

# European coffee history

the pre-espresso era



### CHRISTINE COTTRELL

Coffee and creativity go hand in hand. But for a few hundred years, no one fully understood why. Regardless, Europe's great intellectuals, scientists, artists and writers were among the most enthusiastic coffee consumers, frequenting the cafes that emerged in cities during the 18th and 19th centuries.

Italian coffee history began in Venice where a community of Turkish merchants was living by the end of the 16th century. The first commercial coffee shipments arrived in the 17th century, but it was 100 years before the first coffee house opened.

The reluctance to accept coffee sooner was perhaps due to the sceptical attitudes towards what was considered 'a pagan brew of Arabs'. It attracted the concern of church leaders who issued a decree to Pope Clement VIII in 1605 – with the aim of banning it as 'the drink of the devil'. After tasting a brew, the Pope decided it was too good to ban, gave it his blessing – and since then, even the most devout Christians in Italy have enjoyed coffee.

The first cafes appeared in Piazza San Marco, the most well known being Florian, dating from 1720 and reputedly the oldest surviving in the world. Being in a magnificent location opposite the Doge's Palace and St Mark's Basilica, Florian attracted patrons from all over Europe, including great thinkers and writers such as Lord Byron, Goethe and Proust. Since Florian was one of the few places where ladies were welcome; it was also popular with Casanova.

Today a visit to Florian is a must for any coffee lover in Venice. Expect to pay a premium price – for the view, the music, the table and a step-back in time. As the orchestra starts up at sunset, enjoy the music – just as early patrons would have. Then go into the room on the far right – to find a portrait for which Marco Polo may have posed.

One of the biggest Italian coffee houses is the Pedrocchi in Padua, having been rebuilt as a huge

neo-classical structure – on the location of the old Pedrocchi, where scientists from nearby University of Padua, including Copernicus, Galileo and Isaac Newton along with physician, William Harvey were drinking coffee hundreds of years ago. It is believed Harvey was aided in his discovery of the blood's circulatory system by the fact that he could feel something (the yet-to-be-discovered caffeine) pumping through his body.

A trip to Rome is not complete without a visit to Caffè Greco, Rome's oldest cafe. You'll find it on the right just down from the Spanish Steps. There's a myriad of interesting memorabilia on the walls and it was once the haunt of famous musicians such as Rossini, Mendelssohn and Wagner.

The first few hundred years of Italian coffee history is about life in the many 'grand caffes storici' – as Italians call such cafes. You'll still find many in major Italian cities today but three of the most fascinating are on Piazza della Repubblica in Florence: the Gilli and the Paszkowski on one side and the Guibbe Rossa on the other.



Caffè Greco, Rome



Coffee history in Holland is as old as that in Italy but with more far-reaching influence during the 17th and 18th centuries – aided by the fact that Holland was a great trading nation, dealing in all kinds of exotic goods. The enterprising Dutch saw the potential in coffee and were quick to make the most of it.

Most Dutch people were drinking coffee in their homes from the mid 17th century after merchants had brought small quantities back from their travels. Pieter Van den Broecke, a successful cloth merchant with the Dutch East India Company was the first, smuggling beans from Yemen as early as 1616. As coffee drinking became popular, Dutch traders began investigating the possibility of its cultivation – to feed the quickly growing domestic market. Some decades later, they were the first to produce coffee commercially – in Ceylon, and later in Java.

When the first cargo of low-cost coffee from the Dutch East Indies arrived in Amsterdam there was a massive rise in consumption, so that by the end of the 18th century, the Dutch were known as the world's greatest coffee consumers.

Coffee houses first appeared in The Hague, Haarlem and later in Amsterdam.

Some believe The Hoppe Café of Amsterdam rivals Florian as the oldest still standing – arguable only because it was first a distillery. Harry Hoppe Mustert, the owner of the distillery, acquired the building next door, made a connecting passage and turned the adjoining section into a café. By this time however, Florian was in operation.

In Amsterdam's old district is Hofje van Wijs, a café with a small museum attached. There you'll find some fascinating coffee memorabilia and can pick up a tour of old Amsterdam that takes in places

where the earliest European coffee history was made.

Meanwhile shipments of coffee were also arriving in France through Marseilles. The first cafe in Marseilles was built in 1671 and others soon followed.

The cafes dotted around the south of France attracted artists from all over Europe – Matisse, Renoir and Picasso from Paris, Vincent Van Gogh from Amsterdam, Jean Miro and Salvador Dali from Spain. Often very poor, they occasionally paid by leaving a sketch or painting.

The oldest café still standing in the south of France, dating from 1782, is Les Deux Garçons in Aix en Provence. It's where the artist, Cezanne drank with his long-time school friend, Emile Zola. If you go there, don't miss the portraits of Cezanne and its famous patrons on the walls.

My favourite is La Colombe d'Or in St Paul de Vence, which you'll find in the hills, a short drive from Nice. Enjoy an aperitif in the bar sitting by a portrait of Picasso and lunch beside a huge Leger relief in the lovely, leafy courtyard. Then wander inside to see countless works by other well-known artists who frequented this idyllic venue.

After it's arrival in Paris, coffee became immediately fashionable – taking on impetus in 1669 with the arrival of Suleiman Aga, a Turkish Ambassador who held extravagant parties in his elaborately decorated home. As laid down by Turkish custom, he offered coffee to guests – said to be poured into fine porcelain cups by elaborately robed Nubian slaves on bended knees.

Louis V shared a passion for coffee with his mistress Madame du Barry who, to curry favour with the king, commissioned a portrait of herself dressed in Turkish fashion with a coffee cup in her hand!

Likewise, the king flattered her by doing everything he could to bring coffee into vogue – tending his coffee plants in hothouses at his Versailles palace and commissioning the manufacture of solid gold and sterling silver coffee pots.

Wealthy women decorated their homes in Turkish fashion and took to wearing Turkish robes and turbans. The popularity of all things Turkish had taken on such proportion by 1670, it led satirist Moliere, to write *Le Bourgeois Gentilhomme*, a work ridiculing the fad that had gripped Parisian high society.

An Armenian known as Pascal was the first to introduce coffee to the Parisian public. In 1672, he set up a small stall and sent boys around the streets calling 'café café', selling little cups of black coffee from trays.

More successful was a Sicilian from Florence, who opened Le Procope in 1689 – an elegant cafe with mirrored walls and marble tables. A magnet for intellectuals, it is said to be the birthplace of the French Revolution because philosophers such as Voltaire, who reputedly drank up to 40 cups a day, gathered there to exchange ideas that eventually changed the course of French history. But it was at Café de Foy, that revolutionary leader Camille Desmoulins stood on a table and incited angry Parisians to take arms against their king. The French Revolution began two days later.

Perhaps the most bizarre of coffee drinkers was Honore de Balzac who is said to have consumed his coffee in increasingly strong proportions – with less and less water, to the point where he was consuming the beans almost dry – to stay awake until he had completed a particular work.



Caffe Florian, Venice



Caffe Piazza San Marco, Venice



Caffe Florian Interior, Venice



Café Sacher, Vienna



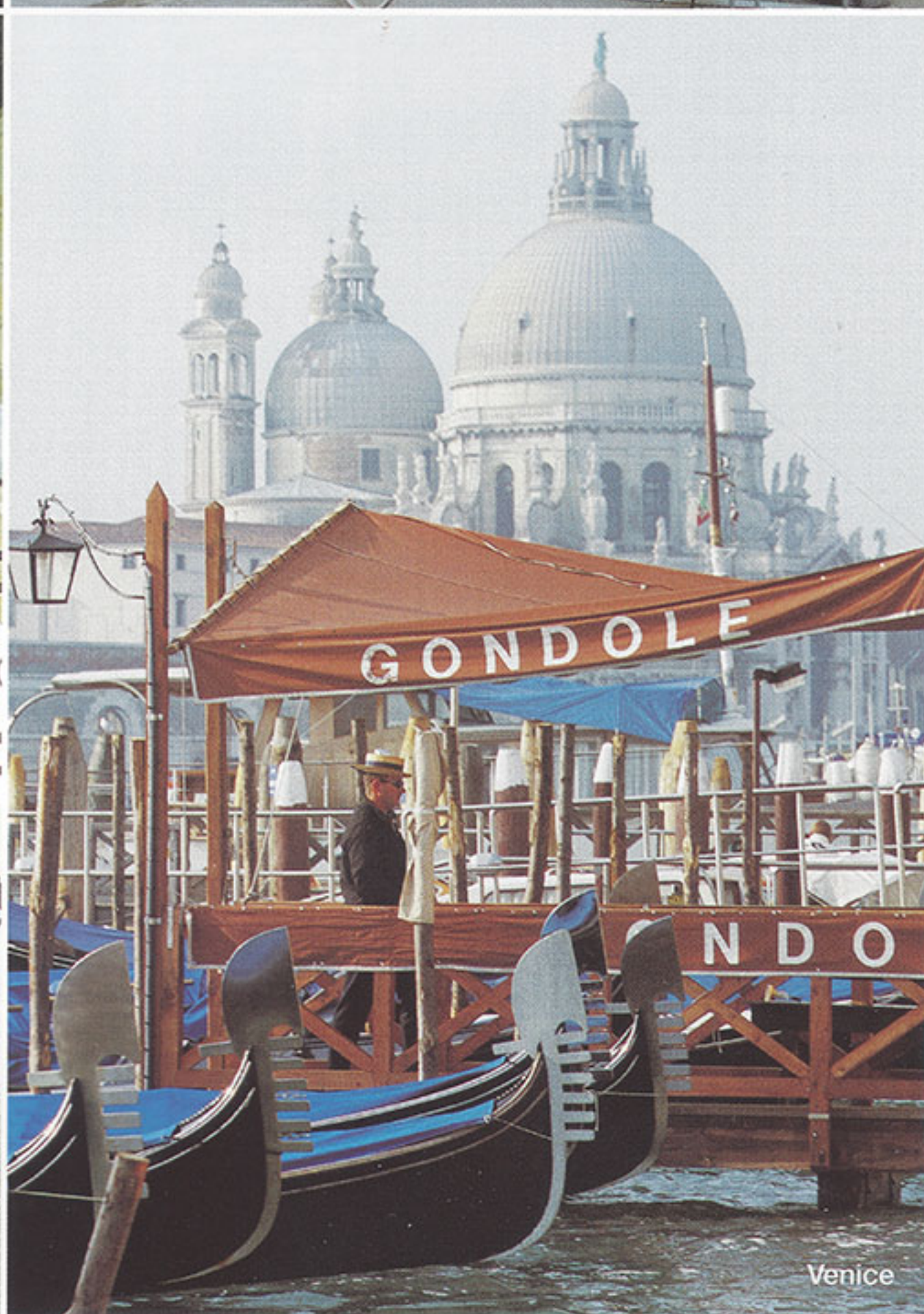
Les Deux Magots, Paris



Caffè Guibbe Rose, Florence



Caffè Gilli, Florence



Venice

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Parisian cafes proliferated throughout the 18th and 19th centuries and although some no longer exist, you'll find many including Café de la Paix opposite the Paris Opera. Also Les Deux Magots and Café de Flore on Boulevard St Germain.

Coffee arrived in Vienna in the mid 17th century, brought overland on camelback with the Turkish ambassador to Emperor Leopold. His entourage numbered 300, among them two servants whose job it was to keep fires burning to roast and brew coffee. Eventually the ambassador was dismissed on the grounds that too much wood was being used.

In 1683 Vienna was under Turkish siege. Koltschitsky, a Ukrainian who was fluent in Arabic and employed as a spy, assisted the Viennese in successfully overthrowing the Turkish army. After their retreat, they left behind an enormous quantity of coffee beans, originally mistaken for camel fodder. Having learnt the art of roasting and brewing coffee, Koltschitsky immediately recognized the coffee beans, and asked to keep them. Thereafter, he started selling coffee to the Viennese.

Although much later than elsewhere in Europe, the Viennese eventually developed a taste for coffee, preferring to drink it with cream – accompanied by something sweet.

By the 19th century, the era of the famous Viennese coffee houses had begun. Synonymous with elegance and luxury, they were decorated with marble counters and tabletops, ornate chandeliers and statues, etched glass windows and long, plush curtains. Gold framed mirrors and tall columns gave the illusion of grandeur and space. More than places to drink coffee, they were designed to be warm and welcoming and provided homely touches like coat hooks and hat racks, newspapers and games.

With cafes vying to be the best, many recipes for exquisite cakes and pastries were invented. The founders of Café Demel, one of the earliest, were pastry chefs to the royal household and Demel continues to offer some of the best cakes and pastries in the world to this day. A trip to Demel is a must when in Vienna where, as well as a fine coffee and cake experience, you can see the pastry chefs at work through a large viewing window.

The Hotel Sacher has become known for its chocolate cake, the Sachertorte – but not without a battle waged between Café Demel and Café Sacher about who owned the recipe. The battle was never resolved, so both Demel and the Sacher can rightfully put the Sachertorte logo on top of their chocolate cakes.

Café Central, established in 1876, is the most impressive, with tall gothic columns and chandeliers. Now it's popular as a place to listen to piano music, but it was once known as the best place for a game of chess. One infamous patron was plotting more than chess moves. Leon Trotsky sat in the same place every day unobtrusively plotting the course of Russian history. Sigmund Freud was also a regular at Café Central.

The 18th and 19th centuries were rich in musical history with the great German and Austrian composers visiting coffee houses to fuel their creativity. Handel and Mozart, Mahler and Bruckner were often seen in many, but Brahms faithfully visited Café Heinrichshof, opposite the opera, every day for 35 years.

Beethoven was particularly fond of coffee, preferring to prepare it himself in a glass pot. He did so with great ceremony, carefully counting 60 beans for each cup. It is also believed that when in the company of guests, he often counted them twice – just for amusement.

In the absence of a concert hall or opera house, coffee houses also served as venues for performances. Strauss performed his waltzes at Café Dommay and Bach's famous Coffee Cantata was first performed at Zimmerman's Kaffeehaus in Leipzig. Composed in 1734 as a short, light-hearted operetta, it was both an ode to coffee and a stab at the movement in Germany that tried to prevent women drinking it.

As coffee was becoming so popular with the German people, Frederick The Great became concerned about the decline in beer sales his thriving economy relied on. Consequently, in 1777, he devised a plan that involved a government monopoly over coffee sales and a ban on commoners drinking it. He went so far as to enlist physicians to declare coffee was the cause of many ailments and to employ 'coffee sniffers' to go about the streets and locate anyone roasting it. While commoners were forced to revert to beer drinking, government officials and clergymen were exempt, and continued to enjoy their coffee. Needless to say, his plan ended in failure.

It was in Germany that one of the most significant contributions to coffee history was made. In 1819, Goethe, famous poet and philosopher, engaged a clever, young scientist known as Runge to investigate what was in coffee that had such an effect on the human mind and body. Within a few months, he had isolated the bitter-tasting white crystalline powder that was first of all known as 'kaffeebase' – and later, caffeine.

So it took 200 years of coffee history to find the reason for coffee's immense popularity and why it had become, by the start of the 19th century, a beverage that had fuelled considerable creativity and woven its way into the social fabric of Europe.