars. They again resemble the waiter barista of the dolce vita era but with updates. Faema's "Art and Caffeine" store is decidedly more hip than Starbucks and

18. Romedia Studio, "Coffee: Italians do it Better?" (YouTube Video: June 3, 2017), <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Q7fwQAnymfw>.

19. Grace Dobush, "35 Years After Milan's Espresso Bars Inspired Howard Schultz, Starbucks Finally Enters Italy With an Opulent Roastery," *Fortune* (September 6, 2018), <https://fortune.com/2018/09/06/starbucks-milan-italy/>. (accessed: July 28, 2019).

20. Morwenna Ferrier, "The Problem with Starbucks' New Dress Code," *The Guardian* (July 26, 2016), <https://www.theguardian.com/fashion/shortcuts/2016/jul/26/problem-with-starbucks-new-dress-code-for-staff> (accessed: July 28, 2019).

Nespresso with “personal style” baristas wearing t-shirts and jeans (of course, properly fitted and ironed to Italian standards), or collared shirts, vests and suspenders on cuffed pants ala hipster. Some wear leather tops, caps or aprons. There is no sloppiness whatever the style. Faema also hosts special short classes and other events during Fashion Week as well as during other fashion and design conventions to bring fashionistas into the space to link these key areas that Italy and Milan are known for across the fashion and coffee worlds. Nespresso has gone a step further into the realm of global fashion and hosted special “mattino moments” for preferred clients and viewers. One such event in 2013 featured fashion industry leader Ed Burstell, known for heading up Liberty and Bergdorf Goodman, discussing his love of and need for coffee in his work in the demanding retail fashion sector.<sup>21</sup> Another YouTube segment shows an English fashion blogger named Emily Johnston trying a new Nespresso coffee while visiting Milan. She describes the coffee as stylish and elegant like the people she is seeing in Milan. Nespresso executive Karsten Ranitzsch concurs and explains that the new blend called “Tribute to Milano” was, in fact, created to celebrate the city’s fashion and coffee heritage. Emily then tells him she will bring this coffee to London to remember her Milanese experience.<sup>22</sup> A Swiss Company, a British blogger, and Italy’s leading fashion city come together to market an “Italian” coffee.

Starbucks and the other coffee flagships do not necessarily epitomize the new cool Italian barista, however. In fact, a hybrid of the traditional Italian espresso bar and the third wave coffee shop is appearing in large and small cities throughout the peninsula. These newer coffee houses are generally small and are owned, managed and staffed by the same person or a small staff. They are loaded with cool coffee shop and barista vibes! The new bars feature espresso of the highest quality, often organic and fair trade, as well as pour over coffees, siphon methods, and other specialty espresso or coffee beverages, such as espresso tonic and Nutella lattes. And a highly trained, professional and well-dressed, cool barista is always at the core of the shop. Marco De Rocco of the Beard Coffee House in Rome near the Via Tuscolana, for example, worked for many years as a barista in an espresso bar inside one of Rome’s ministry buildings before deciding to open his own shop. He carefully decorated the space with vintage and repurposed items and updated his knowledge of the coffee industry to be able to offer coffee and espresso options with which many Italians were not familiar. He also wanted to provide trusted favorites such as simple espresso and cappuccino and wanted to preserve the Italian origins of the roasts and so mainly uses Caffè Vergnano for his espresso blend. For his personal style, Marco wanted to convey cleanliness and decorum but also show the Italian attention to fashion. He wears his hair in an undercut with an upswept spiky top and has a long well-groomed salt-and-pepper beard. His uniform consists of a long-sleeved white button-down shirt, a black vest and tie, black trousers and leather shoes. (Fig. 3) He says “it’s important to look clean and well put together. I don’t always care for the ‘wear whatever you want look’ for a barista. It sends the wrong message. This is a craft. And we want our clients to know we take it seriously even if it’s fun.”<sup>23</sup> Marco even had a doll made to look like him. It is about the same size as Barista Ken and attracts interest from the customers. (Fig. 4) Marco and other similar new espresso bars also sell their own merchandise, often nicely designed logo t-shirts, hoodies and baseball caps and they feature themselves and their customers wearing them on social media.

The Pergamino Caffè and l’Artigiano del Caffè in an area of Rome near the Vatican are two other examples of new espresso bars with a cool factor. Both spaces are modern and clean. Pergamino features coffees by micro-roasters in Italy and across the globe while the Artigiano roasts his own beans. In both places, customers can try a range of flavors, from light to dark roasts, arabica and robusta coffees from single-origin countries or mixed, and experiment with brewing methods. The managers emphasize the extensive training they have received to learn about coffee, the industry and running a business. They are baristas as well as entrepreneurs and love having contact with the product and the customers. Massimo Carpineti, the manager at Pergamino, wears his long hair pulled back in a ponytail and sports a coffee-colored t-shirt with the café logo. (Fig. 5) The look is youthful and trendy. Antonello, the Artigiano,

21. “Nespresso Mattino Moments: Ed Burstell on Fashion” (YouTube Video: May 7, 2013), <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ssD5dtVSvsw> (accessed: July 28, 2019).

22. “Emily from Fashion Foie Gras Tastes Nespresso’s New Tribute to Milano Coffee with the Experts” (YouTube Video), <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=b79xHh3RtwQ> (accessed: July 28, 2019).

23. Interview by Author with Marco De Rocco of Beard Coffee House (Rome, May 22, 2019).





Figure 3 (left): Marco De Rocco of Beard Coffee House in Rome, Italy (Photo by Author)

Figure 4 (right): Mini-Marco and Barista Ken (Photo by Author)

wears a white long-sleeved shirt with a logo cotton coffee-colored apron. He has a mass of curly hair in an undercut and a groomed though full beard. (Fig. 6) The aesthetics are clearly carefully chosen and intended to complement the décor of the shops and the overall image the owners want to convey.

Big cities are not the only places where the espresso bar and barista has felt the influence of global transformations, however. The Adriatic coastal town of Rimini is home to two coffee houses that combine cool style and artisan coffee. Brothers Mauro and Marino Paone run the Caffè Ducale dressed in maroon long-sleeved button-down shirts and long wool blend gray aprons. (Fig. 7) Handsome and well-groomed with short, dark hair and goatees, the barista duo enjoys relaying their knowledge about coffee while serving up a specialty item, such as espresso with ginger and raspberries. There is plenty of comfortable seating as well but conversation and community clearly contribute to the artisanal atmosphere. On the other side of the small center of Rimini, the Bar Lento offers a welcoming space designed by Simona Dell'Aquila and Valentina who want to encourage space for lingering. That is, while espresso is fast, they want to foster an environment that allows customers to spend time there and talk about social and cultural issues. Hence the name *lento*, which means slow. Neither barista manager wore a uniform but their choice of fashion conveyed an idea of bohemian chic — short hair and a tailored look for one and long, curly hair and flowy, flowery garments for the other. (Fig. 8)

Whether in Rome or Rimini then, the espresso shops and their baristas have drawn from the traditions of Italian fashion and coffee but at the same time their outfits and approaches to business reflect the global influences on each.<sup>24</sup>

24. Informal conversation at espresso bars in Rome and Rimini, May 2019.



Figure 5: Massimo Carpineti of the Pergamino Caffè in Rome, Italy (Photo by Author)



Figure 6: Antonello Serani of l'Artigiano del Caffè in Rome, Italy (Photo by Author)





Figure 7: Mauro and Marino Paone of the Caffè Ducale in Rimini, Italy (Photo by Author)



Figure 8: Simona dell'Aquila and Valentina of the Bar Lento in Rimini, Italy (Photo by Author)

What is hard not to notice in the majority of espresso and coffee shops inside and outside Italy is the entrenchment of the male barista and masculine style. Remember, there is no barista Barbie. Of course, there are women who work as baristas and, like the women of Bar Lento, also run their own shops, but the development of espresso and coffee culture has been remarkably part of the male domain, both in roasteries and bars. In the Italian espresso bars and factories of the postwar era, coffee work was distinctly masculine. The weight of the sacks of coffee beans, lever espresso machines that required some muscle to operate, and general stamina are the most often cited physical reasons for the prevalence of men behind the espresso bar counter.<sup>25</sup> As in a number of other industries, masculinity and physical strength became tied together and associated with gender appropriate forms of work. The activities of roasting and serving coffee, as the most strenuous parts of the process, leaned heavily toward male workers. However, the nature of public interaction also tended to favor the male barista. Being positioned in front of and engaging with customers at the bar counter resulted in questions about personal contact that were not always seen as respectable for young women. And some ideas about women circulating through sparsely populated streets during the early morning hours reinforced notions of danger, especially sexual vulnerability, and contributed to the notion that barista work was not suitable for women who wanted to maintain their reputations.

Of course, today, many aspects of physicality for the barista are less significant. The semi-automatic espresso machines require just the push of a button to operate. Smaller sizes of espresso beans, often five kilograms, can be attached directly to a grinder. And many coffee shops outside Italy use paper and plastic containers, thus eliminating the need to load and unload ceramic cups and saucers in dishwashers. Norms about gender in public and working life have also changed, of course. Women have entered into nearly all professions in the western world and their movements in public space are far less limited. Most of those changes took place at about the same time espresso and fashion were modernizing. The women's movement in Italy had been consistent since the end of World War II and feminism ushered in new opportunities during the 1970s for women in many parts of the globe. Gender norms have not always kept pace with legislation, however. Not in Italy and not elsewhere. This means that social and cultural prejudices continue to inform many aspects of working life and this is the case in the realm of coffee work as in other fields. The idea that men are better baristas or more suited to the craft continues to circulate.<sup>26</sup> Coupled with the notion that a woman barista is "easy," that is, sexually available, the role is male-dominated worldwide. A recent study in Australia found that customers expected the person making coffee behind the counter to be a man.<sup>27</sup> Women, perceived as more friendly but less competent, were preferred as cashiers or to take orders in sit-down cafes. Even when women and men baristas were both standing near the espresso machine, customers routinely approached the man for their coffee order. No worldwide data seems to exist for the exact gender breakdown of employment as a barista, but estimates suggest it is over 70% of men making coffee. At the many barista and latte art competitions held at trade fairs or by coffee and espresso organizations such as the Istituto Espresso Nazionale Italiano, the overwhelming majority of competitors are men, usually exceeding 80%. They are not necessarily Italian, however, and recent IENI winners have included a German and a Taiwanese man. It was just in April 2019 that a South Korean woman, Joyeoon Jeon, won the World Barista Championship, an event that has been held for the past twenty years as part of the World Coffee Championship. The other five finalists were all men.<sup>28</sup> And the 2019 Latte Art Champion is an Italian woman. Manuela Fensore beat five Asian men to capture the trophy for Italy.<sup>29</sup> Interestingly, "latte art" was not purposely cultivated in

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25. Interview by Author with Francesco Salomone, Mokadoro (Turin, Italy: March 14, 2018).

26. Blog Thread, "Guy or Girl Barista?," *Barista Exchange Forum* (November 2010), <https://www.baristaexchange.com/forum/topics/guy-or-girl-barista> (accessed: July 28, 2019).

27. Sarah Gooding, "Grounds for Complaint: Female Baristas Struggle to Change Cafe Culture," *The Guardian* (August 19, 2015), <https://www.theguardian.com/lifeandstyle/australia-food-blog/2015/aug/19/grounds-for-complaint-female-baristas-struggle-to-change-cafe-culture> (accessed: July 28, 2019).

28. Nick Brown, "Korea's Jooyeon Jeon Wins 2019 World Barista Championship," *Daily Coffee News* (April 14, 2019), <https://dailycoffeenews.com/2019/04/14/koreas-jooyeon-jeon-wins-2019-world-barista-championship> (accessed: July 28, 2019).

29. Nadia Rossi, "Manuela Fensore campionessa del mondo di Latte Art," *barigiornale.it* (June 10, 2019), <https://www.barigiornale.it>

Italy and has really only arrived recently because of its popularity elsewhere. A skilled barista in Italy has been known to add a heart or other design to the top of a cappuccino, but caffè latte is traditionally just warm milk added to coffee rather than a specialty drink. Third wave specialty coffee is slowly changing coffee culture and perceptions of women within it but it is still a male-dominated industry.

The “cool” male barista, whatever his country of origin, carries an aspect of the Italian notion of *sprezzatura*. As Eugenia Paulicelli has noted *sprezzatura* is a term long used in Italy to denote “coolness, masculinity, and ideal style.”<sup>30</sup> The aesthetic is a casual elegance that looks as though it came together with little effort. It runs counter to perfectly polished Italian style, that is, rather than everything matching and being worn as expected, the wearer maintains an edge in order to “undermine[s] the accepted way of dressing while still adhering to its traditional garments.”<sup>31</sup> Perhaps not tucking in a shirt, or leaving the jacket open or belt dangling is a way the wearer is not quite “perfect.” When applied to barista fashion and culture, the nonchalance of style carries with it some behaviors that can appear to be aloofness, disinterest, or superiority. The cool male barista does not need to be outwardly friendly. The annoyed expression of Dustin Mattson, who works for Counter Culture coffee, a successful and growing third wave roaster, appeared in numerous memes mocking hipster coffee culture. Although his picture was intended to be ironic, it nevertheless came to emphasize negative aspects of fashion and attitude in the new wave of coffee.<sup>32</sup>

It seems, however, that the unavailability of the male barista only enhances his coolness. The same gendered idea of male barista authority exists in the social media world as well where, for instance, superstar male baristas show off their brewing techniques and latte art. Yes, a glimpse of a well-defined bicep or a casual hair toss appear in many an Instagram story but the barista boys are generally far more understated than their female counterparts, whose styles tend to be eroticized. A popular blond Australian barista, for example, is known mostly for her short schoolgirl skirts and sticking out her tongue as she holds one of her latte designs. She makes latte art but also posts makeup tutorials. Another barista and Instagram influencer based in California is a beautiful Brazilian woman with long locks and dimples who almost pulls off a cool vibe, since she sports tattoos, but the number of followers for the coffee shop she and her husband run does not meet even a quarter of the number of her own followers. Moreover, the comments on her physical appearance far outnumber the comments on her impressive latte art.<sup>33</sup> Male baristas who post similar photos and videos of their creations receive compliments on their work, even when they are noticeably attractive as well. Images such as an airborne latte being released by a leather-aproned man underscore the masculine edge of the barista. In other words, women baristas can be sexy but are less cool than the guys. Such is the case even when the coffee work and physical appearance of the barista are comparable.

So it turns out that Mattel’s Barista Ken truly captures the globalized cool of espresso culture. A hot beverage born in Italy, Anglo-American-Japanese youth culture, and *moda all’italiana* all come together in the cool barista toy boy. It may be that Ken is from California and of mixed-race origins. It may be that Ken is not really trying to make a statement through his latte art or his fashion choices. But he is working hard in a challenging vocation and learning about coffee. He is sharing social media stories and in so doing he is showing us which cultural trends resonate as they are re-interpreted and re-presented across time and space. Today Ken can travel across the United States, to Japan or Australia and even to Italy and recognize himself across the bar counter. The barista preparing an espresso or a cappuccino

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bargiornale.it/caffe/manuela-fensore-campionessa-del-mondo-di-latte-art/ (accessed: July 28, 2019).

30. Paulicelli, “Italian Fashion,” 7.

31. Josh Sims, “Men’s Style: How to Dress with sprezzatura,” *Fashion Beans* [no date], <https://www.fashionbeans.com/article/how-to-dress-with-sprezzatura/>. (last accessed: July 28, 2019).

32. Amelia Tate, “Living the Meme: What Happened to the Hipster Barista?,” *New Statesman* (October 19, 2017), <https://www.newstatesman.com/science-tech/internet/2017/10/what-does-hipster-barista-look-like-now-2017> (accessed: July 28, 2019).

33. The Instagram barista accounts are: @caffinatedlamb and @miria\_moreton, and @redbecoffee is the coffee shop in California. At last check on July 28, 2019, @redbecoffee had 2757 followers to 28.4 K for Miria. And the Australian barista had 60.4 K.

will, like him, know something about where the coffee beans came from, how they were roasted and ground, be an expert on how to use the espresso machine, and will be able to make a flower design with milk froth. He will also look clean and put together but remain trendy and true to his personal style. The mini-Marco of the Roman Beard Coffee House is perhaps the embodiment of the fashion and coffee worlds coming together in Italy through contact with global youth fashion and third wave coffee. The new Italian barista enjoys a long heritage of aesthetics and quality, and is professional, fashionable, and now, oh so cool!

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