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On The Table #8

Espresso Bar Staff Training: Part II of a Three Part Series - Hiring and Training [\(Part I\)](#)

Dear cyber reader, In hiring a potential espresso specialist, one of the key qualities to look for is a person who displays a certain pickiness with their coffee. The best baristas are very fussy about their craft. They want it just so.

Hiring

To start an interview, I may make a candidate a perfect cappuccino. Do their eyes light up upon tasting it? No lights may mean no barista. Are they excited about food, wine, beer? Any sign that an applicant is connected to their taste-buds is a good sign. Some kind of culinary interest and excitement **MUST** be present.

For work experience I prefer a background in bartending.

At [Vivace](#) we always hire with a team. My trusted managers and business partner must all approve a candidate before we will take them on. Human judgement is fallible. Expand your powers of judgement by using some trusted allies to evaluate job applicants. And, as long as the "snivel rights" * revolution is still going on, you protect yourself from opportunistic law suits by interviewing with a team. Never interview a candidate alone.

* (A note on civil rights litigation: Obviously I have been burned here, and you the business owner must protect yourself from frivolous lawsuits. But a few opportunistic lawsuits is, on the balance, a small price to pay compared to a society where they kick in your door at 2AM with shiny knee-high boots, and you disappear because you think Bill Clinton is a clown. Or because you think American History should be taught from the Western point of view, to hit a little closer to home.)

As a high volume business we have enough work to create an entry level position, a barback. This is a tough job which requires performing tasks such as running errands, stocking, and cleaning ashtrays, for little pay. The person who can handle the barback position shows a strong

sense of priorities and a strong work ethic. If we like their performance as barback, and we see they are excited about the coffee, they are slotted for a barista position.

Hiring has been made much easier since we got big enough to create the barback position. Staff and managers can train the barback is a week while they are on the job. The new-comer has an opportunity to prove themselves before I invest a lot of time in their coffee training.

Training

The training of a barista is an ongoing process and should not be viewed as a one-time event that a new employee undertakes. Any in-depth training takes place within the context of a "company culture." Each organization will form its own way of doing things based on staff perceptions of the priorities of the owners. Thus, the priorities of the owners will either erode training goals or reinforce them.

The formation of a culture of excellence is the big difference between average coffee and superlative results. Next month in this column we will examine how Vivace culture has formed over eight years in Part III of this series.

If you have been following this column you know that I divide up espresso preparation into [factors](#). There are about 17 depending on how you divide them up with four broad categories:

1.
Environmental Factors,
2.
Equipment Factors,
3.
Ingredient Factors, and
4.
Techniques of the Barista.

Anyone attempting to specialize in the making of espresso coffee needs to control each factor in order to approach perfection. Obviously, machine set-up and blend selection are not going to be taught to your new hire. You the owner need to be the Macchinisti, or (espresso) machine specialist. In an initial training we focus on category four, Techniques of the Barista.

After serving as a barback in our organization, an upgrade to barista is accomplished in the following manner.

I personally teach the theory of espresso preparation first. I explain and draw pictures to show how coffee volatility and the properties of pressurized water affect the espresso process. Coffee flavors are volatile and pressurized water will take the path of least resistance, rules for living.

Sit them down and give them context by which they can understand technique. If you take the time to establish this context your technical training will be retained longer by the trainee.

After a 20-minute theory discussion, we go to the machines. I break down shot making for the trainee into the following categories:

1.
Dosing, distribution and packing. We do this until they get it. Grinding a shot, evenly distributing it, then dosing and packing it perfectly over and over until they have it in their minds and in their hands. It may take five minutes or an hour, depending greatly on the physical talents of the trainee. (See Behind the Bar May and June 1995.)
2.
Adjusting the grind for a 25-second pour. I show them how to adjust the grind, holding packing weight and dosage constant, to change the rate of water flow through the packed coffee. (August 1995)
3.
Cleaning techniques are covered next. Scrubbing the porta-filter every 40 minutes, rinsing dirty water from the heads after each shot you make, and backflushing between groups of customers. We also cover cleaning with espresso detergent during this phase of training. (November 1995)
4.
Thermal Control - Temperature Surfing. I teach them to be quick, not allowing the porta-filter to cool off while packing, and manipulating the temperature of the head with 2-ounce pulses of brewing water to achieve a target temperature. (April 1996)

This is the content of my initial training program and can be accomplished with most students within four hours. It is important to note that my best baristas are never my quickest students at first. This probably is just a statistical anomaly, but intriguing just the same. Maybe the ones who respect the coffee are cautious and fumbly at first.

I never teach milk to a new trainee, and all my baristas work in teams.

A new barista works the shot making side of the machine, while the other steams milk and runs the cash register and supervises the newcomer's coffee for a few weeks. When I see that they are getting a feel for the coffee we go into milk, details of the cuisine, etc.. It usually takes about 4 weeks for a barista to be allowed to solo on a bar while their partner takes a break or does dishes.

In my first two years of business before my company culture formed, training was much slower. Now information is reinforced from all sides as the newcomer makes his or her way into the staff. Also, there is a healthy attitude of competition among staff to excel. Next month we will look at how this culture came about.

Ciao for now!

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