

Hipster Baristas and Chinese Espresso

Published 18 May 2026, with Wendy Pojmann and Grazia Ting Deng.

Together, Wendy Pojmann from Siena College and Grazia Ting Deng at Brandeis University demonstrate that there's nothing static about tradition, not even the tradition of espresso, starting with Wendy Pojmann and the inspiration for her essay on Barista Cool.

Wendy Pojmann: The idea of the hipster barista for me came from when I saw a Barista Ken doll. So Mattel made a barista Ken who is male, has his hair styled in a kind of man bun. He has a denim apron on, kind of wide leg pants, and the white sneakers. And he was sort of the epitome of this idea of barista cool. So I became curious about why Mattel did that, or how ubiquitous this kind of barista cool culture was.

Jeremy: But Ken, Ken doesn't have a beard and he doesn't have tattoos, which to me are the mark of a cool barista.

Wendy: It might be a little too much for Mattel. I don't think they have any tattooed Barbies or any kind of body art. So they could make some sleeves, tattoo sleeves to put on Barista Ken. But yeah, that is a little bit, you know, not necessarily the typical barista that you would see.

Jeremy: Mattel must have ... I mean, Mattel probably have their fingers on the pulse in all sorts of places, but can you pinpoint the origin of cool baristas?

Wendy: Well, I think there's a mix of influences on what becomes the cool barista. So I think in a way, the idea of a professional barista is very Italian, and Italian baristi would also dress in an appropriate way, more professional looking, very clean and put together. But when Starbucks founder Howard Schultz came to Italy and saw this professional barista culture, and he wanted to do something similar to what he was developing in Seattle. So when the first Starbucks opened in Seattle, it was actually very, very casual, kind of, you know, shorts and flip flops, kind of casual. And Schultz said, no, I think we

want to make this a little different. So then they started to introduce the green aprons and require a dress code of the barista, which was actually fairly rigid. Then in the meantime, we have the development of specialty coffee shops, and they kind of converge both of these aesthetics, let's say. So you have the idea of professionalised barista, plus a little bit of personal style that emerges as well. And I think that depending on what part of the world you're in, it looks a little bit different.

Jeremy: Depending on what part of the world you're in; are there sort of hotbeds of barista cool, would you say?

Wendy: Yes, I would say definitely. You know, it all sort of started in Seattle, Portland, the Pacific Northwest in the US. You'll see some cities in France. And then Tokyo would be another place where you see the the barista cool idea. Even in South Korea, there's this kind of aesthetic, which is not only how they're dressed, but also the way they're preparing the coffee. And the coffee is also styled not just the people.

Jeremy: And then in Italy, which sort of exported the idea of the professionally dressed barista, if you like, to Starbucks, does that, then relax. Does it then adopt? Because most bars in Italy you get, you get the machine coffee, but you don't get the specialty coffees. You don't get the pour overs. So how does it come back to Italy?

Wendy: Well, I think it comes back to Italy through probably the millennial generation, honestly. And so this younger group of people who are interested in everything artisanal. So whether it be beer or coffee, they're looking for authenticity, for quality. They want to know what where their food or drink is coming from. So I think it's really that generation that starts to change the culture in Italy as well. And so now there are many specialty coffee shops in Italy and they do do pour over. They do, you know, mocha coffee, they do American filter coffee. So it's not necessarily all espresso based, but when it is espresso based, again, there's a particular origin. They know where it came from, they're into the *mono-origine* types of coffees and prepared in a certain way. So they're not necessarily using coffee of the big manufacturers.

Jeremy: One of the things that's interesting in Italy is that the traditional bars, the more traditional bars, are usually tied to one

coffee manufacturer, roaster. Do you think that's holding back the development of specialty coffees here?

Wendy: Well, I think the majority of Italians are used to their neighbourhood bar. And the owners do, in fact, sign contracts with the *torrefazione*, the roasteries. And with those contracts, they promise exclusivity. And they also then receive all the *tazze*, the *tazzine*, all of the, you know, the mugs and cups and all of the serving things that go with that brand. So the branding is very clear.

I do see in some of the specialty coffee shops in Rome in particular, that they maybe include multiple roasters. Actually, the other day I was walking on the Via Quattro Fontane and I stopped into a specialty coffee shop there, and they were actually featuring a coffee by an Irish roaster, which I thought was pretty interesting.

Jeremy: Yeah. And this idea of the barista knowing about the coffees, that's also something, I think, slightly different from the average coffee bar.

Wendy: Yes. And, you know, although perhaps again, there was a professionalisation of being a barista in the 70s and 80s, but then perhaps it declined and was seen as maybe a lesser type of job. But I do think that it's come back and that people are more interested in knowing about what they're drinking.

Jeremy: And as far as the traditional Italian coffee bar is concerned, I mean, you can occasionally get a really bad coffee. Do you think the average espresso drinker in Italy, do you think they actually care about the quality of the coffee?

Wendy: I think they do actually. I was in a restaurant the other day near Sao Paulo, and the waiter brought an espresso to the table and I could see that it didn't look good. You know, it had like ... First of all, it was kind of spilled out of the cup. And then the woman actually sent it back and she said that there were grounds in the coffee. I do think Italians care. And I do send it back if I see that it wasn't prepared correctly or carefully.

And you know, some of the bars, some of it depends on how many coffees they're making a day, because the more a bar works, the better the coffee usually is because the machines need time. The machines work well when they're being used constantly. So if they're

sitting around cooling off and have to get heated up again, that can also affect the extraction of the espresso. And so normally I try to avoid bars that don't look like a lot of people go there, at least not for coffee. And I do think Italians care about the presentation and the, taste, and some of the bars especially that maybe are a little like overworked and don't have enough staff to keep up on things. And sometimes the machines are dirty and that can also give you a stomach ache. So all of that factors in.

Jeremy: One of the interesting things in your original paper about barista cool is the preponderance of cool men. There aren't a lot of cool women baristas. In fact, there aren't a lot of women baristas. Why do you think that is?

Wendy: I think at the beginning, because it is a physical job. Being able to lift heavy bags of beans, dealing with all of the dishes and plates. So I think it was considered a physically demanding job. Being on your feet all day again, even the movement of the portafilter, you know, off and on the machine, it's a very physical job. So I think it became more associated with masculinity. I think there's also the idea of the hours, you know, having to be at the espresso bar very early in the morning and maybe, you know, women unaccompanied on the street. There was sort of ... you know, not a proper job for a young lady. And I think, though, in the barista cool aspect, I still to this day with the specialty coffee shops tend to see more men behind the espresso machine and more women maybe taking the orders at the cash register and in social media. Yes, there can be sort of attractive male baristas showing their muscles and cool tattoos and slinging their latte art, showing off their work. And with women then, there often will tend to be more of like a sexiness to it more than a coolness.

Jeremy: Nothing changes. Looking to the future, it seems that in so many areas the artisanal which people are looking for, and the interesting, and the neighbourhood, is giving way to the industrial and the standardised and the reliable brand. Do you see the same thing even with specialty coffee? Or is it always going to be a kind of niche that it'll be in balance with.

Wendy: In some places. I think I've almost seen too many specialty coffee shops popping up. Actually, even, I was on a trip recently to the Midwest in the United States to visit my family, and there were four

or five little specialty coffee shops in suburban Kansas City. And that was a little unexpected for me. And I wondered if the population there can support all of that, or if people will just do the easy thing and run to the Starbucks that's nearby.

Jeremy: I get the impression that there is a kind of a backlash to the price of coffee in specialty coffee shops, and in that regard, the neighbourhood bar is an astonishing bargain. I can remember when I used to come to Italy on holiday and people in England would say, oh my God, you can't possibly afford a coffee there. And now a coffee here is like a third of the price of a coffee in England.

Wendy: My favourite, or my historic, coffee bar that I started going to when I was an undergraduate student here in Rome is the bar San Callisto in Trastevere, which is a classic Roman bar. They recently renovated. Luckily, they didn't completely transform it. They maintained the original style. But, so I went to get my first espresso there after the grand reopening, and it was only 90 cents for an espresso. I was like, whoa, and only 90 cents, so they've kind of kept their sort of proletarian ethic, I guess. And yeah, in upstate New York, I went to a coffee bar a few weeks ago, and they were asking \$6 for a cappuccino, \$4.50 for a *cortado*, which is half espresso and half milk. And that's a lot of money. It actually makes me tend to just stay home and make my own coffee. I have a nice Italian machine, and I do use mostly Italian roasts myself at home — Kimbo, Trombetta, Illy — so I get to have that little bit of my own authentic Italian espresso feeling at home. And, you know, it costs me maybe 55 cents a coffee versus \$4.50. So yeah.

Jeremy: Yeah. Of course, you don't get to look at the hip cool baristas.

Wendy: This is true.

Jeremy: Wendy Pojmann becoming her own barista. And on now to Grazia Ting Deng and Chinese Espresso.

The neighbourhood bar in Italy has always been a way for migrant workers to get a step up in the cities, to earn a bit more and become a bit more independent. And as Wendy Pojmann explained, if you can save up enough to buy a bar, the coffee company will supply the beans, the cups, the espresso machine and the training to use it.

Grazia Deng told me that the Chinese are no different from other migrant workers. As Italian bar owners retire and sell up because their children aren't interested, Chinese immigrants are following the same path and buying those bars. But how did she come to do the research that ended up as Chinese Espresso?

Grazia: The first time I went to Italy was in mid 2000. I was an exchange student in the University of Trento. I majored in Italian studies, so I was there learning Italian, writing my thesis dissertation. Okay, so at that point, I didn't see any bars run by Chinese, but I was aware that the bars are very essential in everyday life. You know, everyone goes there, even including me, without a coffee culture. But I would not say that it was a place that most of the Chinese in Italy would go at that point or regularly go. And then, you know, years after, when I was doing my PhD, I was deciding what project to do. I wanted to do something that can bridge China and Italy. And then just by chance, I heard from my advisor, actually, Oh, I have a friend in Italy, Italian friend, so a bar in her community, in her neighbourhood, is now run by Chinese.

I was like, no way. There's no way. You know, this is different from what I experienced, you know, my lived experiences in Italy.

I was in Hong Kong at that point. So I asked a friend in Bologna, so do me a favour. Just, you know, walk from your home to the university, see if you can find any, you know, bars run by Chinese. And my friend was very nice. He walked around in the city center, *centro storico*, and then he told me he found more than 20. I was like, okay, that's the thing. This is my project.

Jeremy: So you came to Bologna. You already spoke fluent Italian, you were going to do a kind of anthropology of Chinese owned bars, but not just observational. You actually went and worked in a Chinese owned bar.

Grazia: I always wanted to have that barista experience myself, but it was not possible. In the beginning. I didn't know any Chinese baristas, so I just walked around and, you know, said hello to see, to observe if they are nice to me. So some are nice, some are not. But in the end, I was able to, you know, have some barista friends, but I could only start my barista experience like at least six months after, because before that, I broke my arm. So I had the cast there. So I just walked around, you know, talked to people in the bar, with the cast. Then,

once the cast was removed, I talked to my barista friend. So actually, I was also interested in learning this. And this guy, this Chinese guy, was very nice. And he told me that he actually trained several Chinese baristas in his bar. And then it's fine that I could just, you know, do it like others.

Jeremy: So what do you think, as a working barista, Chinese barista, in a Chinese bar, what kind of insights did that give you into the experience?

Grazia: So, the first thing I noticed was that when I crossed that little old gate, right, I started working as a barista, people became, like, more friendly with me. So it was because usually you go to those, like, neighbourhood bars, *barre di quartiere* no, mostly the clients were men, right? Often, you know, men with more advanced age. Often it was awkward for both me and them to initiate the conversation, right? So when I became a barista, that was different. So they felt confident and natural to talk to me. That was the first ...

Jeremy: Because that's the kind of defined relationship. You're not just a Chinese?

Grazia: Yeah. I became a Chinese with a proper role in the bar, not before. Right? Before I was an observer. So that was the first change.

The second thing is that I actually could understand that it was not that difficult to be a barista, at least in the bar, in the neighbourhood bar, because I didn't really need to learn many skills, you know. With some training, I could be quite proficient with, quite skilled with, the coffee machine, with espresso machine. And then with some training, I could make a cappuccino, make the good ... Even like the latte art design, right?

Jeremy: So more generally talking about the Chinese coffee bars, my impression is that there's a lot of, kind of casual racism in Italy and this business being visibly different. Does that make the racism more complicated?

Grazia: Oh, definitely. It's complicated because on the one hand, they are anti-immigrants. They are racist against Chinese baristas, you know, Chinese in general. On the other hand, they couldn't avoid the bars run by Chinese, because that's a big, that has become the essential part of their everyday life. So that's complicated. This is one

thing. Second, so in a bar run by Chinese the interactions are actually, you know, complicated by the racial understandings, right? There are positive sides. I wouldn't, you know, it's all negative. There are some positive sides, but there are definitely a lot of negative sides.

Jeremy: Was there ever a suggestion that as a Chinese person you couldn't possibly make a good coffee?

Grazia: Oh yeah. Exactly.

Jeremy: Even though it's the machine. I mean ...

Grazia: You know, Italian identity, *Italianità*, is related to material culture. Let's say fashion, food, right, sport. These things. And coffee is one of them, espresso. So the idea is that Italian coffee is good. And then to make a good Italian espresso you need to use the Italian coffee and the Italian baristas, they have their connections. So in the beginning, the first reaction was always like, oh, Chinese can't make good coffee. But things are changing because with more and more bars run by Chinese, they can't avoid and they have more experience. And then at least some people would say that, oh, you know, they are good. Yeah.

Jeremy: If it's your local coffee bar, either in a small town or on the periphery, you have no choice. If you want your coffee, you have to get it. So presumably the customers, regular customers will at least come to see it as fine.

Grazia: Yeah. So maybe in the beginning they had the choice. They go, they go to a bar where they have to walk two blocks to arrive, right? But then they also hear from other people saying, Oh, that, you know, the Chinese lady is very *simpatica*, so they will probably go to try and then after trying, Oh, actually nice, huh? So they would even go back. You know, that happens a lot.

Jeremy: So the reason not just Chinese, but immigrant workers get a bar is to get a better life, to make their family more economically secure. A lot of the immigrants came from China in the early 2000 to do exactly that. Looking back on it from now, Italy has been more or less the same economically. China has gone way ahead. Did you come across any Chinese coffee bar owners who said maybe it wasn't such a great idea to come to Italy?

Grazia: Yes, some will say that if they stayed in China, you know, never emigrated, their lives would not, was not that bad. Or because they have relatives there, you know, people with similar backgrounds, they were doing great, especially the region where they were from. Most of the Chinese in Italy are from a specific region in China. I would say 80%, 90% of the Chinese in Italy from a specific region. It's called Wenzhou and the surrounding area, it's like 500km south from Shanghai. In that region, people have a strong regional identity associated with migration and small entrepreneurship. Okay. So they are basically everywhere in the world.

And then, right, in the early 80s, so the area, especially rural area, they were not doing very well economically. So many people just left and then went to other countries. But more recently in the last three decades, I would say four decades, the region is doing really great and is economically very wealthy. You know, also thanks to, partly thanks to, the, you know, the overseas connections, right? So people are rich there. And then when these Chinese migrants in Italy looked back and, you know, saw their family members, how they are doing in the region, in China, they are kind of saying like some regret.

Jeremy: And then one of the things that enabled the Chinese to buy these bars, you said, was because the Italian families, their kids didn't want to take over. Is the same happening now with the Chinese owned bars that the children don't want to run a coffee bar?

Grazia: If they have a choice? So we think about that. The first generation Chinese migrants went to Italy in the late 90s or early 2000s, or even after, when they were in their late 20s or early 30s. Right? So their kids were still young, and then they left their children in China, or after several years, they brought their children to Italy. Maybe they had the second children or third children in Italy. So now, 20 years after, kids are in their 20s or 30s. Those who were born in China and went to school in China, they are not like just the second generation who were born in Italy and raised in Italy. They are one and a half generation migrants. So they probably, many of them, were not able to go to college in Italy. I knew some who went to college for economics, psychology, law, all those kind of professional degrees. And then some of them went back to family-run small businesses because they couldn't see the future. Partly because of the, you know, the general economic situation in Italy and, you know, the underpaid and no promotion. But then partly also because of the ceilings in the

job market. Right? So in the office, they had to deal with casual racism, then probably, possibly, they were the first Chinese working in that company. And then, you know, so why do they need to face that?

Jeremy: So what's the future? I mean, can you imagine, can you push yourself ten, 15 years into the future? How does the coffee bar culture look in Italy?

Grazia: Well, so I talked to a sociologist, Italian sociologist, ten years ago. And then he, his opinion was that in 20 years, this kind of traditional bar, *bar di quartiere*, would disappear. Like, not completely, but kind of, a way of life. So I would agree that, so in 20 years or in the future, if we think about if there are Chinese still behind the coffee bars, I would say yes. Because, as I say, the Chinese, within the Chinese communities, you know, they are also more and more diversified. Some went to college, some become professionals. And those who were not able to leave and had to stay in the family business, maybe they have the chance to buy a better bar rather than, you know, stay in the, you know, peripheral bar. But I will say we can see more diversities in terms of types of bar.

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