

Bringing A Taste Of Italy To The Coffee-Loving Middle East

Enrico Barbera, CEO of [Café Barbera](#) and founder of the family's new franchise concept, reveals the vision behind the rapid expansion of the brand, and the legacy behind the taste of the Middle East's Italian coffee house.

Finding it easy to stand out among a sea of low-taste, rapid-turnover American-chains, there is a new high-quality concept in coffee spreading across the Middle East. One bringing a 150-year-old taste of Italy to the region's dedicated coffee lovers.

Beginning on the streets of Southern Italy in 1870, the Barbera family's special roasted coffee was created by Domenico Barbera, who was the great-great-grandfather of the company's current CEO. The rich aroma brought customers from miles around, earning him the nickname "the magician". Generations later, and the now-global coffee brand still carries the magician logo in honor of its founder. The blend remains a closely-guarded mystery, with only three people in the company aware of its secrets.

For 150 years, the Barbera family specialized in roasting and trading its coffee across the world. Today it exports to 63 countries globally. Then, in 2004, Enrico Barbera, the fifth-generation leader of the company, introduced a new direction—exploring the creation of a global coffee house community and launching a pilot store in Dubai with the name of Café Barbera—The Italian coffee house.

Over the next five years, Barbera adjusted the business model and educated himself and his team in the craft of franchising, regularly flying to the US to learn from specialist consultants. In 2008, the company began to widely promote its international franchise model. Café Barbera has now opened stores in Italy, the UAE, KSA, Iraq, the Philippines, Oman, Pakistan, Brazil, Mexico, Ukraine, Sudan, Somalia, Jordan, Morocco and the US. This year will see another 20 locations added, including Kuwait, Bahrain and the UK.

To walk into a Café Barbera is to be transported onto a high street in Naples, Venice or Rome. Every small detail has been carefully chosen to channel the Italian ambience. The brand prides itself on being an Italian coffee house, with an emphasis on "house". The focus here is not to grab your coffee, pay and go—this is a place to relax, to socialize and to savor your choice of food and beverage.

Although each menu follows Café Barbera's style of being fresh, true to the brand's heritage and (mostly) healthy, around 15-20% will also be tweaked to take into account local tastes and preferences, with an Italian touch. In the coming months the larger stores will add freshly-made gelato blended and created right in front of your eyes, including the cone. Many stores will also offer vitamin-rich fruit and vegetable juices to satisfy the calorie-conscious .

The signature coffee, however—whether you buy it in a flagship store or from the pop-up truck that will be soon be gracing the streets of London— is made in the same way across world, using a custom-made manual machine that means every cup is hand-made by the expert baristas from scratch. So unique is this creation that Barbera has to order them in batches of 20 at a time—the manufacturer has tried persuading the CEO to move to automated machines. The answer is always no.

All this means that the investor is closely protected. It's not enough to have a good profile to be a Café Barbera franchisee, you need the right smile, the right attitude. In return, for an initial investment of between \$87,000 and \$350,000 depending on the concept store format, many are expecting turnover of up to \$1 million+ per year.

Enrico Barbera is today preparing his son Elio Barbera to take over the business—it will make him the sixth-generation son to take the helm once his father retires. Elio, having completed his degree in International Business Management, is focusing on supporting Café Barbera's international expansion, approaching structured corporations looking to diversify in the F&B industry.

For now, however, Enrico remains very much in the driving seat. As he flies almost non-stop between the Middle East and Italy, speaking to investors, franchise partners and attending grand openings of new stores, he finds time to discuss his journey—over an espresso and a bruschetta of course.

Why did you choose Dubai for your first store? Most good things you don't plan; it comes and you take the opportunity.

In 2003, I was invited by a local investor to visit Dubai. He was interested in importing our coffee. He is still today our distributor here. He proposed that we jointly invest in a coffee shop. After six months we found a location and we opened our first store. It was very exciting, but also tough. We started promoting and selling the Café Barbera Franchise in the Middle East in 2008.

We are very much focused on the Middle East and North Africa. We expect to have at least 200-300 locations in the next three to five years.

How do you ensure that each location maintains the family reputation for quality?

If I cut my vein it comes out coffee not blood because its from generations, it's inside our family history. Because it is the family name, it is important that we satisfy and standardize the quality of the items we serve. The trust and credibility you build is stronger than profit for us. One of the toughest parts of this business is to repeat the same quality and the same experience for our clients.

We started this experience of making it warm, familyoriented. A house is warm and welcoming. People are demanding this because they are bored of standing in a queue to buy a cup of something and then leave. To keep these standards, we need strong training. We have a weekly call between our director of operations and our franchise store managers worldwide where, on the top of standard control procedures, they have to show a video of how they are brewing the coffee—if we don't like how they are brewing we will start to check.

The recruiting process is very important. We have a trial period of three months where we score the manager and in the very beginning, when it's a master franchise store in a new territory, we insist that the manager is someone Italian for three or six months, just while the business starts.

How do you blend your coffee—what makes you so unique?

My father and I used to travel to tropical areas tasting coffee before deciding which coffee to import. We select at the origins and we import directly from the production areas. The coffee you are drinking is made from seven different types of bean.

Once the product arrives, we single roast each type of bean separately at its best. We believe that coffee blends—like when you cook food—should have many different ingredients (coffee origins) It's a very expensive process. Each kind of bean has a different size and different characteristic because when you roast you start a complex process where all the essential oils and aromatic elements come out. Then we do the blend. The blend is a secret recipe—only three people know it and one of them is me.

What is important for us when we export is to be sure that the person who is making the coffee understands what they are working with and appreciates the product. We Italians do everything with passion. Our franchisees must also be passionate about coffee and the customer experience that is so important to us. We are uncovering new investors every day, and I look forward to meeting more.

<https://forbesmiddleeast.com/bringing-a-taste-of-italy-to-the-coffee-loving-middle-east>