It all began in 1970 at the Bar Marotta, a neighborhood bar on Via Riviera di Chiaia in Naples, where I experienced my first real espresso, the elixir of my adulthood. This was no coffee-flavored beverage to be consumed as a caffeine-delivery device. This was coffee catapulted to another dimension. The espressos served up at Bar Marotta and the other bars I frequented in Naples reduced coffee to its essence—smooth, rich, and seductive, with hints of chocolate and caramel and a range of fruits and spices. Every cup was covered with a thick layer of luscious crema, the emulsified oils that define a true espresso.

There was infinite variety, as each bar seemed to use a different local roaster, opening up an ever-widening world of sensual delight. I would order cappuccinos in the morning, but after that it was only straight shots drunk quickly while standing at the bar, in the Italian tradition. In the evening I might have my espresso coretto (corrected) with a shot of grappa.

Espresso is serious business in Naples. The barista who prepares your coffee is not a kid with a part-time job but rather someone with decades of experience who understands the countless variables that go into preparing espresso correctly. There they still use the old-fashioned piston machines with the big handles, heat the cups in trays of near-boiling water to ensure the customer gets a hot drink, and routinely serve a ristretto shot. Literally, the term means “restricted,” meaning they restrict the amount of water passed through the ground coffee so that the customer is served an ounce or less of liquid velvet.

Before that trip to Italy, the only espresso machine I had ever seen was a nonworking one, a fixture at the Detroit Institute of Arts café for several years. When I returned home from my European sojourn, the museum derelict was gone, and I searched in vain for an espresso fix. I’m quite certain there was not an espresso machine in the city of Detroit at the time.

When I moved to San Francisco in 1971, I was astonished to find a city filled with espresso machines. I made my home in North Beach, with its diverse array of bohemian cafés. I hung out at several of them, but it was the Caffe Trieste—where Iolanda served up fabulous motor-oil-thick espressos—that got most of my business. Iolanda soon learned that “Ricardo” liked his espresso short and strong, in the Neapolitan style, whether drunk as a straight shot or in a cappuccino, and the quality of her drinks, along with the colorful procession of bohemian characters, kept me coming back.

North Beach became a part of my being; its coffee houses, my community, my church. A day rarely passed when I didn’t spend at least an hour at the Trieste, where I reveled in the offbeat essence that seeped from every crack in its floor. But home ownership beckoned, and when my wife and I found a small house in west Berkeley that we could afford, we made an offer on it.

The night before I had to sign the papers for the house, I tossed and turned for hours. Was I worrying about the debt? Was I questioning whether we had chosen the right house? None of the above. I was agonizing about living outside of North Beach and across the bay from my beloved Caffe Trieste. (When I told my friend Bob, another Trieste regular, about our impending move and my vow to visit the café every Saturday morning, he looked at me and said, “Yeah, they do that—for a while.”)

As I continued to fret over my separation anxiety, I decided that the only solution was to buy a home espresso machine for the new house—a fateful decision that played into my developing addiction. For I soon learned that with a basic home machine, an adjustable burr grinder, a well-balanced and freshly roasted espresso blend, and careful attention to technique, I could make a richer, smoother espresso than was served up in any Bay Area café or restaurant, including the Trieste.

There are many reasons why espresso is rarely made well in this country. Perhaps the main one is that the United States is Big Gulp territory, while a true espresso is a tiny thimbleful of ambrosia to be savored for its quality and...
intensity rather than its quantity. Among those who take espresso seriously, the rule of thumb for a double basket of ground coffee is two or three ounces of espresso (less for a ristretto) extracted over twenty-five to thirty seconds. But when an American café or restaurant serves its customers the half-full demitasse that is the standard in Naples, the customer looks at the server with disbelief, unable to fathom the concept of drinking such a tiny amount of coffee. So even if they start off knowing better, café owners often give up, run four to six ounces of water through the coffee, and end up with the acrid, bitter brew most Americans know as espresso.

Sergio Azzollini, founder of the Café Roma in San Francisco’s North Beach, explained it to me twenty years ago when he took me behind the counter and pulled me a ristretto. He stopped to show me how dark and thick the coffee was and then turned the espresso machine’s pump back on and filled the cup to the brim with thin, watery coffee. The ristretto, he explained, is the way to appreciate true espresso. When you keep the pump on too long, you are just adding bitter, acidic water that destroys the flavor of the coffee.

The ultimate signature of a true espresso is abundant crema, the dark reddish brown layer of emulsified oils that should cover the surface. Don’t let anyone pass off a thin layer of pond scum as crema. As Giordano Bianchi, owner of North Beach’s long-gone Caffe Italia once told me, “You don’t even have to taste the espresso. You pour some sugar in the cup. If it just sits there on top, the coffee’s okay. If it goes right through to the bottom, you send it back and tell them it’s no good.” (This, of course, is something of an exaggeration, in that crema alone by no means guarantees a good-tasting espresso.)

As I began my experiments as a home barista, I tried several Bay Area espresso blends—Trieste, Graffeo, and Mr. Espresso—and then cast a wider net by placing mail orders
to Seattle-based companies, including Torrefazione Italia, Espresso Vivace, and Caffè D’arte. (For the American espresso lover, Seattle is the closest thing to a domestic Mecca. There, in the shadow of Starbucks, serious cafés like Espresso Vivace, Victrola, Zoka, Hines Public Market, and Vita are pushing the envelope both in their roasting and in the culture of pride they have developed among their baristas, who are coming to rival those in Italy.) Along the way I found myself commiserating with fellow fanatics, complaining about the espresso at local restaurants and cafés and, in one of my finer moments, berating the owner of a Greenwich Village restaurant that had just gotten a rave review in *Gourmet*.

I was alone in New York and had snagged a seat at the counter of Le Gigot, an intimate West Village bistro. The owner, who was doubling as maître d’ and server for the tiny counter, produced a fabulous meal of *soupe de poisson* and *confit de canard*. I ordered my postprandial espresso with some hope, given the quality of the meal. But the light brown liquid in the full-to-the-brim oversize demitasse she brought me did not bode well. I asked the owner if they might try again, using a double measure of coffee for a one-ounce shot. But as I watched the waitress/barista attending to my request I spotted the problem. “You don’t have a grinder!” I exclaimed. “You’re using preground coffee! No, no, no, no! It will never work! You can’t make espresso with preground coffee!” After I calmed down, the owner and I had a civil talk. I explained the meaning of espresso to her. I gave her advice and phone numbers, which she no doubt dropped in the trash as soon as I was out the door.

It may sound snobbish to say one cannot produce a decent espresso with preground coffee, but the difference between an espresso prepared with freshly ground coffee and beans ground only a few hours before is dramatic. There are many styles of espresso, but one thing aficionados generally agree upon is that a good espresso requires high-quality, freshly roasted beans that have been ground to order and firmly tamped so that it will take precisely 25 to 30 seconds for the pressurized hot water produced by the machine to work its way through the coffee “puck.” If the coffee is not freshly ground or the grind is wrong, it’s immediately obvious in the look and taste of the coffee. The seasoned barista will adjust his grind several times a day to maintain the twenty-five- to thirty-second shot time, because an espresso that gushes out in twelve seconds will be hugely inferior to one extracted over the proper time frame. It does not take a refined palate to taste the difference.

Several years into my home experimentation, I discovered the online news group alt.coffee, an international collection of fanatics as obsessed—nay, even more obsessed—than I. We’re talking people who have tricked out their home espresso machines with PID (proportional, integral, and derivative) controllers to better stabilize brewing temperatures, people who will argue for days about the exact temperature and tamping method required to optimize the taste profile of a particular espresso blend. For me the alt.coffee experience was like a junkie discovering a library full of books explaining the health benefits of heroin. It confirmed everything I had been saying for years and taught me a lot of new things besides. I’m not one of those people who obsess over gadgets, but espresso machines are a major topic of discussion on alt.coffee, so I started to take greater interest in the array of home machines on the market. When I one day walked into the Williams-Sonoma in downtown San Francisco and encountered a saleswoman talking to a guy in an expensive suit about their selection of superautomatic espresso machines, I drifted over. He was asking her to explain the difference between the $900 and $2,500 superautomatics—no-muss, no-fuss machines that grind, tamp, and brew espresso at the push of a button.

Soon, she was offering to make each of us an espresso with the $2,500 machine. We heard the whir of the grinder and other mysterious sounds and watched as dual streams of brown dishwater emerged from the machine’s spouts. I simply couldn’t bite my tongue. “That’s not espresso!” I exclaimed. “You can see the bottom of the cup. There’s no crema!”

“You haven’t even tasted it!” she shot back, seeing a $2,500 sale flying out the door. Then she pointed to a tiny patch of pale brown foam floating on the dishwater. “That’s
crema!” she announced. After respectfully disagreeing with her definition of crema, I decided it was best to leave quickly, before a beefy security guard introduced my face to the sidewalk.

I’m currently on my third espresso machine and grinder set: a $1,200 ECM Giotto—a high-end home machine—and a $400 Mini Mazzer professional grinder. I have guided several friends along the path to espresso mania. But things changed radically a few months ago when I went to my doctor for a routine checkup. Some years ago I began experiencing occasional heart arrhythmia and went through a battery of tests. The verdict: premature atrial contractions, not a serious problem as these things go but something to be watched. My doctor, who knows all about my espresso obsession, urged me to switch to decaf, and I tried for a few weeks before slipping back into my old habits. But as time passed, the arrhythmia increased, and more and more frequently I was taking drugs to control it.

I dreaded broaching the subject during my checkup, but the EKG the nurse gave me on the spot left me no choice: the arrhythmia happened right there. When the doctor came in, I asked if I should be taking medication routinely instead of as needed. “I have a different question,” he replied. “Can you afford to continue drinking coffee?” His answer was, of course, no, and he laid it out in very graphic and terrifying terms.

“Decaf, here I come,” I acquiesced. To which he responded, “I’m not even sure about decaf.”

So I took a deep breath and did it. I quit coffee cold turkey that day. Me, the guy whose favorite T-shirt is from a Seattle café called Coffee Messiah, featuring an image of Jesus on the front and the words “Caffeine Saves” on the back. So daunting was the thought of an espresso-free life that a little voice kept whispering, “Maybe quitting won’t make any difference, and you can just keep on drinking the stuff.”

The first day was tough. I felt as though I was swimming through a muddy fog wearing a fifty-pound trench coat and somebody else’s glasses. But the fog dissipated after a couple of days and, to the disappointment of the little voice, the arrhythmia made its exit about ten days later.

Lest I be cast as a poster child for abstinence, I should concede that I have fallen off the wagon more than once, unable to resist the opportunity to taste an espresso that came highly recommended. (And I should add that this experience has given me newfound understanding of the caffeine-free friends I used to scoff at when they told me that one of my coffees would put them on the ceiling for hours, because that is exactly where I find myself now when I imbibe the real thing.)

Nor have I followed my doctor’s advice on the subject of decaf. With a couple of caffeine-free months under my belt, I ordered a pound of decaf from Caffè D’arte in Seattle. I soon found that a decaf cappuccino each morning wasn’t half bad and didn’t trigger the arrhythmia. But without a healthy dose of steamed milk to help it along, a straight decaf espresso is rarely satisfying. When blessed with exceptionally fresh beans, I’ve pulled a few straight shots that have been passable, but decaf is tough to work with and has a dismayingly short shelf life.

These days my mornings begin with a sad ritual. I make my wife a real latte. Then I pull out the decaf beans, change the grind, and do battle, often pitching two or three coffees in the process, until I manage a shot that, when drunk with a nice dose of steamed milk, reminds me of the glorious beverage I once took for granted.