

Vandals Burn Controversial Palm Trees in Milan

Kayla Pantano (February 20, 2017)



The freshly planted Starbucks-sponsored palm trees at the Piazza Duomo were set alight following protests with a racist tinge alleging “Africanization” and the recent outcry over the chain's planned arrival in Italy.

Last year, [Starbucks](#) [2] Coffee Company [announced a partnership](#) [3] to open their first store in Italy in early 2017. Since then, the launch has been postponed to 2018. However, the initial backlash recently resurfaced after the global coffee giant carried out on their plans to renovate the garden in Milan’s central [Piazza del Duomo](#) [4].

The project is part of a [contract Starbucks won to restyle the green spaces](#) [5] surrounding the equestrian monument to Victor Emmanuel II for the next three years. The hornbeams and Clerodendrum previously planted in the flowerbeds have been transferred to other parts of the city. To the dismay of many, they were replaced by rows of palm trees and will soon be joined by banana plants.



Starbucks-sponsored palm trees go up in flames

Amid a dispute over the non-native plants at one of the Italy's most celebrated cathedrals, three of the 42 palm trees were set ablaze in an overnight attack early Sunday. Only one of the trees, standing at 15 feet tall, suffered extensive damage to its trunk.

No buzz was raised until the morning when local police reached the scene in response to a photo that circulated on Facebook. Authorities are still checking surveillance camera footage.

Right-wing groups rail against "Africanization"

The palm trees struck a chord in particular with the city government's center-right factions, who condemn the "Africanization" of the historic piazza. In fact, the incident followed a protest on Saturday organized by the anti-immigrant [Northern League](#) [6] party and [CasaPound](#) [7], a radical rightwing movement.

Northern League leader [Matteo Salvini](#) [8], who regularly denounces Italy's acceptance of tens of thousands of migrants entering from the Mediterranean, described the planting of the trees as "madness." He continued, "Now we only need sand and camels for the illegal immigrants to feel at home."

Varying views divide the city

The trees have rallied some approval with supporters saying they add a touch of fin-de-siècle sophistication.

[Antonella Ranaldi](#) [9], a city official, pointed out that there were palm trees in the same square back in the 19th century and reassured that the groves were only temporary. "It's an experiment and it will last a few years," she said.

On the other hand, [Mayor Giuseppe Sala](#) [10] had said that he wasn't "very enthusiastic about the idea." However, he also alluded to the historic precedent in an attempt to reason the logic behind the Superintendent's approval of the plan.

A few in opposition deride them as "kitsch," such as [Paolo Pejrone](#) [11], a well-known garden designer and architect.

"Planting these species in Piazza del Duomo seems like a neo-Gothic folly to me," he wrote in [La Repubblica](#) [12] newspaper. "The bananas are a courageous choice but a bit kitsch," he said, while the palms looked out of place in northern Italy. "I fear they are going to have a tough time there, in the heart of Milan."

It should be noted that while palms are indeed not native to Italy, they are widespread in more temperate areas of the country, including Rome, the Riviera, and Sicily. The trees in Milan are of a cold-resistant variety expected to survive the northern city's chilly winters.

Others simply criticize Starbucks involvement

Many critics are not upset with the palm trees themselves, but rather that Starbucks had sponsored the project in its entirety.

Salvini also said, "I do not like that a multinational comes and decides what to do in one of the most beautiful squares in the world. It is as if McDonald's were to deck out St. Mark's Square and fill it with French fries everywhere, or the Colosseum."

Numerous amounts of oppositionists view the arrival of Starbucks as an invasion. Not only has Italy perfected coffee, the Starbucks approach is very different from Italian café culture. Italians mostly favor making coffee at home and when they do go out for it they drink espresso shots or



cappuccinos standing at the bar. Furthermore, they visit independent cafes over chains and pay inexpensive prices. Not to mention, they consider American coffee bland and inferior and would never dare to consume a Frappuccino made with pumps of sugary syrups and topped with whipped cream.

To add insult to injury, last week the colossal coffeehouse chain revealed their plans to [open 300 outlets across the country](#) [13] when the majority of Italians were already alarmed with the news of just the one.

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- [2] <http://www.starbucks.com>
- [3] <http://news.starbucks.com/news/starbucks-announces-it-will-open-stores-in-Italy-in-2017>
- [4] <http://www.aviewoncities.com/milan/piazzadelduomo.htm>
- [5] <http://www.iitaly.org/magazine/focus/facts-stories/article/starbucks-open-in-milan-renews-garden-in-piazza-duomo>
- [6] http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Lega_Nord
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- [10] http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Giuseppe_Sala
- [11] <http://designfile.architecturaldigest.com/search/architect:Paolo+Pejrone>
- [12] http://milano.repubblica.it/cronaca/2017/02/16/news/palme_piazza_duomo-158435628/
- [13] <http://www.thelocal.it/20170216/starbucks-prepares-to-open-up-to-300-stores-in-italy>