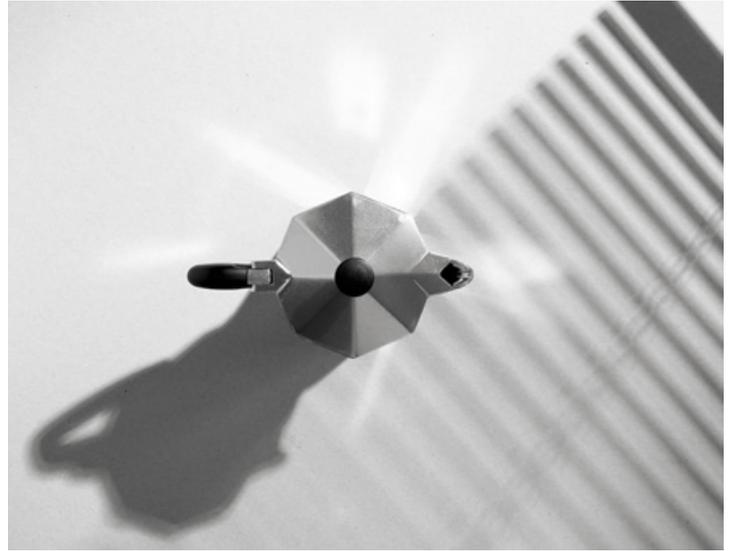


Moka Express

In a world filled to the brim with complex coffee-making machinery, the classic Moka Express remains a much-loved staple.



ICONIC ALESSI

by Molly Mandell

Alberto Alessi has produced a number of coffeemakers that function much like those developed by Alfonso Bialetti, his grandfather. “I decided to create the first Alessi Moka coffeemaker, the 9090, as a tribute to him and an attempt to improve on his creation,” Alessi says. “It has been in production since 1979, has been a Compasso d’Oro winner and is part of the permanent design collection at the MoMA.” This coffeemaker (top), designed by Richard Sapper, was followed by La Conica (middle), a collaboration with Aldo Rossi recognizable for its whimsical cone-shaped lid. Most recently, Alessi released Pulcina, a design by Michele De Lucchi (bottom). Alessi’s stovetop espresso makers, much like Bialetti’s original Moka Express, are a handsome marriage of contemporary design and functionality.

The Moka Express is ubiquitous in Italy, anchored to the stovetop of nine out of 10 Italian kitchens. The rest of the world is no stranger to this humble espresso maker either—over 270 million Moka pots have been sold internationally, and it features in the permanent collections of both New York’s Museum of Modern Art and London’s Design Museum.

Its inventor, Alfonso Bialetti, was born in 1888 in the sleepy lakeside town of Omegna, Italy. As rumor has it, he began developing the Moka Express in 1931 following a failed attempt at building a motorcycle. Bialetti was not a designer but a metallurgist, an entrepreneur and, according to Harvard professor and cultural historian Jeffrey Schnapp, “a tinkerer.”

Perhaps for this reason, the design—despite its unmistakable octagonal form—is not exactly original. “There was a coffee service by Puiforcat and several others by Hénin that were reproduced in *Casabella*, an Italian architecture and design magazine,” says Schnapp. “The designs look similar to that of the Moka Express. My suspicion is that Bialetti borrowed from these.”

Even so, the functionality of Bialetti’s coffeemaker makes up for whatever it lacks in appearance. Inspired by local laundry techniques and experiments derived from the first generation of

larger, industrial coffee machines, the Moka pot functions thanks to a pressure chamber that pushes water through coffee grinds into a smaller container.

“The Moka Express doesn’t break. It doesn’t blow up or crack, which was a deficiency of many imitators,” Schnapp explains. “Bialetti perfected the Moka Express a long time ago and made it so bulletproof that it developed a very devoted following.”

Bialetti’s invention had enormous impact, moving coffee consumption away from bars and cafés and into the home. The Moka pot’s iconicity, however, cannot be ascribed to its architect alone. Its sustained success can be attributed in part to his son, Renato. Renato viewed his father’s sales methods, confined to local fairs and markets, as amateur. He turned to radio and television commercials, the most famous of which included *omino con i baffi*, or “the little man with a mustache.” This cartoon figure would become the company’s logo and make the Moka Express internationally recognizable. The Moka Express remains almost unchanged after over 80 years despite fierce competition from the AeroPress, the Hario V60, even the Nespresso. Bialetti’s coffeepot will endure as a benchmark of home brewing for coffee aficionados across the globe.