

# barista

M A G A Z I N E

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# ITALY

BY MATT MILLETTTO

It has been almost seven years now since I was last in Italy, since I was on my way back home hauling taped-up oil paintings and a carry-on bag full of great wines and garden grown tomatoes, given to me as gifts by my Italian friends. I spent over a year living in the Marche region attending art school and immersing myself in the Italian culture and life. It was a once-in-a-lifetime experience, and one that I will never forget.

When I left, I made a promise to myself that I would try to return at least once a year, a promise that I have not kept. After getting married in August 2007, I knew it was time to take my wife to the country I love so much. What better reason to go back to Italy than a combined honeymoon and trip to be the best man in my father's wedding, which was taking place in Positano, Italy in late September?

My wife, Kylene, and I woke up early to catch the first leg of our flight out of Portland, both of us feeling the excitement and anticipation of what we would experience in the 10 days to come. We had a comfortable flight and managed to get some sleep as we flew to Milan. We arrived in the afternoon, and my good friend who lives in Torino came to meet us at the airport. As we planned to spend a few days in Torino towards the end of our trip, we immediately caught a bus to the Milan train station so that we could make it to Firenze that evening. After a quick hello and espresso at the train station we were on our way to Firenze. We arrived that evening and found our hotel quickly. Having been traveling for the last 24 hours, we took a short rest before going out for dinner.

There was of course a small bar (café) in the piazza our hotel was located in, and I immediately wanted my first of many Italian espressos. We walked into an immaculate bar, and the barista was quick to acknowledge our presence. "Due espressi," I ordered, and it was only moments before we had two shots and two small waters served to us at the walk-up bar. The espresso was good, ground fresh, and the aroma and taste reminded me of the hundreds of espresso moments I had here years ago, in the birth place of espresso. Revived



**My wife, Kylene, enjoyed our visits to Italy's coffee hubs almost as much as she loved that famous Italian shopping tradition.**

and buzzed, we walked downtown to the Duomo of Firenze. It was late, but I recognized the piazza, and the architecture and the time I had spent learning about how it was designed by Filippo Brunelleschi and completed in 1434, and was built without the use of scaffolding.

We stopped in for a campari soda at a small bar before dinner, and spent the evening eating pasta and enjoying the sidewalk table we found, watching people and not recognizing the jet lag that was telling us to go to bed.

The next day we woke up fairly early after a much needed full night of sleep, and walked to the same café for espressos. When I was in school we would come and spend full weekends at the many museums of Firenze and I wanted to get a good start on the day. We walked first back to the Duomo and watched the tourists wait in line to go in, as well as file through the beautiful Baptistry, a separate structure located on the entrance side of the Duomo of Florence. The Baptistry is famous for its east door panels by Ghiberti which mark the beginnings of Renaissance.

We walked down to the Ponte Vecchio, one of Firenze's best known treasures. The bridge is lined with street vendors and jewelry shops, and although there were many tourists, we had a nice time looking out over the sparkling Arno River on a sunny September day.

We walked by the incredibly long lines to the museums and decided to head back to the Duomo. The walk to the top is something that I had to share with my lovely wife so we decided to go for it. We got in line and quickly entered the building. Up countless turns on aged stone steps, we climbed our way upward. Stopping for a view of the artwork on the cathedral ceiling, we headed onward. It's quite a workout getting to the top, but we made it. The view is extraordinary and we were lucky that the day was so clear. After a nice rest and some great photo ops we made our way back down.

Walking back to the hotel, we stopped off for a plate of pasta, and then managed to call for a taxi to take us to our next destination. I had set it up so

that we could tour the La Marzocco factory located just outside of Firenze. When I lived in Italy in 1999, I was conveniently located about 10 miles from the Nuova Simonelli espresso machine factory, which I toured on two occasions. I was there the day they released the beloved home machine, the Oscar, and enjoyed my lunches with Cosimo and their crew. I was really looking forward to being back in a factory, and reminding myself of all the hard work that goes into the machines that we rely on to produce our precious espresso.

We showed up in the afternoon and Mary, an American who has lived in Italy for many years, welcomed us to the factory and showroom. We sat in the waiting room, having espresso made from the FB80 and I managed to pour some great latte art for the other employees greeting us. After a few minutes we took a tour of the production plant of the machines, including the beautiful Mirage machines, and then we headed for the separate warehouse where they were assembling the GS3s. It was fun to see so many of the little machines being made, and I hope to see more of them soon.

After our tour we were told that Piero Bambi himself was in his office and wanted to come meet us. When I was studying in Italy I became very comfortable with the language and so I was able to converse with Piero for quite a while about our trip there, the factory and the specialty coffee industry in general. However, he felt confident that I was fluent enough in Italian that he gave me the entire history of La Marzocco espresso machines and the tour all in Italian. I would look over to Mary for a translation from time to time, and she would smile before Piero would embark on explaining another new machine or invention, and I would pay close attention, listening for the words I could understand. Having a fairly strong knowledge of the equipment, it was not too hard to understand him, and his smile and laugh made both me and Kylene very comfortable in his presence.



**Would you be nervous pouring latte art for Piero Bambi of La Marzocco? I was!**



**So many newlyweds! At top, my dad, Bruce, marries the lovely Toni, with Jose Arreola officiating. Below, Kylene and I strike a pose midway between Portland and Milan, just one month after our own wedding.**

We had a couple more espressos and walked around the facility one last time. Piero left us then, wishing us a great vacation. We sat for a while looking through the guest book that had been signed by so many friends in the industry, and we were both given La Marzocco gift bags as we left. We caught a ride back into town with Mary, who was on her way home from work. After that, we went out for a nice dinner and prepared ourselves for the next day when we would head to Roma.

In the morning, we got up and had a pastry and cappuccino before we walked to the train station to catch our train to Roma. So far the espresso beverages I had were good. In my 14 months living in Italy I had acquired a taste for Italian espresso, and it was great to be back.

We only had a couple of days in Roma, but we managed to do a lot. There is nothing better than walking down streets that are 1500 years old and seeing such a concentration of amazing architecture and historical sights. The Colosseum, the Vatican museums, St. Peter's, the Pantheon, the Roman Forum, the Trevi Fountain, walking the Trastevere, and hitting the local night clubs made our list of attractions, and we will never forget them. We stayed at a friend's hotel in which I had stayed many times when I went to Roma during my schooling, and it was fun to see some familiar faces and be back in such an amazing city.

We met up with my sister and her friend and took a train down to Napoli, and then a cab onto windy cliffs overlooking the sea to the beautiful town of Positano, nestled into the Amalfi coast. Years ago I rented a Vespa and traveled those same roads, in the off season thank goodness, because driving on them now in a cab was dangerous enough. After about an hour, we finally made the turn and descent down into the beautiful little once peaceful fishing village. In 1953, John Steinbeck published an essay in *Harper's Bazaar*, and penned, "Positano bites deep. It is a dream place that isn't quite real when you are

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there and becomes beckoningly real after you have gone." Even after just seven years since I was last there, the town seemed to have become more and more tourist oriented. Still, it was an amazing place to relax and be with my beautiful new wife.

We checked into our hotel and found a bottle of wine waiting for us in our room. Later that evening we walked down to a little restaurant on the beach where the first of many dinners and drinks were shared in celebration of my dad, Bruce, and his wife Toni's wedding. After more wine, it was time to take our seats, and who do I see walking down the steps to join us but Jose Arreola, World Barista Championship judge and great friend to many in the coffee industry. It was so fun to see many familiar faces in such a beautiful place.

Each morning we would wake up to a tray brought to our room with fresh juice, yogurt, pastries, and our choice of espresso beverages. It was hilarious because the hotel waiter would barge into our room and open the doors to our patio, set up our breakfast and then say "Buongiorno," smile and leave. We would both laugh as we hid under the covers, and waited for him to exit the room. The cappuccinos were about like what I'd expect in any hotel, and I had to assume they were using a home machine, so I looked past the spooned-on foam.

The day of the wedding was beautiful, and Jose, who was officiating my dad's wedding, joined us for a nice walk that morning before the wedding ceremony. There were many people from the coffee industry who came to the wedding including Roberto Pregal formerly of Brasilia, Italia; Umberto Terrini of Astoria; Roberto Bresciani and Gianni Casaliggi of Nuova Simonelli; and many more who came a long distance to celebrate such a fun day.

The wedding ceremony was one to remember, and took place out on an open patio of the Hotel Le Sirenuse. Jose assisted with the reading of the vows, and those of you who have seen him emcee at barista competitions won't be surprised to hear that his eloquence and gentle demeanor made the ceremony very special. We had many toasts and a wonderful time eating and drinking under the starry night sky and overlooking the annual fish festival down on the beach, where coincidentally they had an amazing fireworks display that was fitting for such a celebratory day.

It was a bit sad to leave Positano, but we wanted to head back north to spend some time in Torino with our good friend Andrea Serrajotto, who only a month earlier was the best man at our wedding in Portland.

We took another long cab ride to the Napoli airport and caught the 45-minute flight to Torino, where Andrea and his father were waiting to pick us up. We spent the evening walking around the shopping district and stopping in small cafés for espresso and white wines from the Piedmonte region.

We had two more full days in Torino, Turin, which is about the same size of Portland, if not a bit larger. Torino was the site of the last winter Olympics, and it was fun to explore the city that I had spent so much time in years ago. We went to the Museo Nazionale del Cinema, which was very interesting, and walked around old Roman buildings and upscale designer shops.

The last night we were there, Andrea took us out to a couple of night clubs to really take in the nightlife of Torino. Our flight was early the next morning, but we wanted to squeeze in as much as possible. The espresso that I had in different cities ranged from good to very good; it is hard to scrutinize quality when you are on vacation. I will say many of the cappuccinos that I had were below my expectations, but I also feel that, like in many areas of the U.S., quality is consumer driven in some cases. I tried for Kylene's sake not to focus solely on espresso bars while in Italy, but the last night we were there I saw the most amazing thing. The first bar that we went to was packed,

and people were out on the sidewalk. We walked in and ordered drinks, and there it was ... the three group espresso machine and what looked to be the tallest grinder hopper I have ever seen. There was a Mazzer grinder with a hopper that towered about eight feet in the air. I was amazed and had my friend ask the barista if I could take a picture. My wife and I laughed and tried to imagine them getting on a ladder to fill up the hopper.

We went out dancing after that and managed to get about two hours sleep before heading to the airport to start our 20-hour journey home. It was so good to have been back in the country that I spent so much time in and will forever feel so close to. **b**



It is unlikely we could have packed more fun and coffee into our 10 days in Italy. Both Kylene and I thoroughly enjoyed our time and learned an incredible amount.

