

ANYONE FOR COFFEE?

By @east_chem_lad

I spluttered in my bowl of Harpers when I was scrolling through the BBC Radio iPlayer looking for some vintage comedy to set me up for the day. An episode of Hancock's Half Hour being repeated on Radio 4 Extra was listed as "*The Espresso Bar*" when any fule no the official title is "*The Espresso Bar*". How could the BBC have got it wrong? Or did they?

Certainly for me growing up in the 1960s, I remember clearly the signs for espresso over the coffee shops. I had no idea what it was, as my parents never frequented such establishments and my memory is that they were certainly not places to take children. They were the haunt of teenagers on two wheels and people whom my parents called beatniks. Sylvia Syms, Hancock's co-star in *The Punch and Judy Man*, starred in a 1960 film called *Espresso Bongo* about an agent who discovers a teenage singer in a coffee house. The singer was played by Cliff (that'll slow 'im down a bit) Richard. So espresso was in common usage at the time.

Espresso, or espresso to use the current parlance is, as I know now, a shot of coffee that is forced through a filter under pressure. Topped with a small amount of steamed water, it is my drink of choice before the sun sets over the yardarm and if I ever disappear from view my wife knows to find me in one of the more modern coffee shops that adorn the High Street. My wife and I share a love of Italian holidays where we enjoy a coffee as we watch the world go by but a man of my cal-i-bre would no more ask for an espresso in Italy than ask for spaghetti bolognese or a pizza with pineapple on it. So how did we in Britain get to call it espresso in the 1950s and 1960s?

One theory on the internet is that it's a mistranslation. Someone thought *caffè espresso* meant fast coffee but the name refers to the process, not the speed the coffee is made. There is also evidence that the "x" is pronounced if not written in certain parts of Italy and other European countries. Hancock fans know that The Lad was quite fond himself of popping off to sunnier climes across the channel (not always telling the BBC first!) and was presumably well aware as to how to order a coffee. Listening to the episode "*The Espresso Bar*" I think Hancock's pronunciation with an "s" is quite clear.

The title of the episode was not of course decided by Hancock. It was not even decided by Galton and Simpson or anyone at the BBC. Early episodes were not given formal names but the titles we now use were drawn up by Roger Wilmot for his book "*Tony Hancock – Artiste*". Strangely, Wilmot's book was first published in 1978 when espresso would have been the term in general use. Perhaps he deliberately used the term more prevalent 20 years earlier?

So was the BBC right to call the episode *The Espresso bar*? Or should we stick with Wilmot's espresso? To arbitrate, I call on no less than Messrs Galton and Simpson. The script was not given a title but in it Hancock says "We are going to open an espresso bar".

So perhaps the BBC could argue that they are right and Wilmot is wrong. But Wilmot did get there first!