

Smoking Ban Clears the Air, but It Befogs Italians' Mood

By ELISABETTA POVOLEDO

MILAN, Jan. 10 - Smokers and restaurant owners in Italy were fuming in a rather different way on Monday after a tough new law that bans smoking in public places - one of the strictest in Europe - went into effect.

As undercover health inspectors and police officers began patrolling cafes and bars, smokers huddled on sidewalks outside restaurants at lunchtime, while those inside enjoyed what would be for many their first smoke-free meal.

"It's a disaster - my clients all complained," said Concetta Gaggiano, owner of the Nico Bar, a usually bustling cafe in central Milan. "People just ate their sandwiches and left. They didn't even have coffee. You could tell that they couldn't wait to light up a cigarette."

Getting people not to smoke in a country where around a quarter of the population does has been a major headache for the Health Ministry, which pushed the law through more than a year ago, giving restaurants and bars 12 months to create sealed-off smoking areas. The new law bans smoking in indoor spaces, including offices, unless they have a separate smoking area with continuous floor-to-ceiling walls and a ventilation system.

Many bars and cafes in Italy are simply too small to accommodate such a space and still turn a profit.

In the countdown to the midnight deadline on Sunday, only a small percentage of restaurant and bar owners complied with the restrictions, complaining of the high costs of renovations and the difficulties of restoring historical venues regulated by tough building codes.

Ireland, Italy and Norway are the only three countries in the European Union to have total smoking bans in public spaces, while partial bans are imposed in some other union nations. Smokers can still breathe easily in half a dozen union countries, including Britain, Spain and Portugal.

Citing the 80,000 deaths each year that can be traced to smoking-related causes, Health Minister Girolamo Sirchia made the new law a main priority despite the opposition of some members of his the cabinet.

"This law is not a prohibitionist law; we don't prohibit smokers from smoking, we just ask for the protection of nonsmokers," Mr. Sirchia said in an interview. "There are a number of changes in the air."