



ANDREA ILLY

World-famous coffee roaster

A CUP OF ESPRESSO WITH COCO CHANEL

by KATHARINA BECKER

photo MARCO PROSCH

Nine o'clock in the morning at the family-run Illycaffè headquarters in the port of Trieste, Italy, can mean only one thing: the first bottleneck of the day. No, not in the company parking lot, but at the coffee counter. Shoppers attired in elegant threads, office employees in casual polo shirts, ladies in light and airy linen dresses, and manual workers in blue overalls... all of them competing in the edelweiss white, spacious foyer for the best spot below the oversized spiral of colorful espresso cups. Every second, the two baristas slide small, preheated cups of *caffè*—as espresso is known in its native land—*cappuccino*, *caffè lungo*, or *macchiato* over the counter.

In Naples, espresso preparation is a religion.

The Illy family, based in the north Italian town of Trieste, has transformed religion into science in its never-ending pursuit of the most perfect *caffè* ever.



In Naples, espresso preparation is a religion. The Neapolitans maintain that fine espresso calls for a fine coffee-bean blend, top-quality mineral water—none of that dreadful tap water, thank you very much—and a shot of *dolce vita*. In the north Italian town of Trieste, coffee preparation is a science. Illycaffè has its own research division to aid the firm in its search to unlock the secrets behind the quintessential espresso. They have already filtered more than 1,500 different scents and flavors, from nuts to bananas and dried wood to fresh mint and young peas. “My favorite is linalool, which has the scent of jasmine,” says Andrea Illy. A scent that—Illy seemingly adds parenthetically—is found in Chanel N° 5 as well.

“It’s quite difficult to prepare the perfect espresso,” says Andrea Illy. Wiry in build, with close-cropped hair, Illy—who has followed in his father Ernesto’s footsteps as a chemist—is the third generation to guide the fortunes of the family company. His wood-paneled office is lined with chemistry books, financial literature, and a National Geographic atlas, all equally at home with one another. The process of brewing that tiny cup of espresso involves so many chemical and physical variables that, in theory, millions of different espressos could result—but only one of them can truly be called *perfetto*. And Illy →



Just one poor-quality coffee bean could ruin the espresso. So at Illycaffè, every single bean has to pass a total of 125 quality checks.

company has established “coffee universities” in São Paulo (Brazil), Bogotá (Colombia), and 24 other cities. These universities, similar to the one in Trieste, offer advanced training courses for coffee farmers, baristas and coffee lovers.

Risks for Andrea Illy’s premium coffee lurk everywhere: Burned coffee beans can blur the flavor; moisture can lead to fungal attack or mold. Around 50 beans are needed for a single cup of espresso. “Just one poor-quality bean would ruin the entire cup,” says Illy. So he leaves nothing to chance. Each product has to pass a total of 125 quality checks.

In the entrance hall, just a few steps away from his office, jute sacks filled with coffee beans from the day’s production are stacked higher and higher—up to the roof. The electronic sorting machine scans each bean as though it were a diamond: 200 per second. A compressed-air jet expels any bean that doesn’t pass muster. Successful beans are conveyed in large metal containers to be roasted. There, the beans are heated to a temperature between 200 and 225 °C. Northern Europeans prefer the lighter, 200 °C version, while darker coffee is preferred in the south.

The faint aroma of coffee wafts through the production hall, chock-full of conveyor belts rising up towards the ceiling. The hall is full of rumbling, hissing, and clacking sounds. Entire armies of silver-toned cans roll along, awaiting their turn to be filled and sealed. Here too, Illycaffè forges its own path. Instead of joining the ranks of other coffee roaster companies →

has the formula down pat: Water, at a temperature of 90 °C and pressure of nine bars, flows through seven grams of finely ground espresso powder, enabling 25 milliliters of perfect *caffè* and hazelnut-colored *crema* to emerge. Rapid preparation under pressure is essential to ensure that the flavoring agents are released and that many of the bitters and tannins remain in the coffee grounds. An overly long brewing process gives espresso a woody flavor. Water that is too hot will cause it to taste burned. Because so much can go awry, Illycaffè not only invented coffee pods back in the 1980s, but it supplied an espresso maker as well. It does everything right, and looks good into the bargain.

The Illys’ search for the perfect coffee starts much sooner than that, however. In short: it starts with the coffee bush. The venerable coffee roaster only uses beans from the Arabica coffee bean, grown in the highlands and full-flavored. Robusta beans have a higher caffeine content and offer a higher yield, but are held in lower esteem. The Illys purchase the unroasted green beans direct from coffee farmers in Brazil, Central America, India and Africa. And for beans of the sought-after quality, they pay around 30 percent more than the market price. To find out who grows the best beans, Illycaffè organizes competitions and awards premiums in coffee-producing countries. The



and using a vacuum method to package the coffee powder, Illycaffè packages it under pressure in nitrogen and carbon dioxide. This is intended to not only preserve the flavor but—just as with a fine wine—to enhance it as well.

Andrea Illy represents the Illy family tradition, in which the day-to-day operations are now left in the hands of external managers. During World War I, Illy's grandfather Francesco Illy, a Hungarian soldier, arrived in Trieste, where in 1933 he founded a coffee and cocoa business. Two years later, he came up with the legendary Illetta coffee maker, which still stands in the lobby of the company headquarters. His son Ernesto assumed control of the business

in the 1950s. It is he who is still viewed as the heart and soul of the company. Ernesto was less interested in sales, being more of a scientist rather than an entrepreneur. His dream was to produce the finest coffee possible. A true gourmet, says his son Andrea Illy. Thanks to his



father, Andrea Illy discovered early on that he himself had an intuitive feeling for good taste—and a passion for vegetables that has continued to this day. “Even as a child, I recalled the finest tomato soup in the world, served at our hotel in Budapest. Corn on the cob in the summer, mushrooms in the fall. Simply marvelous ...” the 47-year-old rhapsodizes, in contrast to his otherwise so deliberate and analytical manner.

Sales have nearly quadrupled since the youngest offshoot of the *famiglia* assumed the helm of the company in 1994. Last year, the company, with a good 750 employees, earned 305 million euros. Every day, six million cups of Illy coffee are consumed. The family →

THE WORLD COFFEE MARKET

Brazil is the world's largest coffee producer, followed by Vietnam and Colombia. In 2010, the world's coffee drinkers consumed around 8,040,000 tons of coffee. In ground form, this quantity would cover 2,273 soccer fields—and reach a height of one meter. The Finns take the lead in per capita annual consumption of coffee: nearly 12 kilos. In other words, each inhabitant of Finland drinks 1,831 cups of coffee a year or five cups a day. Germans down just under three cups a day, still ahead of their fellow coffee drinkers in Italy and France. This makes coffee, rather than beer, Germans' favorite beverage. Every year, coffee consumption increases by more than two percent. And growth has been highest in Japan, with an average annual increase of 3.5 percent over the past ten years. The price of coffee has more than quadrupled in the last decade. In August 2011 alone, 500 grams of Arabica traded for U.S.\$2.60 on world markets. In contrast, 500 grams of Robusta coffee cost less than half that amount: \$1.03.

Sources: Deutscher Kaffeeverband, International Coffee Organization



EVERY YEAR, THE UNIVERSITÀ DEL CAFFÈ IN TRIESTE PREPARES OVER 15,000 STUDENTS FOR WORKING IN THE COFFEE INDUSTRY—FROM BARISTA OR BUYER TO PRODUCER—IN SHORT, EVERY ASPECT OF THE ART OF SELECTING AND PREPARING PERFECT COFFEE. OTHER COFFEE UNIVERSITIES HAVE SINCE BEEN ESTABLISHED IN CHINA, SOUTH KOREA, THE NETHERLANDS, AND EGYPT. AND MUNICH'S KAFFEEAKADEMIE HAS OPENED ITS DOORS AS WELL.

sells its espressos in 50,000 restaurants, coffee lounges, and delicatessens in 140 countries. More than half of their receipts are from overseas. For some years, the family has been investing in their own coffee houses. Around 250 have now been opened, in Italian style and spanning the globe between Los Angeles and Tokyo.

No one in Trieste is persuaded by the argument that an assortment of products is good for business, no matter what marketing experts may preach. They manufacture a single product, and that is all: “The best coffee in the world,” says Illy, as he savors his espresso at the long counter in the foyer before the afternoon stampede begins. “There can only be one best coffee. If we offered two, by default one of them would be inferior.” And to offer a coffee that isn’t *numero uno*? Out of the question! ←



Illycaffè itself designed the equipment it uses in manufacturing the 3-kilogram containers used in the food service sector.

For the past two years, engineer Jacopo Brunelli (right) and his Porsche Consulting team have been assisting Illycaffè in optimizing their production process. By now, productivity has doubled at the facility where the 250-gram cans are produced, says logistics and production head Massimo Lovise (center).

EFFICIENCY WRIT LARGE—BUT IN COMPACT CANS

Andrea Illy is a fan of real sports cars. That is why he has paid such close attention to how Porsche has become the world’s most profitable automobile manufacturer. He is fascinated by lean production. When the Illys were confronted with the challenge of how best to meet increasing demand, the coffee specialists lost no time in traveling to Germany. In other words, to Zuffenhausen, which has been the heart of Porsche from the very beginning.

For the past two years, Jacopo Brunelli, engineer and Principal of Porsche Consulting in Milan, and his team have been assisting Illycaffè with a variety of projects. Working together with the Illy experts, they turned production of the 250-gram cans upside down, analyzed machine failures as well as sources of errors and remedied them, standardized maintenance procedures, and sorted out responsibilities. “Plant productivity has doubled,” says Massimo Lovise, in charge of logistics, production, and procurement at Illycaffè.

Their latest project is the development of the third capsule generation, planned to be less expensive but without compromises. “Illy capsules are ingeniously designed, but unfortunately they are also complicated,” says Brunelli. In products from other manufacturers, water only flows through the capsule. However, to achieve the Illy flavor, pressure is required as well. This is the reason why the capsule is fitted with a valve, which does not open until a pressure of eight bars has been reached. While searching for new materials and processing methods, the product creation process has been adjusted to include experts from production, logistics, and quality assurance from an early stage. This helps to avoid making decisions that could later cause problems during production.

