

Blending quality and speed behind the bar



Espresso has been around for close to 100 years. For the first 80 years, the machines, the coffee and the knowledge of espresso didn't evolve much. Today we have better equipment, better coffee and more knowledgeable baristas. Yet too often in independent shops, the time it takes to produce an espresso drink is significantly longer than during the "old days" in Italy. Sure, there's value in taking your time and making sure you are hitting perfection. But it's also important (and difficult) to prepare a delicious drink in a reasonable amount of time. What follows are some tips to help you find that balance.

WHAT IS A REASONABLE AMOUNT OF TIME?

I know that it takes around 25 seconds for a shot to extract, about 15 seconds for 12 ounces of milk to be steamed, and approximately 30 seconds for coffee to be ground, dosed, tamped and polished. So should a 12-ounce latte only take a minute and 10 seconds to make? No.

All drinks will be a little different, and each café is going to have its own system. The point is that baristas and managers should be aware of how long a task takes, and they should create expectations and goals to reach that time. At our shop, we believe a customer should never wait longer than five minutes from the

time a drink is ordered to the moment it's delivered—no matter how busy we are or what drink it is. That is our goal, and we have done a lot of work to put systems in place to make this possible.

WAIT TIME

Smart café managers know the implementation of a speed strategy begins with the line of customers. Everyone hates to wait. How then can we as baristas trick the customer into believing he or she is waiting less than 15 minutes for a cup of coffee? If a customer gets into a line that has 20 people in it, they're willing to wait a good amount of time for their drink—especially if they know it will be ready less than five minutes after they order it. What frustrates customers is this scenario: They walk up to the counter and there is no line, so they assume they won't have to wait long for their drink. However, the reality is that the baristas just cleared a long line and there are 20 drinks in front of them, so it will actually be a lengthy wait. The customer may begin feeling like the baristas are inept. Whenever I do a training, I talk about the "balancing act": The person who takes the orders must be the pace keeper. If the baristas are getting backed up, slow the line down. If your barista needs something to do but you have a line out the door, have the barista take orders and prep drinks. Make managing the line fun.

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PUTTING ON A SHOW

Entertaining the customers is another important barista skill. When customers get impatient and begin to breathe down your steam pitcher, what do you do? Do you begin to pull shots a couple seconds shorter or steam milk a little less hot? Does your latte art begin to suffer? Instead of getting frustrated and making lower-quality drinks to get through the rush, bring the customer along for the ride. When new baristas get in a rush, often their heads go down and they avoid looking at customers. If you look up to say “hello,” customers stop thinking about the 12 minutes they’ve been waiting for their Americano.



POUR ON THE CHARM: A good barista knows to interact with waiting customers.

When a shot goes awry or the grind suddenly needs to be adjusted, don’t leave customers in the dark. Pour on the charm and fill them in: “Sir, your cappuccino will be just another minute because I need to adjust my grind so that this drink will taste delicious.” Who can argue with that? It is a simple action that gives the customer a better experience.

THE DOWNSIDE OF MOVING FAST

So, let’s say you’re a flash behind the espresso machine and you make drinks faster than we do. How does your steam wand look?

How much coffee and milk did you have to throw away today? So far we've been thinking in terms of efficiency; now we'll look at professionalism and quality. When we get moving, we stop paying attention to the details. I love barista competitions because they assess the coffee and the details of the preparation—that's it!

Any great barista will say that to pull a good shot, you have to listen and taste your coffee. I'd say it's a process that involves all the senses: the time, color, and volume (or weight) are all indicators of an extraction that's going right or wrong.

Most mistakes behind the bar occur when people are rushing. Slow down, listen to your customers and repeat something back to them if you think you have misheard.

WHY SO MESSY?

Cleanliness is just as important to a great-tasting shot of espresso as high-quality coffee is. If you have a dirty work area, my guess is your towel is gross and your portafilter isn't getting properly cleaned. This affects your shot quality. If you work clean, it won't take long to tidy up and look professional. If you dose like a slob, add another 30 seconds to your drink time for cleanup. Remember, it's all in the details.

PEOPLE EAT FIRST WITH THEIR EYES

I love receiving an unruly, greasy hamburger at a diner, but if I have a dirty knife or an unclean plate, I get frustrated. Then I start to wonder about what the restaurant's kitchen looks like. As a barista, I always send back latte bowls that aren't pristine. At the barista competitions, I am always amazed how much we baristas polish our demitasse spoons and cappuccino cups. At my first competition, I had a note on my score sheet from the judges that said, "Fingerprints." At that moment, the penny dropped. Polishing for hours is a little extreme for some café settings, but if you spill a little down the side, clean it up. All these details may take a few extra seconds, but customers notice.

HOW TO CHANGE YOUR CAFÉ

First off, identify some goals by asking yourself a lot of questions. Should the drinks be delicious? Should you be able to make and hand them to the customer in less than five minutes? Should all drinks have latte art? Does that add another 20 seconds to the drink? What about detail-cleaning the cups or cleaning your station? What should a certain beverage taste like? What should it look like?

Once you have created your goals, create your systems. How many baristas does it take to reach these goals? What kind of bar flow should you have? Each café is different. At ours, we have made some major decisions to streamline drink-making processes. We have a limited menu and feature one-size drinks, which helps consistency and speed. We all know how long and labor-intensive

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blended drinks are. Maybe for you, blended drinks slow everything down and are not worth the effort.

TRAIN YOUR BARISTAS

This is the most important and most difficult part of bringing together drink quality and speed. Teach baristas how to pull two shots at the same time, so they can make an Americano and a latte in one fell swoop. If you need two baristas on bar, make sure each one knows what the other is doing, and assess the outcome to make sure the strategy actually is leading to better, consistently timed drinks. Chances are, your system is not perfect. Be ready to learn and adapt.



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PARTING WORDS

I used to compare the third-wave coffee scene to fine dining. I used to say that we couldn't and shouldn't pump out drinks like McDonald's pumps out hamburgers. But if you go into a fine-dining kitchen, there will likely be a beautiful production system in place. Skilled chefs are aware of the time it takes to prepare a dish, and their focus on pacing is actually similar to the fast-food world. If the third-wave coffee scene wants to be successful, we need to embrace the speed of our fast-food friends but continue to create peerless, fine-dining-like drinks that are worth the (reasonable) wait. ☪