



# Caffè SOSPESO

For more than 150 years, iconic Naples café Gran Caffè Gambrinus, has served poets, popes and presidents, but few realise it also welcomes the city's poorest who have no money to pay for a coffee themselves.

Words by Josephine McKenna and photos by Susan Wright

**WEARING CREAM-COLOURED** waistcoats and black bow ties, the baristas at Gambrinus move seamlessly behind the marble counter delivering patrons their morning espresso or cappuccino with a swirl of chocolate. Overlooking Piazza del Plebiscito, Gambrinus is arguably the most elegant café in the city and offers a stunning view of the Royal Palace, home to the Bourbon kings who ruled the city until 1860. Adorned with stuccoes and statues, the café's classic ambience attracts visitors from across Italy and around the world.

Gambrinus also promotes 'caffè sospeso' – which means suspended or pending coffee – where clients are invited to buy an extra coffee and leave a receipt for a customer in need.

"It is a beautiful thing they do here," says Stefano Galdi, a 37-year-old native, after he purchased an espresso for himself and an extra one as well.

"Coffee is an important Italian symbol and this is a gift for those in need. It gives me a lot of pleasure to do this."

At Gambrinus the walls are lined with mirrors and chandeliers hang from the decorated ceiling. Display cases are filled with tempting delicacies including the *sfogliatella*, the popular ricotta-filled pastry that looks like layers of thin leaves.

Back at the bar a well-dressed elderly gentleman, Claudio Calvino, has just

paid for two coffees and dropped a receipt for a second 'caffè sospeso' in an oversized coffee pot which sits beside the cash register.

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The pot is covered with a simple invitation – written in several languages including Japanese, French and English – asking visitors to "warm somebody's heart" with a free coffee.

Locals give generously. Aurelio De Laurentiis, chairman of Napoli Football Club, reportedly buys 20 'sospeso' whenever he drops in and today's customers have already dropped more than a dozen receipts into the bottom of the pot.

"Caffè sospeso shows Neapolitans have a heart," Claudio tells. "When you drink a coffee you leave one for others, it is so Neapolitan. It creates a bridge between two people."

Simona Amalfitano, a 44-year-old tour guide, agrees. "It is beautiful. It is a very Neapolitan thing and demonstrates the warmth of the people here."

As a military band strikes up in the autumn sunshine outside, a new wave of customers arrive at the bar but so far no one has retrieved a receipt for a complimentary coffee.

But Gennaro Ponziani, the manager at Gambrinus, says the need is greater than ever as many of the city's homeless have mental health issues, as well as nowhere to live.

"The homeless of today are not like those in the past. These days they are crazy," he says. "They are poor people





Manager at Caffè Gambrinus, Gennaro Ponziani, says the need for *caffè sospeso* is greater than ever.

who are no longer lucid. They need even more tenderness.”

Gennaro has been at Gambrinus for over 20 years and served coffee to five Italian presidents, current Italian prime minister Matteo Renzi and Pope Francis. “The pope asked for a long black and I

said ‘Your Holiness you have to drink a real coffee here at Gambrinus.’ So he did and we still have his cup to prove it!”

The ‘sospeso’ is a Neapolitan tradition that evolved after World War II, but in recent years the gesture has spread right throughout Italy as many families have been hard hit by the country’s economic crisis.

Two years ago Irishman John Sweeney, who was enamoured with the concept, started a global ‘suspended coffee’ movement. Fuelled by social media, it now includes cafés in diverse locations such as Sweden, India, Brazil, the United States and Australia.

In Italy, however, coffee is far more than a beverage, it is a way of life.

“National statistics say Italians drink around three or four cups a day but a Neapolitan definitely drinks many more than any other Italian,” says Claudio Percuoco, who heads Caffè Moreno, the Naples firm that provides Gambrinus with its fine blend.

“An espresso in Naples has its own particular characteristics which comes from the roasting of the beans. It is done using traditional artisanal methods in a slow way to ensure the perfect roasting of the beans.”

Gennaro believes coffee is a national obsession and says it’s not surprising

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some of his clients down more than a dozen cups a day.

“The first thing you do in the morning is have a coffee. When you eat, you finish with a coffee, if you smoke a cigarette you have a coffee, and when you are at a meeting you say ‘shall we have a coffee?’ In Italy it’s always top of mind.”

Beyond the charming walls of Gambrinus lie the gritty streets of Naples, where chaos and crime, strikes and traffic jams seem to generate a homegrown solidarity rarely found in other Italian cities.

Across town in the edgy inner city neighborhood of Sanità, a small pizzeria decided to introduce ‘pizza sospesa’ in



At Caffè Gambrinus in Naples, patrons are invited to put their *scontrino*, or receipt, in this container to offer a coffee to someone in need.

2003 to support the poor and newly arrived immigrants to Italy.

Da Concettina ai Tre Santi was started by Concettina Oliva in 1951. Her great-grandson Ciro Oliva now runs it, on a narrow street with a shrine to three saints: Vincenzo, Anna and Alfonso.

The neighbourhood made national headlines in September 2015 when a 17-year-old with a criminal record was gunned down in a nearby piazza and it brought the close-knit community closer together.

As the pizzeria fills with lunchtime patrons, Ciro, an energetic 22-year-old, shouts orders across tables and shares his family’s philosophy while insisting the neighborhood is safe to visit.

Restaurant patrons leave €3 extra here for a ‘pizza sospesa’ and the pizzeria provides around 15 pizzas a week for those who can’t afford them. Tomato, cheese and flour producers also donate their ingredients.

“This is something we do for those in need,” Ciro says. “Two weeks ago we did 300 pizza ‘sospesa’ for migrants who had just arrived.

“They have travelled thousands of kilometres from all over the world, many have lost relatives and can’t even trace their families.

“But we also offer pizza to those in our neighborhood and give them kind words as well as a pizza.”

Giuseppe Sannino has no family and lost his home when it burnt down after

a gas explosion. He now lives on the streets and stops by the pizzeria several times a week.

As he picks up a steaming Margherita fresh from the oven of Da Concettina ai Tre Santi, he says the gesture makes him feel like part of Ciro’s family.

“They have adopted me like a son here,” he says. “They help me financially and emotionally. They are so important to me.”

Ciro and his family feel the same way and the restaurant’s logo of a heart-shaped mozzarella inside a pizza reinforces its own catchphrase, “Our heart beats for Sanità”.

“People in need shouldn’t be a number, we have to do something to feed these people and enrich their hearts,” Ciro says. “We have to take care of these people, we have to contribute and help them on their way.”

And now, the idea seems to be catching on in other ways. Feltrinelli, the national bookstore chain, is inviting customers to buy a ‘libro sospeso’, while a Naples hairdresser is offering clients a ‘coiffeur sospeso’ and wants stores, supermarkets and trattorias across the southern city to do the same.



Pizzeria Da Concettina ai Tre Santi, in the Sanità area of Naples, offers pizza sospesa, or free pizza, to those in need.