

High-quality espresso from low-end machines

The Boston Globe

By Ike DeLorenzo, Globe Correspondent | January 13, 2010

The coffee aficionado is often a very regular sort, and his pronouncements are verifiable by all. Good coffee - particularly good espresso - has an undeniably compelling taste and aroma. There's none of the inscrutability of, say, the wine expert. Coffee gourmands are more like you and me because, well, they *are* you and me.

So, Mr. or Ms. Coffee Gourmand, let's talk about the electric espresso machine plugged in on your counter. If it's making terrible coffee, you certainly know it. What you may not realize is that even a cheap machine can make spectacular espresso. The problem is you, not the machine. Of course, you need good quality beans, but the key to great espresso is in the grind. Also important is the amount of coffee you put in the small metal basket (called the portafilter) and how you pack it.

Craigslist is a veritable Island of Misfit Espresso Machines. In the past month, numerous low-end Brevilles, Briels, Krups, Starbucks, and DeLonghis were offered for less than \$100 (many for under \$50). I bought several to determine how to get the best espresso out of unremarkable equipment. Dissatisfied owners were surprisingly honest. "The espresso it makes is so bitter," said one man as he sold me a barely used Briel Lido for \$40 (it retails for \$200). "No returns!" He shouted as he sped away. I purchased three other machines that week, all under \$50.

Let's start with the grind. What you really want to get rid of on Craigslist is your coffee grinder. Unless yours is high-end (\$400 and up), you cannot produce an espresso grind at home. And surprisingly, beans ground at Starbucks, Peet's Coffee & Tea, and even independent coffeehouses (I tried quite a few) yielded uneven fineness and uniformity. At Peet's, and elsewhere, I found that you get different grinds for what employees referred to as "home espresso machine." Mysteriously, even asking for a given grind number did not help.

All the particles of ground coffee must be a very uniform size to prevent uneven water flow through the coffee, and that grind has to be the right size for a machine with a relatively weak pump. It turned out that the best coffee for this is canned, ground espresso, preferably imported from Italy. Italian manufacturers grind good beans to a perfect uniformity, and a grind size appropriate for the way Europeans make espresso - with cheap machines like yours. The cans are filled with nitrogen to preserve freshness and have a shelf life of up to a year. I tested 11 of the top Italian canned coffees and in no sample did beans ground at a local coffeehouse produce an espresso as good as the canned.

Era Ora and Sant'Eustachio both made spectacular espresso, even in the cheapest machines. Era Ora (\$13) is imported by Newton-based ItalyPoint. Sant'Eustachio (\$15) is a wonderful ground coffee from Rome, which is favored by Boston magazine restaurant critic and "Joy of Coffee" author Corby Kummer.

Five brands produced acceptable espresso: a good taste, crema, and aroma at the level you would expect from an independent coffeehouse - or Starbucks on a good day. They are, in order of preference: Caffè Kimbo Gold Medal, Illy Ground Espresso Coffee, Lavazza Qualità Rossa, Caffè Kimbo Aroma Espresso, and Café Bustelo. The only non-Italian coffee that made the cut, Bustelo is produced in Miami for "el gusto Hispano" (Hispanic tastes).

Four brands produced thin, bitter, or crema-less espresso, or (usually) an unfortunate combination of the three: Whole Foods Organic Northern Italian Espresso Grind Coffee, Whole Foods Organic Southern Italian Espresso Grind Coffee, Caffè Kimbo Espresso Napoletano, and Lavazza Tierra! espresso.

Filling the portafilter correctly is very important. Add the coffee and tap the side of the portafilter a few times to settle the grind before you tamp it. Inexpensive espresso machines come with a cheap plastic tamp to pack the coffee. Such a flimsy disc can wobble while you push down, packing grinds unevenly. You could improve on this by using, say, a spice bottle that is the exact size, so the grinds are all pushed down at once.

For best results, order a metal espresso tamp sized for your portafilter. It improves the quality and consistency of your shots. You paid \$50 for the machine, so splurge on a \$15 tamp. The portafilter should be about four-fifths full after you tamp it, and the whole handle should easily screw into place. More coffee in the portafilter can mean bitterness, not more taste. Finally, keep the button down only as long as the espresso comes out dark black (10 seconds max).

If you think this is all too much obsessing over one little machine, and a cheap secondhand one at that, spend \$800 on a Rancilio Silvia espresso machine and \$400 on a Rancilio Rocky grinder. You may get an even better cup.

Some years ago, I visited a Cuban friend who made me a shockingly excellent espresso in his low-end machine. At the time, I owned a \$1,200 La Pavoni machine (thank you, Craigslist, for getting rid of it for me), and I looked askance at his clunky and cheesy Krups.

I tasted his cappuccino. The coffee was undeniably, frustratingly wonderful.

Yours can be too.

Era Ora coffee is available at Lionette's Market, 577 Tremont St., Boston, 617-778-0360 or at www.italypoint.com. Sant'Eustachio coffee is available at www.amazon.com. Metal espresso tamps are available at www.espressoparts.com. Ike DeLorenzo can be reached at delorenzo@gmail.com. ■