

BARISTA ETIQUETTE

Seeking the Commerce-Artistry Equilibrium



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The espresso professional is so many things at once—a host, an artist in a highly technical culinary discipline, a performer on a public stage, a counselor, a listener, a friend, and a purveyor of caffeine. People come in to see us feeling dim and dappled, and they need their coffee. We do our magic and shazam—time to rock and roll. This is the first reality of the barista: seeing and greeting people who very well may not be ready to face the world. How well we respond to these types of challenges depends upon how well we conduct ourselves; the way we interact with our customers is dependent upon our observance of our social mores, that is to say our professional etiquette.

Here I reveal my dinosaur leanings. After 17 years spent in the specialty coffee profession, I remain as I started, highly concerned about being a good, approachable host. I have spent almost two full decades working on one simple question: What is the style that allows a pro to put people at ease as they shuffle along, pre-coffee, in the morning? Certainly a primary factor is compassionate listening. This is a vital skill that directly contributes to a barista's approachability day after day by the widest variety of people.

Many espresso bar owners advocate a high chat style in a barista with lots of intrusive personality and flattering comments, but I call this the personality trap. It may increase sales for a year or so, but ultimately, the chatty barista may move on, taking many of her customers with her. What's more, the chatty barista can serve merely to unnerve a sleepy or shy customer, potentially influencing a decision to avoid that café.

Putting out a lot of chat can also be difficult on baristas, as they may encounter as many as 400 people a day. Force them to indulge in mindless, happy chat with every one of those people in line, and many baristas will simply burn out. To be a long-term pro, a barista must conserve energy and use it where it counts, on speed and quality. Also, if you are intent on making people feel great with flattering chat, you normally attract people that need that. Again, my approach is Old School: I believe that when customers come through the door of my shop, what they want most is a cup of coffee. I believe my customers already *have* a life.

As with just about any social encounter, those between the barista and customer should always begin with eye contact. I would like my baristas to make eye contact with anyone who walks through the door within a few moments after they have crumpled in. Human beings are an aggressive, territorial species, and eye contact signifies, *Welcome to my space*. If a nod to say, *Be right with you* is all you have time for, that's fine, too.

THE ORDER

This business is based on regular customers. And if your specialty coffee concept is gourmet, the customer possesses enough sensitivity to appreciate the difference between your espresso and the blend served at the joint down the block. A sensitive person may not want a lot of personal conversation every day before coffee, so I

teach my staff to try to stay away from leading questions such as *How ya doing today?* for obvious reason; such a question could easily lead to, *Whadda ya mean 'how am I doin' today?'* *I am doin' without my coffee that's bow!* Focus the encounter right away on the customers' needs, using phrases like *What can I get you?* *Coffee time?* or *How can I help you?* Keep it simple and welcoming in order to stay approachable every day.

The next step in the interaction is this: you listen to the customer and get their order right. Repeat the order back to them, emphasize the details they have stressed such as 'not too hot,' or 'vanilla, not too sweet.' The first key to speed on a bar is getting the order right the first time, and the most important step to cultivating a professional relationship is finding a way to make each customer feel unique and welcome. An easy way to endear your customers to you forever is to memorize their drink within two visits so that you can greet them simply with, *The usual today?* People yearn to be acknowledged and listened to in our frenetically-paced urban culture and this is how we honor their choice to come into our shop: we listen. When they need to talk, you'll know it. Of course we'll chat when a customer initiates conversation and when we have the time to do so. We would not be in this business if we did not like people.

THE SERVICE

The successful barista's routine is a dance of fluid efficiency. As a performance art, making espresso is clearly a case of the form following the function. The function, of course, is to prepare the finest espresso drinks in the shortest amount of time. And because espresso preparation is a culinary art, people will consume the coffee, so every action must ooze confidence. This is the quality I most admire in the lifelong professional baristas I've observed in Italy over the years—a rock solid underlying confidence that infuses their motions with an almost feline grace.

Moving with a silky smooth physical style mimics the beauty of the espresso pouring from the portafilter spouts, or the velvet undulations of the steamed milk forming the rosetta patterns atop the cup. Smooth efficiency is also the second key to speed on a bar. Rushing will slow you down with inevitable clumsy mistakes, and it stirs anxiety among the customers watching your performance. At best, the barista's performance and

FOCUS



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the culinary art being created share the same flowing style. Any serious music student will understand the responsibility the barista is charged with; as with their art, the foundation to a confident performance is in the preparation.

First, set the stage. Any smooth performance begins with all the props being where they should be. Arrange your work area according to your working style. For me, milk containers should be opened in advance—I hate wrestling with the little plastic rings, or worse, forcing open reluctant paper cartons in a slam—and arranged for easy access in your refrigerator. Syrup bottles are shiny, not sticky, and arranged in order of usage, with vanilla and almond right up front. The all-important rag hierarchy is established with a portafilter wiping rag, counter-top rags (sanitized), a steamer rag, and floor rags to act as mini-mops for small disasters. Back-up rags are one step away.

Cups—both porcelain and paper—are clean and well stocked. Porcelain cups are, of course, ready and waiting, pre-heated on top of the espresso machine. Back-up stock is one step away. Grinders should be detailed and stocked with fresh coffee, with back-up beans within arms reach. Utensils, coffee brushes, scrubbing pads for the brass brewing surfaces, a small tool kit, bandages, pens, foam spatulas, etc., etc., etc.—everything must be where it should be before the door is opened.

THE BARISTA

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that minimum, some style and flair is nice. I favor dark, tight-fitting knits and a black or dark brown four-way apron around the waist.

No chicken-slaughtering, full-coverage apron for me. I like to look sharp and sassy, vaguely Italian and always urban. For my staff, I allow a wide range of personal style because I need them to be comfortable first and foremost in order to do a top-notch job. But they *must* be clean and tidy looking.

Because espresso preparation is a culinary art, polished professionalism is the best style. This can be reflected in each motion a barista makes—packing, steaming and pouring the rosetta latte—when preparing the espresso. One of my five-year baristas, Kasey, displays his artistry from the moment he picks up the packer. He has a flourish when he addresses the coffee with it. He sweeps it off the counter, and the packing head sort of does a little circular motion on the way to the portafilter, which he repeats after tapping the portafilter. The circular embellishment is not dramatic and large; it is smooth and subtle, having developed naturally over thousands of shots. You have to be watching to notice. It's beautiful. It is his signature as a very experienced culinary artist.

Free pouring *caffè latte* art is the grand finale in this two-minute dance. Even after 17 years of watching these patterns ooze forth from steam pitchers, I still find them mesmerizing, and so do our customers. It is a classic finish. The beauty of the free-poured patterns is that they are a natural extension of the behavior of the two liquids, espresso and steamed milk, combining. The sensuous, flowing form of the rosetta pattern echoes the viscous beauty of the espresso pour itself. The velvet beauty of the rosetta is accomplished with

an effortless flick of the wrist, and is never labored or time consuming. For heavier foam, such as we prepare for cappuccino and espresso macchiato, the heart shape is my favorite to pour. Again, it is the form following the function that is the mark of the professional.

There is another school of latte and cappuccino art that employs a scribe-like tool to draw the foam into beautiful patterns reminiscent of the swirls employed by French pastry chefs. Although these cappuccinos are beautiful, laboring over the customers' coffee with a tool just will not do on an espresso bar. And personally, I would not appreciate a barista bending over my cappuccino and tooling it. On the other hand, these beautiful patterns would work well in a classy restaurant where the waiter simply appears from the kitchen with the artistic cappuccino. (There is a master in Australia, George Sabados, who shares his knowledge of these creations in a video entitled *Coffee Making Skills*.)

COUNSELOR, LISTENER, FRIEND

Over the years I have had a number of strange encounters between my baristas and my customers. I will never forget a strapping young man who worked in construction and bristled with masculine energy and coiled muscles, walking in to complain about rudeness he felt he had been the target of at my sidewalk bar down the street. He had been going there for years and as he began to talk about his encounter, his lower lip began trembling, his face grew red, and he started to cry. In his mind, he had been betrayed by a friend.

I have seen repetitions of this scenario many times since then. There is something about making coffee for someone every day that transcends commerce. Perhaps it is our compassionate listening style as baristas that slips us past people's urban defenses. But people will bond with a good barista. This vulnerability on the part of



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regular customers requires compassion and kindness on the part of the barista.

When a professional barista sees and serves hundreds of people a day, however, they are likely to run into a few of them on occasion who are not worthy of kindness. At my shop, the customer is always right, and if this does not prove to be the case, the customer is gone. I empower my staff to "eighty-six" abusive customers, telling them that in my absence they are the host of this espresso bar. In all of my years, though, this has only led to one or two instances of a customer being asked to seek coffee elsewhere.

My people are professional baristas, and I give them my respect when they don the apron. Trust is the only way to manage people with the sensitivity and intelligence to produce espresso at the high level we strive for at my café. The trust that builds between my baristas and me allows them to relax and fosters the confidence that is the basis of our bar's persona.

THE REWARDS OF ETIQUETTE

Clearly, what we have in the role of the barista is a new profession. To learn the intricacies of espresso preparation requires years of experience, patience and craftsmanship. A professional barista works as a culinary artist and performance artist at the same time. This hard-earned position as talented artist and service professional, born of thousands of hours of steady practice and devotion, begs the question of salary: how can we espresso bar owners ever pay these artisans enough to keep the good ones in the job? There is a limit to the posted price for espresso drinks. Artistic coffee can go as high as 20 percent over the corporate chains, maximum. Even charging that much can be a risky business move. Fortunately, espresso lovers are very appreciative of the high-quality work that we do.

One answer lies in a bar design to encourage tipping. If you have ever seen the crowd in Lance Burton's magic shop in Las Vegas after his act, you will see an amazing sight. Normally sane people trip over themselves to buy five-cent "Coin Vanishing" gimmicks for \$10 each. What this demonstrates to me is that if you amaze and inspire people, their wallets will readily open. The same is true of the espresso performance. So place the cashier adjacent to the final pouring area so that the customer is paying as the drink is flowing into the cup, saying "Oh my god, that's so beautiful, I hate to drink it" and stuffing the tip jar to the hilt.

It is at this intersection of interaction, a crosscurrent that the professional barista must straddle dozens of times a day, where the importance of attitude, efficiency and style in each transaction will always stand at the forefront. How the barista copes with the pressures between commerce and artistry, between the customer as individual and the customers as a mass, and between the quality of the performance and the product, is always a challenge. Rising to meet that challenge depends on training, confidence, ability, and etiquette. **b**