



Being *a* barista

Here, Coffee Community's MD, Paul Meikle-Janney outlines what skills and attributes are required when it comes to being a successful barista, and Edinburgh University's Dr Eric Laurier tells us what it was like when, during the course of some research work, he was required to work as a novice barista in a busy London café.

PAUL MEIKLE-JANNEY, COFFEE COMMUNITY

A vital role

If a café owner is ever unsure of the importance of a skilled barista then I recommend they do some quick statistics on their business. Firstly, work out what percentage of their turnover comes from the sale of coffee. Secondly, what profit margin they make on it. Putting these together you can often find that much of a café's annual profit is attributable to coffee. Is it wise, then, to have no training or quality program for your coffee, particularly with an ever more competitive market?

At Coffee Community we have been training baristas for nearly seven years now and sadly we still frequently see people who have put their life's savings into opening an espresso bar and only reserve half an hour to train their staff on their main product.

You would not open a hairdresser's and give your stylist only half an hour's training and expect to succeed!

However, after saying this, espresso is not rocket science and training a competent barista is easier than a lot of people would have you believe. So what should you look for in a good barista, and what training should you give them?

The characteristics

Firstly, the best baristas have a quick, logical mind to enable them to hold all those orders in their head and work through them in a logical manner. Secondly, you need the cleanliness and fine palate of a chef. Remember, espresso is 'à la carte' coffee, prepared fresh to order. Thirdly, they need the hospitality skills to deal with the customers. The skills needed after this can all

ABOVE: Paul Meikle-Janney cupping coffees at the Central Liquoring Unit in Ethiopia during a recent visit there.



Paul Meikle-Janney is the managing director of Huddersfield-based Coffee Community (www.coffee-community.co.uk), a barista training company that describes its mission as 'to bring quality coffee within everyone's reach'. The firm can also supply a range of mobile espresso carts and bars, enabling café culture to be sampled in a range of different environments.

be gained through barista training.

Elements that your 'barista to be', will require training in should include the following:

- an understanding of coffee (similar to wine appreciation)
- the importance of freshness of coffee
- understanding how to set a grinder to avoid under or over extraction
- understanding the correct water quantities required
- good foaming and texturing techniques for the milk
- daily cleanliness and maintenance schedules

An awareness of these points can be fostered via training in as little as half a day. Indeed, this is often what your coffee, or machine supplier, can provide, although I would recommend a minimum of one to two days off site training to allow the barista to absorb and practise their new skills. After this they will need to apply these skills on the job. Just like learning to drive, they say you don't really start to learn until you have passed your test.

Progress checks

In the following months after training, and at regular points thereafter, I strongly recommend some form of audit programme. Regularly check the quality of your baristas' drinks to confirm that training has been implemented and standards remain constant.

Such checking can be done with more fun and informality by having in-house competitions to encourage adoption of skills. Some of the best cafés I have visited have an ongoing rivalry between their baristas that fuels the development of their profession.

Such competitions can then go a step further by getting involved in prestigious events such as the UK Barista Championship, for example. This not only provides great PR for your café, but supports the professional status of your baristas and provides a hot house for the fine tuning of their barista skills.

My involvement in national and international competitions over the years has led me to question some of the techniques I used and adopt better ones. More so, heated discussions with passionate baristas around the world have made me understand the science behind why some processes work and others don't (perhaps there is a little bit of rocket science involved after all!).

What to look out for

If you are going to audit the standards produced in your café then there is a host of things you could look at, but specifically with the coffee, three main problems seem to reoccur more than most.

1. Under-extraction. This is where the water

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flows too quickly through the coffee allowing little time to pull the desired flavour out. This is usually caused by one of the grind of the coffee being set too coarse (the most common cause), not enough coffee is put in the filter, or the coffee is not tamped correctly. As a guide, an espresso should take about 25 seconds to produce from pressing the button to the last drop.

2. The correct quantity of water used. An espresso is meant to be a short, powerful drink. It needs to be a maximum of 30 ml (per 7 grammes of coffee). If you doubt this, try producing an espresso with the first 30ml of liquid put into one cup, and then let a further 30ml dispense into a second cup. The second 30ml will taste and smell like an old ashtray, as the flavoursome oils have now been extracted and all that is left is bitter caffeine, tannin and scorched coffee.
3. The correct milk techniques. The ability to foam and texture milk is a skill that every barista will need to master. Simple coaching of good techniques (a little too lengthy to include here), will set your baristas in the right direction and avoid the years of poor advice and old wives' tales that surround this subject.

If you are going to pay a barista trainer to help you in this area, make sure they have a clear system and they understand how this works with the science of how milk foams. You do not want to pay to pick up bad habits!

Good equipment

Finally, when your barista is fully trained, it is essential

that you support them with good equipment, and good beans. Your barista will not be able to perform unless they have the right tools, and this has to start right back with your selection of beans.

You can not make a good espresso unless you start with quality beans. When you are choosing taste them both as an espresso and as a latte or cappuccino, as the milk based drinks are likely to be your biggest sellers.

Do not just choose your beans on price. It may appear that the price of one case of coffee looks enticingly cheaper than another, but work out the price difference of an individual espresso. It may be that the favoured coffee is 7p per shot and the inferior coffee is 6p a shot. When your customer is paying £1.50 for it, is it worth saving 1p and risking them never returning?

Choosing an espresso machine is much like choosing a car – all of them will get you where you want to go, but some will do it with more performance and reliability. Choose one that fits your requirements, whether that be the Porsche, Rolls Royce, or the Reliant Robin of the espresso machine world! But once you have it, make sure that it is regularly cleaned and maintained or the quality of your coffee will soon deteriorate.

Pay attention to the quality of the smaller bits of equipment as well. I have seen baristas struggling, and losing customers, because they have a cheap inappropriate milk jug. A company may well spend £5000 on a new machine and then try to save £5 on a milk jug!

DR ERIC LAURIER, SCHOOL OF GEOSCIENCES, EDINBURGH UNIVERSITY.

In at the deep end

"Where is the decaff?" I ask my fiftieth question of the morning and we are only an hour in. Here I am, a university researcher well versed in serving up literature reviews is trying to become a competent barista in only one week in order to get at least a feel for what this new (to the UK) job involves.

Just learning how to get your beginner's hands on the decaff coffee, the herbal tea, the tongs for moving panini on the toaster and so on, takes repeated searching and reaching for the many things that are used to make customer orders. Your searching and reaching is cumbersome and halting, and sometimes it is done in plainly the wrong place as you search for a tea bag under the counter when it is on a high shelf. The experienced staff keep pointing out where things are to you, but you don't want to overstretch their patience.

This frustrating inability to find the ingredients and equipment is combined with having to 'walk through'

Eric Laurier describes himself as a human geographer with an interest in contemporary culture, everyday life in the city, practical reasoning and, of course, cafés! A senior research fellow at the School of GeoSciences at Edinburgh University he recently undertook some research work (*The Cappuccino Community: cafés and civic life in the contemporary city*, a 30 month study funded by the ESRC looking at what is happening in cafés today, particularly in terms of social interaction), and was required to spend some time learning how to be a barista.