



The Humble Brilliance of Italy's Moka Coffee Pot



Bialetti, the Italian maker of the moka pot, a stovetop coffee machine and one of the most iconic kitchen appliances ever created. The moka pot is a symbol of Italy: of postwar ingenuity and global culinary dominance. It is in the Museum of Modern Art, the Cooper-Hewitt Smithsonian Design Museum, and other temples to design. It is in the Guinness Book of World Records as the world's most popular coffee maker, and was for decades commonplace to the point of ubiquity not only in Italy but in Cuba, Argentina, Australia, and the United States.

Italians began coming up with their own gadgets for brewing coffee in the 19th century, but the biggest by far was the idea of applying pressure to coffee in order to create a strong, and more importantly fast, drink. This is the age of steam, a miraculous source of power that can unlock the world, and though it's not entirely clear who originated the idea of using steam to brew coffee, certainly it was in Italy that it was popularized.

Bialetti patented his Bialetti Moka Express. It's three-chambered. It uses steam power to force hot water through the coffee. The characteristic hourglass shape, with the eight-sided chambers, was there from the beginning. But the Moka Express design—today, "Bialetti Moka Express" is the specific product, while "moka pot" is the general term for this type of coffee maker—took a while to catch on. Italy still had to get embroiled in a couple of World Wars, and then recover. By the 1950s, Italian design had some amazing advantages. All of the factories set up to create war materials were at a loss



for products to make, as were a generation of skilled manufacturers. Vespa, Fiat, and Alfa Romeo designed incredible vehicles. And Bialetti's Moka Express, which still boasted a futuristic and clever design, suddenly took off.



Post-war Italy had a surging economy, a growing middle class, and the same access to the world's products that the rest of Europe boasted. Alfonso Bialetti's son, Renato, came back to Piedmont in 1946 to take over his father's shop, and decided to stop making everything except one product: the Moka Express. The newly low price of aluminum and coffee, and a growing middle class of people who could buy products like this, made the moka pot a perfect device for the time. Renato was also a pretty shrewd businessman; in 1953, he commissioned the drawing of the company's logo, *L'omino con i baffi*, "the little man with the mustache", which has since been inseparable from the Moka Express. The Moka Express was "the first way that Italians could realistically make coffee at home that was some approximation of what they could get outside," says Giuliano.

Over the next 60 years, the moka pot would conquer the world. As of 2016, the *New York Times* notes that over 90 percent of Italian homes had one. It became so iconic that Renato Bialetti, when he died in early 2016, was actually buried in a large replica of the moka pot. It spread to some countries with large Italian immigrant populations, becoming common in the Italian-American communities in and around Philadelphia, New York City, and Chicago. Argentina and Australia, both of which received large waves of Italian immigration in the 20th century, are also home to plenty of moka pots. The Argentinian company *Volturno* has been so successful that the moka pot in Argentina is sometimes called a *Volturno*.

Inspired by Italian espresso bar culture, Starbucks almost single-handedly changed the entire concept of coffee in America. And the moka pot was not part of that. The espresso machine, which uses mechanical pressure (via pumps and/or levers), was the device used to make coffee in Italian coffee shops; the moka was strictly for the home. "In the '90s and



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early '00s, having some sort of 'authentic' Italian coffee chops were part of what was exciting and interesting about coffee," says Giuliano, who lived through this phase at Counter Culture. In the 1990s, coffee shops, which greatly informed coffee consumption in the U.S. in general, looked to Italian coffee bars.

After the Starbucks boom, American coffee culture changed rapidly, eventually coming to embrace drip coffee, especially a lighter, more acidic style common in Scandinavia and Japan. Espresso stayed, of course—with the glaring exception of the moka pot, Americans never really stopped looking to Italy for coffee, and even today most of the "serious" espresso machines come from Italian companies.

The nice thing about the moka pot is that it can create a very nice cup of strong coffee, and that the equipment you need is wholly affordable. Moka pots cost about 30 bucks, and by using good coffee and a bit of technique, you can make as good an example of moka pot coffee as anyone in the world.

Vocabulary:

The Humble Brilliance of Italy's Moka Coffee Pot

Appliance: aparato/utensilio

Ubiquity: ubicuidad/omnipresencia

Gadget: aparato/utensilio

Bucks: dólares

Device: aparato