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Bambino on Board



Max the Regular: A Coffee Bar Embraces the Bambino Like a Local

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Gianluca is the proud owner of La Curva and he is front-and-center behind the bar whenever we've visited. He's owned the bar for eight years, though he claims that the place itself has been a fixture in Panzano for over a century. It opens ridiculously early – 5:15 a.m. – which is notable in a town of just over 1,000 people. And make no mistake, this is not a tourism concession – La Curva is truly a spot for locals, and the bar opens at the early hour to serve residents who then travel to Florence for work.

While there are two other bars in Panzano serving coffee, La Curva is the truer coffee bar. Gianluca underwent intensive training at [illy](#) coffee headquarters in Trieste to master the art of pouring the perfect espresso. For three years, he took specialized barista and coffee bar management courses, eventually earning the diploma *Artista e Manager del Caffè* that hangs proudly on the wall behind his massive, commercial espresso machine.

How many U.S. coffeehouses, independent or chain, place such an emphasis on learning the true art of coffee preparation? The culture here mandates that a man should excel at his passion.

A man named Bil Bil works the morning shift with Gianluca and usually prepares my order, which has evolved from a single shot of espresso to a far more aggressive cappuccino and double espresso. Bil Bil took an immediate liking to Max, as he has a 7-month old baby at home. It has become our common conversational link and we both acknowledge successfully navigating the first year of fatherhood depends on regular doses of caffeine.

After ordering my coffee, Max and I usually settle at a back table in the tiny bar, allowing customers to enter and exit freely without the hindrance of a stroller (besides, Max likes catching glimpses of the Italian music videos that play from the overhead television.) Inevitably, the customer flow detours over to Max, with locals of all ages lightly rubbing his feet or stroking his cheek, smiling and saying, "Ciao, Max!" while he chews his blanket and smiles warmly in return.

The experience is one I look forward to each morning, it's a friendliness that cuts across cultural barriers and has made us feel truly welcome. And we owe it all to Max.

Traveling with Max is like going clubbing with a supermodel. We are allowed to skip the lines, so to speak, and jump right into informal interactions with locals. Yesterday, we stopped at a shady park in Rada for a rest (temperatures again reached the 90s) and a group of local children immediately approached to inquire about Max. With a 12-year-old girl Italian-American girl serving as an expert translator, we played with these local kids for a half-an-hour, teaching them how to pronounce Chicago. (Chee-KAH-go was nearly perfect, we told them.)

Each of the kids in turn held up one of Max's hands to measure their own against it.