

Humor Me

By Ronald P. Culberson

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“The Week I Became a Doppio Addict”

It was 7:00 a.m. in the Amsterdam airport (1:00 a.m. stateside) and I needed a pick-me-up to keep me awake until we got to Rome later that day. Officially, (meaning what I tell my nutritionist) I drink decaf. However, when I feel myself dragging or need a burst of creative energy – which is approximately every 17 minutes – I sneak a regular coffee.

I approached the airport coffee counter and ordered a “café” so as not to give away my Americanism. I gave the barista a five euro bill. He gave me three euro coins back. I had not yet figured out the numeric equivalent of “two bits, four bits, six bits a dollar” and I must admit that after the whole Susan B. Anthony debacle, I’m still not comfortable with these kinds of coins.

After pocketing the coins, I watched the barista approach the Airbus A380 coffee machine to make my drink. This bad boy would kick Mr. Coffee’s carafe. This was hard core, steam driven, testosterone level caffeine and the barista worked like Michelangelo shuffling cups, turning knobs and pushing buttons. Then, with the grace of a ballerina, he turned and handed me a cup the size of my daughter’s American Doll tea set containing a small dose of concentrated black oil.

I wasn’t sure whether to sip it or throw it back like a shot of tequila. Since I had two hours to kill, I took a sip. I felt the layer of enamel melt off my teeth. The burn down my throat forced me to yell “Ricola!” (I WAS in Amsterdam). I took a second sip which, by the way, was also the good-to-the-last drop and felt a surge of caffeine course through my veins.

I had just survived my first European espresso...and I wanted another hit.

“Again”, I said and this time I threw it back like an old pro.

We got to Rome about 10:00 a.m. (4:00 a.m. our time) and I needed another jolt while we waited for our train. I slid up to the coffee counter and glanced at the menu. That’s when it hit me. We were in the land of cappuccino and espresso, grandé and venti, DeNiro and Pacino. Starbucks hadn’t invented the macchiato; they stole it from the Italians. And now I got to try the real deal.

I ordered another café. The barista said, “Americano?”

I was impressed that he knew I was American from a simple “café” and said, “Why yes, thank you.”

He handed me a regular size cup two-thirds full of what looked like American coffee. While it had a similar taste to the espresso in Amsterdam, it had been watered down. I later learned that this café Americano was the Italian version of American coffee – espresso with water in it so the girly Americans can have their “full” cup of Joe. It tasted good but lacked the high-octane rush of the espresso. So I ordered another non-American.

I didn’t know it then but I had stumbled into the jittery caffeine jungle and there was no turning back. I could even hear the drums beating. No wait, that was my heartbeat.

The biggest problem for me was ordering the right drink. Most Italians simply order “café” (one shot of espresso). I needed a “café doppio” (two shots of espresso). Misunderstanding my order, the baristas always gave me a café Americano apparently because I was speaking Americano. Finally, by the end of the week, I discovered that if I ordered an “espresso doppio,” they knew what I wanted. So order I did – for breakfast, lunch, mid afternoon and dinner. I even snuck one from the hotel bar after my family went to bed.

Upon returning to the U.S. and after being awake for 45 straight hours, I tried to recreate my caffeine adventure in Italy. Regular Starbucks’ coffee tasted like diluted water. A café Americano was better – at least it tasted like diluted coffee. But if I was to grow hair on my chest like the Italian women I admired, I’d have to find a stronger coffee – and one that lasted longer than a simple shot of American espresso.

It took several attempts, typically after my family went to bed, but I eventually discovered that a small cup of coffee with two shots of espresso most closely resembles the taste of the hardcore cafés of Italy. I once again savored the burn, the rush and the jitter.

My name is Ron Culberson and I *am* a doppio addict.

Until next time, just humor me.

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Ron Culberson, MSW, CSP, CPAE is a speaker, humorist, and author of four books including Do it Well. Make it Fun. The Key to Success in Life, Death, and Almost Everything in Between. His mission is to change the workplace culture so that organizations are more productive and staff are more content. He shows people how to have more FUN while preserving the integrity of the work they do and the lives they lead. For more information, visit www.RonCulberson.com.