

2. Knowing Your Product

Many methods, one goal

A primer on espresso, brewed coffee and the pursuit of maximum flavor

by Gail Powers



Anyone entering the world of specialty coffee will learn fast that this is an industry of trends. That's no surprise when you consider that at almost every level of the coffee chain—at origin, in roasting facilities and at coffee shops themselves—you'll find creative people who are constantly exploring, experimenting and tinkering with taste. Someone will make a breakthrough and enthusiastically share the findings, and then others in the industry will build on the idea. At present, one trend is dominating: single-cup brewing. Across the country, shops are preparing brewed coffee using methods, such as AeroPress and pour-over, that produce one cup of intensely flavorful coffee at a time. Most cafés will combine this approach with the more traditional pot-brewing method, but some quality-focused pioneers have elected to use single-cup brewing and nothing else.

This single-cup revolution is a great lens through which to look at one topic all café owners need to have a firm grasp on: the difference between coffee and espresso. In some ways, the move toward alternative brewing has brought brewed coffee and espresso closer together. In single-cup brewing, baristas aim to highlight specific flavor notes from the coffees they're working with. That same concept has always been at the heart of the espresso experience. People have long opted for espresso shots because they want just that: an intense shot of flavor in which all the taste intricacies of the coffee bean come flying to the forefront. The idea of offering the same experience to the brewed coffee customer is long overdue.

Though trends are certainly fun to discuss, they mean nothing to a shop owner if that person doesn't have a firm grasp of the concepts being articulated. With that in mind, we'll delve a bit deeper into the specifics of brewed coffee and espresso.

The key word in describing espresso is "more": more aroma, more flavor and more enjoyment for the senses, and there is more care taken in its preparation. Espresso speaks to more of the senses than simply taste, with its visual component—a creamy, frothy delivery—and enhanced aromas. Espresso is generally a blend of several types of coffee beans, carefully ground and packed in a device called a portafilter, which brings the coffee into contact with a shop's espresso machine.



The resulting drink delivers a rich flavor that coats the tongue with a long-lasting aftertaste that is pleasant and smooth.

Espresso machines put ground coffee under a specific pressure to extract the oils more effectively and deliver ultimate flavor. (See "Find Your Dream Machine," p. 52, for more espresso machine information.) Water is forced through the ground coffee using nine bars of pressure to deliver an ounce of espresso within 20 to 30 seconds (a bar is a unit used to measure pressure; one bar is roughly equivalent to the pressure of the atmosphere at sea level). The coarseness of the grind will vary for the

blend or origin being used in order to produce the best flavor for that coffee. Extraction time also fluctuates: Some coffees will taste better with an extraction time of 24 seconds, while others may be better at 28 seconds. The packing pressure—the force used while tamping the coffee in the portafilter—will remain consistent at 35 to 40 pounds regardless of the grind or the extraction time. A well-crafted espresso is characterized by the caramel-colored crema at the top of the shot, which traps the liquid part of the coffee in the cup, containing and saving the wonderful aroma and sweet flavor for the person tasting it to enjoy.

Preparing brewed coffee is an altogether different process. Cafés traditionally brew into thermal servers or airpots, producing

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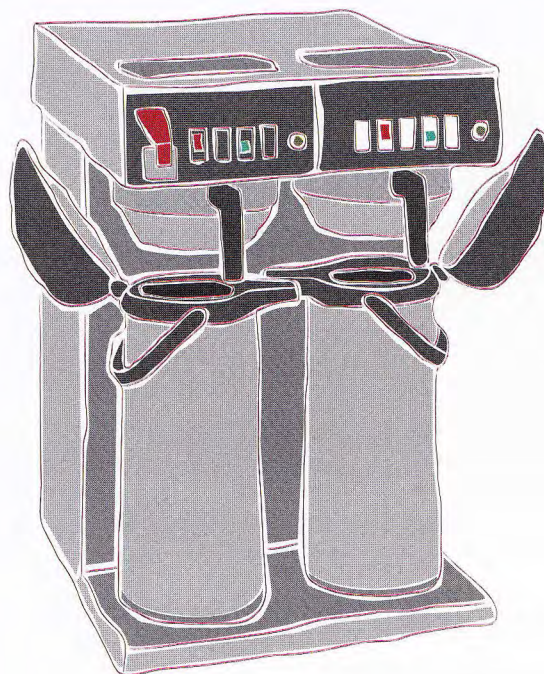
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a half-gallon to 1.5 gallons of coffee at a time. Water is sprayed over a bed of ground coffee, and extraction time falls somewhere between four and six minutes depending on the brew size. The grind, amount of coffee and water used in this method are important factors to the end result. As with espresso, operators should experiment with extraction time and grind to find the best parameters for brewing the different coffees they want to offer. Common mistakes in brewed-coffee preparation include not using enough coffee, using an improper grind—usually too fine—and not using filtered water. (See “The Tools of Tea,” p. 58, for more information about integrating a filtration system into your shop.)



As mentioned earlier, brewed coffee has recently entered a completely new realm. Many cafés have used the French press method for their brewed coffee for a number of years, pressing several quarts at a time and serving it from airpots. But some shops have taken exploration even further, discovering or rediscovering single-cup brewers. In the pour-over setup, for example, a barista will put ground coffee in a filter resting in a ceramic cone and then carefully pour hot water over the grounds and mix the slurry with a spoon. If executed correctly, many of the coffee’s flavor-containing oils will make it into the cup (placed below the point of the cone), producing an outstanding drink. A similar method is the use of a Clever Coffee Dripper. The device is cone-shaped with a round, flat base, and the ground coffee sits inside in a cone-shaped filter. Boiling water is poured over the grounds and stirred, then allowed to steep for three to four minutes. When the base is set on top of the coffee mug, the stopper

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at the bottom releases and the brewed coffee pours into the cup. Other methods to consider include the AeroPress, Hario's drip model and the Chemex brewer.



Just as the best espresso requires a trained and seasoned barista, by-the-cup brewing methods require the person behind the bar to understand the variables that affect flavor, aroma and quality. The amount of coffee, the grind, the amount of water, water temperature and time of extraction must work together and may vary depending on the coffee used. Such variables open a new level of discovery for the person preparing the coffee as well as for the person drinking it.

Another powerful attribute of alternative brewing is the theater such methods can bring to a shop's counter. The coffee is prepared to order, meaning a customer can watch the process take place from grind to pour. The customer becomes a partner in the preparation process—he or she can ask questions as the procedure unfolds, and often the preparation "spectacle" will add to the customer's desire for a sip of that fresh, aromatic coffee.

It's true that single-cup brewing requires both additional time and labor, but owners are finding these methods tend to pique customers' interest and raise their expectations for the coffee experience. It's the same thing that espresso has been doing for decades.

Gail Powers has spent 20 years in the specialty coffee industry with Paramount Coffee Co., a 75-year-old business headquartered in Michigan.

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