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HOW TO GRIND,
EXTRACT,
& STEAM
6 basic espresso drinks
LIKE A BARISTA

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Story by AMY ZAVATTO
Photos by JOHN VALLS

KEN NYE RUINED EVERYTHING. Before ordering one seemingly harmless macchiato, my morning ritual had remained perfectly simple: a Mr. Coffee drip coffeemaker; some random pre-ground (gasp!) coffee from who-knows-where and roasted who-knows-when; a little 2-percent milk heated in the microwave; a spoonful of sugar to help the medicine go down. It completely satisfied me at 7:30 a.m. each day of my adult life. Then Nye, who owns Ninth Street Espresso in New York's East Village and Chelsea neighborhoods, made me that macchiato.

Just like wine, beer or cocktails, there's the good stuff, and then there's the great stuff, and when you taste the difference, those degrees are miles apart. Nye makes the great stuff. His macchiato had a gorgeous, velvety body, the pure coffee itself rich with the flavor of dark chocolate, and a perfectly steamed bit of milk added such gentle sweetness that, for the first time in my life, I didn't add any sugar.

So, when I launched a mission to learn how to make six espresso drinks like a pro, naturally I called Nye. That way, I could stand shoulder to shoulder with him (and, as a bonus, his talented and patient head barista, Trey Wrage) to once and for all learn how to properly make my own great espresso—and maybe figure out how to re-create the macchiato that still haunts my dreams.

ESPRESSO SHOT

CUP: 3 oz. demitasse

INGREDIENTS: 21–22 g. espresso-roasted coffee beans

PROCESS:

1 Remove your portafilter (the shallow cup-with-a-handle) from the group (the round piece on your machine where the water comes out). Wipe with a dry, clean rag. Dose into your portafilter (e.g., fill it with ground coffee), forming a little, loose mound with the coffee—around 21 to 22 grams. Above a plate or towel, gently run your finger over the top, evenly flattening the mound of coffee at the portafilter's edge.

2 With your tamper, apply about five pounds of even pressure (a light press), making sure to keep the tamper level. Lift it, give the portafilter a light tap to remove any stray coffee grains and then tamp again, using about 30 pounds (the equivalent of force you might use to close an over-packed suitcase) of evenly distributed pressure, giving a short twist just before removing the tamper. Your coffee should look compacted and, more importantly, even. An uneven tamp leads to an uneven extraction.

3 Securely place the portafilter back in the espresso machine group. Place your warmed cup (keeping your cup on top of your machine, or filling it with hot water and dump it out just before use, will achieve this) underneath the portafilter's spout.



4 Lift your brew lever (or whatever lever or switch your machine employs to release the hot water) and start counting. Within four to five seconds you should see a thin, "mouse tail"-like stream. At around 24 seconds, or when you begin to see "blonding" (an extreme lightening of the color of your extraction), pull the cup away from the stream and then shut off the water—you will have about a 1 1/2-oz. shot in your cup, the appropriate amount to sip on its own or use as a base for other drinks. Be sure not to turn off the water while the cup is still underneath the stream, Nye says: "After shutting off the machine group, the last few drops are formed after the shot has been disrupted, and no good can come from this."

5 Immediately clean out the grinds from the portafilter, place back in the group and run some hot water through it—after enjoying your espresso, that is.

Piccolo Veneziano Double Wall Cup, \$30/set of 2, bodumusa.com

THE DAILY GRIND

Before you pull that first espresso shot, there are a few critical (but common-sense) things to learn and adapt as part of your basic coffee-making ritual:

KEEP IT CLEAN! Keeping your machine and its accoutrements clean and free of buildup is vital to the flavor and ultimate quality of the coffee you make. Old, stale grinds in your grinder and espresso machine will not only negatively affect the flavor of your freshly made shot, they can also muck up the parts, causing you to spend money on repairs or parts replacement.

BUY GOOD COFFEE. Bad coffee made in a good espresso maker is still bad coffee. Nye says post-roasting, beans emit carbon dioxide and need anywhere from three days to a week

to settle down. In his opinion, they are best used in the second week post-roasting. As beans get older, they can take on a spotty look or become excessively oily in appearance—not good. Buying beans from a trusted roaster who supplies the roasting date on each bag is always the way to go. Keep the beans in their bags, or in an airtight container, stored in a cool spot away from direct light. Whatever you do, don't store your coffee in the fridge or freezer. No matter how clean you think it is in there, your coffee will inevitably pick up undesirable odors and taste like ... freezer.

AMERICANO

CUP: Shot glass or demitasse (for pulling your shot), plus a 6- to 8-oz. cup

INGREDIENTS: 1 1/2 oz. freshly extracted espresso, 4 to 6 oz. hot water (around 200 degrees F)

PROCESS:

- 1 Brew espresso shot as instructed on page 66.
- 2 Pour hot water into your cup.
- 3 Gently pour the 1 1/2 oz. espresso shot into your larger, hot-water filled cup, leaving the crema as intact as possible.

TIP: “An Americano is just a method of diluting espresso,” says Nye. “How much you want to dilute it depends on your preference.” This drink is also the one exception to the brew-into-your-cup rule. “The less you disrupt the espresso, the better it tastes,” explains Nye. “If you pour the water on top of it, you’re breaking up the crema.”

MACHINE MATTERS. As far as machines go, the bad news is that paying more will actually make a difference—however, blindly tossing down cash does not guarantee a good machine. A sleek, \$3,000 piece of pretty-colored eye-candy with lots of bells and whistles may make the same mediocre espresso as a \$200 clunker. “You can get a very good machine for around \$900 to \$1,000,” Nye says, which will offer you the same important components of a commercial machine. (For more on this, see “Gearing Up,” page 77.)

IMPORTANT NOT-SO-EXTRAS. Grinders matter. I thought Nye was just being persnickety when he was trying to hammer this into my head. I figured the basic grinder I’d been happily using for years was adequate. While it was adequate for my drip coffee maker, it could not make a fine enough grind for my extraction to come out in that mouse tail-looking stream. Even on the finest grind setting, my extractions were fat and water-laden, making

for weak, sad espresso. Invest in a quality burr grinder with multiple grind setting (refer to our grinder test in the May/June 2007 issue), and be sure to keep your blades nice and sharp. And as long as we’re on the topic of grind, get yourself a decent tamper. It shouldn’t cost more than \$25 (although there are certainly more- and less-expensive options) and will last a lifetime.

TAKE TIME TO DIAL IN. “Dialing in” is the term baristas use when talking about getting their grind, etc., just right to find that sweet spot where all elements come together to make the best of the coffee you have. “Coffee behaves differently every day,” Nye says, so don’t be surprised if the grind and amount you used yesterday doesn’t bring the same results today. Another important point: If you change your grind, you need to clear the dosing chamber by grinding for a slightly longer amount of time and discarding the first amount. That way, you’re guaranteed consistency.



GOOD TO KNOW: To make a breve, substitute half-and-half for the milk. Because half-and-half has a higher fat content than regular milk, it acts a little stubborn and lazy during the stretching and texturizing. Be patient and make sure you are Johnny-on-the-Spot when it comes time to dip that wand down for microfoaming—you'll want as much time as is allowed before the temperature of the milk gets too hot.



MACCHIATO

CUP: 3 oz. demitasse

INGREDIENTS: 1 1/2 oz. freshly extracted espresso, 1 1/2 oz. steamed milk

PROCESS:

- 1 Brew espresso shot as instructed on page 72.
- 2 Pour three to four ounces of milk into a metal pitcher, dip steam wand partially in, and tilt. Turn on steam head and allow milk to heat and steam until glossy (to 150–155 degrees F). Gently tap the pitcher and swirl the milk to get rid of any bubbles.
- 3 Begin to pour your milk in a circle, from the outer edges to the center, into espresso-filled cup until level with edge.

TIP: A macchiato is an espresso shot “marked” with a touch of milk—just enough to fill your demitasse. “It’s the ultimate combination of milk and coffee,” says Nye, because the small amount of milk you add truly accentuates the flavor of the espresso, as opposed to changing or masking it.

MILKING IT

STEAMING MILK IS AN ART UNTO ITSELF. It's loud, it's fast and seconds count. But don't be discouraged if you feel like your first few attempts wind up all wrong—you'll get the hang of it. The word for the initial steam-heating of milk in barista-speak is “stretching,” just exceeding your own body temp at around 100 degrees F. When whole milk is heated, not only does its texture become more lavish and take on an appearance akin to house paint, it also becomes sweeter. Notice the word “foam” hasn't come up so far; that's because over-stretching, or over-aerating, your milk to give it a foamy almost meringue-like quality may look pretty, but it doesn't integrate well with the coffee itself and winds up being tasteless and dry. Properly textured milk is often referred to as microfoam, which consists of very tiny bubbles and has a smooth, velvety texture that combines perfectly with espresso.

The tools you need for steaming milk are simple: the steam wand on your espresso machine, a cold stainless-steel pitcher and cold whole milk (skim and lowfat don't give the same results because the fat content in whole milk is integral to the ultimate final desired texture, although it is certainly possible to get decent results using lowfat versions). Never steam milk with a ceramic pitcher; it might break because it can't take the extreme temperature. Stainless steel, however, can take it and hold those temps longer. Let's get started.

First, gently place a folded-over, damp dishtowel over your steam wand, careful to keep your hand away from the spot where the steam blasts out. Open the steam pump to empty out any condensation. Turn off and wipe the wand with your towel.

Fill your cold steel pitcher about halfway, or to the bottom of the spout's indentation inside the pitcher. Place your hand around the outside of it (don't use the handle; you need to be able to feel the temperature change). Bring the pitcher up to the steam wand and dip the wand in so the entire nubbed tip

CUP: 6 oz.

INGREDIENTS: 1 1/2 oz. freshly extracted espresso, 2 oz. steamed milk, 2 oz. microfoam

PROCESS:

1 Brew espresso shot as instructed on page 72 and extract into the larger-sized cup.

2 Pour six to seven ounces of milk into a metal pitcher, dip steam wand partially in, and tilt. Turn on steam head and allow milk to heat and steam until glossy (to 150–155 degrees F). Gently tap the pitcher and swirl the milk to get rid of any bubbles.

3 Begin to pour your milk in a circle, from the outer edges to the center, into espresso-filled cup until level with the edge.

TIP: According to Matt Milletto of the American Barista and Coffee School (who made all of the drinks for this article), the milk for your cappuccino should be velvety in appearance and be immediately poured into the glass so it combines with the espresso, creating a visible contrast between the dark crema and velvety milk. You should be left with a well-constituted drink with a 1/4 to 1/2 inch of microfoam on top.



CAPPUCCINO

of it is submerged. Tilt your pitcher toward you and open up the steam. Your milk should immediately begin to violently swirl like a whirlpool and you'll hear a rapid sucking sound.

When the temperature in the pitcher becomes warm to the touch, submerge the wand a little further to begin texturing and microfoaming. This will break down the larger air bubbles that have formed from your initial stretching into smaller bubbles, creating a smoother, thicker texture with a pretty shine. Be careful not to dip the wand too close to the bottom of the pitcher, where all that important bubble-breaking ceases to happen. You'll get what Wrage calls the warning-bell sound of "1,000 screaming babies"—a high-pitched noise that's your signal to pull up a little.

When the pitcher feels hot (but not so hot that it burns you—around 150 to 160 degrees F; going above this temperature will start to burn the milk, breaking down the sugars and depleting its sweetness), turn off the steam, making sure to keep the wand submerged (if you don't and bring it close to the surface, you'll add those big air bubbles back in again). Remove the pitcher from the wand and set it down on a flat surface.

Immediately repeat Step One to clean the milk from the wand (you do not want the milk to dry and harden onto the wand; cleaning it takes just seconds and is much easier to do right away than later on).

Give your pitcher a few taps on the counter to rid it of any larger bubbles, and swirl it around until you can clearly see a shiny, paint-like sheen.

Use these steps for creating lattes and macchiatos. For cappuccinos, where you want a slightly foamier body, you should texture (e.g., microfoam) your milk ever-so-slightly longer in order to add more of those tiny bubbles and achieve a "dryer"-looking texture (e.g., it'll look a little less shiny and very smooth).

Nye advises getting a milk thermometer for under \$10 online or at a restaurant supply shop, which will help you to get used to what the appropriate temperatures feel like. Also, practicing with water first will help you to get the hang of how to comfortably hold and tilt your pitcher, how far to dip your steam wand for your initial stretching and bubble-busting, and what the resulting sounds are.

GOOD TO KNOW: A mocha is a decadent variation of a latte. Simply add a quarter-sized dollop (about 1/2 oz.) of high-quality liquid chocolate to your espresso shot before steaming your milk. Nye recommends using a chocolate that's at least 70 percent cacao. Liquid form—whether you purchase it this way or melt it yourself—allows for the best integration of coffee and chocolate.

Assam Double Wall Medium Glass, \$20/set of 2, bodumusa.com; OPPOSITE: Piccolo Veneziano Double Wall Cup, \$30/set of 2, bodumusa.com

LATTE

CUP: 11 oz.

INGREDIENTS: 1 1/2 oz. freshly extracted espresso, 9 1/2 oz. steamed milk

PROCESS:

1 Brew espresso shot as instructed on page 72 and extract directly into the larger-sized cup.

2 Pour eight to 10 ounces of whole milk into a metal pitcher, dip steam wand partially in, and tilt. Turn on steam head and allow milk to heat and steam until glossy (to 150–155 degrees F). Gently tap the pitcher and swirl the milk to get rid of any bubbles.

3 Begin to pour your milk in a circle, from the outer edges to the center, into espresso-filled cup until level with edge.

GEARING UP

If you're thinking about buying a machine, it can seem daunting trying to assess which one fits your needs, as well as how much to spend. Chris Nachtrieb, president of Chris' Coffee Service in Albany, New York, has been supplying espresso machines to both pros and home coffee enthusiasts for over three decades. If you're in the market for a machine, he offers the following advice:

BARISTA, KNOW THYSELF! Before deciding on what kind of machine to buy, decide how you're going to use it. Plan on making mostly lattes and caps? A heat-exchanger machine (which, for a good model, will run from around \$900 to \$1,600) is for you. Buying a top-of-the-line dual-boiler machine, where prices can start at around \$2,000, is unnecessary, Nachtrieb says. Why? For starters, variations in temperature won't be as problematic when milk is involved. Heat-exchanger machines have less ability to control temperature, so your straight espresso will likely taste different from shot to shot, but if you usually add milk or sugar to your espresso it won't matter as much. "Dual-boiler machines are best for serious coffee geeks because they remove more variables, making coffee consistency more assured," says Nachtrieb.

PLUMB JOB. Know whether or not you want (or are able) to hook the machine up to your kitchen plumbing. Why would you want to plumb? "Number one: convenience," says Nachtrieb. "Most consumers are putting these machines in the kitchen," often on a place on the counter where cabinets are overhead. "The majority of these machines fill from the top. You have to manually fill it. This means you have to slide it out from the cabinet, take the cups off the top, take off the top and put the water in," and then put it all back to push the machine into its usual spot. "It's not very convenient." If you do plan to plumb in the machine, remember that you are probably going to have to cut a hole in the countertop to do so.

IT'S ELECTRIC. Some machines are set up to work with 20-amp modern electrical systems. If you live in an old house or apartment building, which is in all likelihood 15 amps, this is a problem. Some

machines can use either amperage, but your dealer will need to configure it for one or the other. Make sure you know this information when you start machine hunting!

WATER WORLD. If you don't already know, find out whether or not your water is hard. Calcium build-up, or scale, from a hard water supply is the number one destroyer of espresso machines, according to Nachtrieb. When he sells a machine, he sends customers home with test strips that tell you whether or not your water is hard. (Pool-supply stores also sell these.) If this is an issue for you, you'll either need to buy bottled water for your machine, or hook it up to a filter and softener, which need to be changed annually.

POLICY OF TRUTH. Are you willing to put in the time to maintain your machine? Be honest—if you're going to make the investment of money, you also must be prepared to make the investment of time to keep your machine in top condition.

IS ANYBODY OUT THERE? It's critical to buy your machine from a reputable company that offers good service, because all machines eventually need tune-ups. If you're investing the money, make sure the dealer offers talk time and has a knowledgeable staff.

GREAT SOURCES FOR HOME ESPRESSO GADGETS AND INFORMATION:

1st-line.com
espressoparts.com

coffeegeek.com
home-barista.com

CON PANNA

CUP: 3 oz. demitasse

INGREDIENTS: 1 1/2 oz. freshly pulled espresso, dollop of whipped cream

PROCESS:

- 1 Brew espresso shot as instructed on page 72.
- 2 Place a small dollop of whipped cream into the cup, stir to integrate and top with a little extra whipped cream.

TIP: Espresso con Panna translates to "espresso with cream," and making your own whipped cream is a cinch. Using a mixer, simply whip cold, heavy cream until it begins to thicken, then add your sweetener of choice (we like to use a touch of sugar and vanilla extract) and whip until soft peaks form.

