



David Schomer
Owner, [Espresso
Vivace](#) and your
host at Schomer's
Table@Lucidcafé



On The Table #23

Commercial Espresso Program Management—The Role of Quality Assurance is Best Handled by a Passionate Owner

Dear cyber reader, In Italian culture the espresso expert is called the "Macchinesti" according to Dr. Ernesto Illy. Literally translated as the machine specialist, this title does address one aspect of keeping the espresso quality on track in a professional operation: tuning and maintaining espresso machines and grinders. But to realize excellence in this cuisine you have got to motivate and train expert baristas to prepare the coffee. For this reason I prefer the title Quality Assurance Manager.

It is a new job description combining the technical skills to tune and maintain the machines, the culinary instincts to choose and handle a top espresso blend, and most critical and difficult skill, hiring and training baristas.

In Italy, due to cultural and economic differences, a barista may have years of experience before having sole responsibility in preparing caffe espresso. Something that caffe espresso requires due to it's complex and highly perishable nature. In the US by contrast, young people are drawn to this profession on the way to something else.

What then are the implications of our robust economy and material culture on the future of this complex cuisine?

The most obvious implication is that first hand espresso knowledge does not usually reside with the barista. There are exceptions. Many of my best baristas (twelve out of twenty to be exact) have been with me for many years, and have acquired the experience to know at a glance if the coffee is right. These skilled people are artists that derive social and spiritual satisfaction from

their profession. They stay with the espresso business because the coffee is beautiful, and the money is good enough. With all their experience they still need help troubleshoot complex espresso problems. The coffee itself offers few clues to what ails it. You need an expert palate.

Given this reality, the ideal form for a gourmet espresso business is a one owner proprietorship. Owners who have mastered coffee. I have twelve years of daily experience in all aspects of espresso preparation, and eight years of experience selecting green beans and roasting my own blends. I continue to learn new things and improve my bar skills everyday. My quip regarding the tricky coffee is "the more I learn the less I know."

The best espresso is produced by people slightly outside the mainstream. Esthetes, artists and eccentrics have a refuge in the coffee espresso business. Individuals who master espresso coffee by worshipping her beauty. An operation must remain small for an owner to accumulate direct espresso experience.

Are you a product driven entity or a marketing driven entity?

Pure profit motives, though not a bad thing in the large economic perspective, do not lead to quality espresso. They lead to large entities with freshness problems due to the need to warehouse "the product," and a serious shortage of barista talent.

Larger businesses quickly face the management problem: finding and holding the talent while they learn enough to produce quality. In my experience...forgetta 'bout it. Starbucks is experimenting with super-automatic machines in their stores to address their talent shortage. (See my article [Espresso for Restaurants](#) regarding super-automatics.)

It is a bit of a Catch 22 to build a larger company based on quality espresso. You need a manager, but only a few locations can generate enough money for an arm chair owner to secure the talent. I estimate the pay required and justified for a QA manager is 40K per year plus tips and benefits.

It is a question of the will to produce excellence and the wisdom to stay small. The pattern often repeated goes like this: A talented owner opens and runs a successful operation based on the highest quality, directly overseeing operations on a daily basis. After a few years he or she opens a second and third outlet. After that they spend all their time hiring and training and running around between stores. Ultimately they burn out. If they have the talent to create a fine espresso program they always succumb to the siren song of multiple outlets. As Kent Holloway and I used to say

years ago in seminars at the Coffee Fest, "To survive you must stay small and focused on quality, or else go public and become a large marketing driven entity." The skills required to grow a large company are usually not found in an esthete seeking beauty. Starbucks is going to eat your lunch if you try to go the big route. But there is always room for excellence.

The closest parallel of course is a gourmet restaurant. As long as the chef is directly involved in shopping for and preparing the best and freshest foods, magic can occur. As soon as the chef gets greedy and tries to trade on the name by opening more restaurants, the food is no longer special.

Note: For details on the actual job we do on a daily basis, choosing and handling a blend, machine selection and care, and hiring and training baristas, please see my archives at www.espressovivace.com for articles on all the above mentioned subjects.

Ciao for now!

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