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Mar 4 · 3 min read



Nailing the difference between Italian and American women

Every time I visit the US, I am struck by the number of nail parlors open for business in my sons' neighborhood. There are five times more nail salons on one side of one street on one block than in all of Busto Arsizio, the town where I live in Italy. Granted, my sons don't live in a "typical" American community; they live in Hollywood, which is atypical by any measure. Although Busto has a population of about 100,000, the same as Hollywood, it isn't comparable in any other way.

But nearby Milan might be compared to Los Angeles. Milan is much smaller than LA in area and population but both are cutting edge in fashion and style, both set trends for their countries, both are media and entertainment capitals. Yet when I compare the number of nail parlors in these two cities and adjust for population differences, LA still has hundreds (thousands!) more than its Italian counterpart.

I got to thinking why that was so. One of the reasons is obvious: most LA nail salons are staffed by Asian women who work long hours for little money. There isn't such an influx of Asians in Italy . . . although things are beginning to change. Immigrant women here until very recently have tended to come from South America (in Busto, for example,

Ecuadorians predominate), North Africa, or Eastern Europe, and there isn't a nail culture in any of these regions. Instead, in parts of Asia women pay inordinate attention to their nails.

Plus, unlike the flexible work force regulation of the US, employment laws in Italy are set up in to protect legitimate workers from exploitation. (Exploitation is widespread of course, but it isn't technically legal). The upshot is that doing your nails—fingers or toes—in Southern California costs about half of what it costs at an equivalent salon in Northern Italy. Plus the job is better done and lasts longer.

Aside the underlying economic reasons, I figure there has got to be something else. After all, women in Milan care about their appearance just as much—and in some ways more—than women in LA. So I see a lot of symbolism in this disparity between the two cultures. Nails are power, nails are strength. Clawing your way to the top isn't just a saying; it's a *sine qua non* in many industries and successful American women have learned that lesson. Nails may be long and glossy, short and shiny, in clear view or almost out of sight, but they are ready to defend when the need arises.

Italian women haven't accepted this reality, partly because women here aren't focused on their career. Fewer Italian women work outside the home than any other G8 country and when they do, they think more of "job" than "career". With few exceptions (notable, but few) they aren't prepared to fight tooth and nail for their advancement in the workplace. It's a man's world here in Italy, so much so that sometimes it feels like Saudi Arabia, and the macho posturing of so many captains of industry reinforces that mentality. So why should Italian women prepare their nails for battle? The war, they think, is already lost so sharpening their nails is an exercise in futility.

I understand why they feel that way, and sometimes—often!—share their frustration. But whenever I pay a visit to the US, a visit to a local nail parlor is *de rigueur*. My nails may be short and stubby and unimpressive, but when they have been buffed and polished, I know I am returning to Italy with my armor battle-ready. Vacation is over—let the battle begin again.

