

Starbucks or No Starbucks?

Rosario Procino (May 18, 2016)



The Seattle-based multinational chain that reinvented coffee and cafes in America has decided to open in the Bel Paese. The first branch is slated for opening in 2017 in Milan, and public opinion is already split. Will Starbucks succeed in conquering Italy? Not a chance, said Neapolitan restaurateur Rosario Procino, co-founder of the pizzeria Ribalta in Manhattan, during his appearance on CNN with Richard Quest.

The opening of Starbucks in Italy is what I would call collateral damage of modern globalization. Clearly, the American company's desire to expand is more than legitimate. Of greater interest is seeing how Italy will react. The country has long been considered the home of coffee or, as they say in the U.S., espresso.



Too many changes

As history would have it, it was an Italian café that first inspired the founder of Starbucks to open a store in Seattle. Yet, as often happens during ocean crossings, many things – too many – have changed. Starbucks offers several varieties of coffee missing in Italy (single, double, latte, tall, venti, grande, Frappuccino, and so on); the tradition of standing at a bar has vanished; and ceramic cups have been replaced by paper.

What will happen when the store opens in Italy? Starbucks is taking a humble position, promising to respect the country's traditions. That may be true, but I have my doubts that Starbucks will change its modus operandi. Will it serve up a heavier, creamier espresso in a ceramic cup at the bar, as the Italians take their coffee? Or will it serve “watered down” coffee in a takeaway cup?

Knowing corporate America's line of thinking, I'm sure that Starbucks will try to impose its philosophy on Italy, too, without adapting its wares to meet the demands of the host country, essentially putting the ball in the Italians' court. What will win out? A drive to change or respect for tradition?

Success at first, in Milan...

Personally, I think that Starbucks could be moderately successful in the beginning, thanks to the novelty of the endeavor, the fad of the moment, and later become a safe space for American tourists visiting Italy.

In the end, Italians may drink a Caramel Frappuccino every once in a while and chalk it up to a decent caffeinated drink, but I don't think they'll ever go to Starbucks for their daily dose of coffee... but Rome and Naples will reject it! Starbucks might drum up some interest in Milan, arguably Italy's most European city, but not exactly the capital of our coffee culture. But I doubt it will have any success in a city like Naples or Rome, where coffee is almost a religious ritual, aside from attracting a very young customer base that is always on the lookout for new trends to follow until the next one arrives from across the ocean.

Why say 'no'?

Starbucks or No Starbucks? I say No Starbucks, since Italy derives strength from maintaining and protecting its own traditions.

I say No Starbucks because I don't get the point of a double espresso. I say No Starbucks because it calls its smallest serving “Tall.” I say No Starbucks because I don't like it. Plain and simple.

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