

# caffè latte art in the 21st century

By David Schomer

## the present

For the best of reasons, I am marooned in Orlando in the heat of August. My son, Taylor, is competing in the world Yo-Yo contest, and I am here as his support parent. And, oh my gosh, am I seeing some aerial artistry. Yes, aerial, because today featured off-string competition, and we go into on-string double-A compulsories tomorrow. But I digress, as I often do when surrounded by the stucco blandness of the endless franchise that is Suburban U.S.A. As the soul-less shell of the Convention Center hotel presses in on me, I seek refuge in the creative process.

And, as always, the best refuge is writing. Gazing down at the polyester carpet with a print designed by a team of architects to camouflage stains, my imagination is drawn to the flowing, fragile art works we create with steamed milk and espresso. In the 12 years since I produced my first video *Caffè Latte Art*, the practice seems the most evident proof of a coffeehouse's soul. And in the early 21st century, it is spreading, well, not faster than strip-mall cancers, but with a punky, petri-dish organicism. The people who love the beauty of caffè espresso are quietly multiplying, and they are expressing themselves with unique latte art. I know because I had the pleasure of judging the Millrock Latte Art contest, hosted by Coffee Fest, in Las Vegas, Chicago and Seattle last year.

The artistry and enthusiasm that I witnessed for our undulating liquid art form in each region of the country brought tears to my eyes more than once. I can come away saying that free-poured latte art has become the symbol of the independent coffeehouse all across the country—not to mention in increasing numbers of countries—because for a barista to pour these patterns really takes a lot of focused effort and practice, with the sole aim of creating beauty. Usually, creating beauty is not prominently featured on the quarterly stock report of big business espresso.

OK, enough with the soap box, this is a Schomer article—let's get to the meat and potatoes.

## latte art 401. the patterns

**Wreath and Heart-poured by Brian Jackson, Espresso Vivace 2005**

Originally the wreath was used as a border for whip cream on caffè mochas at Vivace. Brian brought the heart in at the end and made the pattern a complete piece of art in itself. To start, tilt the cup only slightly and aim for the corner of the little half-moon of espresso crema to start the entire liquid spinning inside the cup. Pour the milk reasonably fast from the start. As you're leveling the cup, begin the side-to-side rocking of the steam pitcher while still pouring along the side of the cup, to create petals of milk that flow around the cup edge. As the cup fills and you complete the circle with petals, go into the center and finish with a heart without interrupting the flow of milk. As always the flow rate goes to a pencil point to draw the stem of the heart. To pour this well is very difficult I think.



**Caffè Latte Rosetta-poured by Brian Jackson, Espresso Vivace 2005**

This pattern demonstrates the beauty of flow very clearly. Look at the outer petals of the flower, flowing around the outside of the cup until they almost touch at the top. Brian's steady hand and artistry does the rest.



**Winged Heart-poured by Brian Jackson, Espresso Vivace 2005**

Start with the normal flow and position to produce the rosetta. But as the cup approaches half full, move the pitcher to the rear wall of the cup to begin sending flower petals out by rocking the pitcher; flow rate is high at this point. The flower petals will stack up against the back of the cup from this position. When it is almost full, stop rocking the pitcher and back up quickly with a very low flow rate and quickly pour a heart and follow through with the low flow pencil point of milk to create both the point of the heart and the stem of the



## latte art 402. the technique

I recently updated my original video course, *Caffè Latte Art*. The motivation for this is that I have a new approach to teaching latte art that I wanted to share: the focus at my cafés, Vivace, is all about flow. These patterns are at their most beautiful when they enhance the natural beauty of the velvet milk flowing into the red-brown crema of the espresso. To bring out the natural beauty of flowing chiffon foam, we start with the cup very tilted and the pitcher resting against the side of the cup. Flow at this stage is very slow and strikes rear center of the little half-moon of crema in the cup. Flow is gentle to avoid a white-out where the crema is rolled under the textured milk and color intensity is lost.

Pour slowly at first to assure rich coffee color in the design. As we approach the half-full point in the cup, we begin to level out and increase the flow rate of the milk. The cup is still tilted as much as possible without pouring all over your Ferragamo's, and there is a very good reason. The cup angle allows you to pour across the rising surface pushing the flower petal shapes produced by your rocking wrist to the back of the cup where they break gently and flow up each side to make the wreath that frames the center of the flower you are creating. With a high flow rate, the petals of milk have enough force to ooze back towards you after hitting the back wall of the cup. During this stage, we build up the individual petals with the wrist motion, combined with high flow rate, and let them unfold away from the tip of the steam pitcher.

The flower petals must flow away from the steam pitcher and continue up the sides of the cup towards the artist. As the cup becomes full and almost level, we begin to reduce the distance that we rock the pitcher back and forth evenly, creating smaller and smaller petals on the flower pattern, and we begin to back the pitcher up a bit to build up the narrow top portion of the flower and to prepare for the finish. To complete the design, reduce the flow rate to a tiny stream to create a precise stem and beautiful point at the bottom of the final design without dragging the pattern down the cup. A high flow rate during the finish will stretch the pattern out, distorting its beauty, and leaving a white streak down the middle. The finishing flow needs to be a pencil-point of milk, scribing an invisible stem that makes sense of the whole chaotic, swirling event right before your eyes.

Your milk flow becomes a pencil point to draw the stem. To focus your attention on the flow is to master these patterns more quickly and deeply. Teaching latte art this way assures that the very first thing that a student pours, and everything after that, is beautiful without regard to the precision with which he or she can harness and control that flow, to pour a pattern. In my opinion if you focus on the flow rate, you cannot pour perfectly steamed milk into thick, sensuous crema without the result being beautiful.

## the future

During my decade-long battle for temperature stability in the espresso machine, I learned a great deal about how the espresso machine does or does not do its magic. It seems to me that all the technology exists to make a super-automatic machine that grinds and tamps and brews perfect caffè espresso. It is only a matter of time before this occurs. When the machine can create an espresso that tastes exactly like the fragrance of the blend, the human artistry will be confined to milk texturing and pouring beautiful patterns. These patterns will never be poured by a machine even if one is designed that textures milk perfectly, which I doubt can be accomplished. In an increasingly automated and online cyberworld, beautiful milk artistry will be the primary creation of the barista as a culinary artist. The interaction between the barista and the customer is so upfront and personal. It occurs totally in real time and fragrant space. With a flick of the wrist, a small, fragile coffee flower or heart is created quickly and especially for your customer. **b**



Note: The 400-level indicates you have studied milk texturing and mastered it.