THE ULTIMATE GUIDE TO BECOME A PRO BARISTA

Skills Training College
Barista Course

How To Become A Pro Barista

So, what are some of the essential skills of being a barista? What's the first thing you need to think about?
Well, it might surprise some hopefuls to know that the first skill a barista needs to master isn't coffee varieties, or frothing milk, or grinding beans. The most critical skill is knowing how to work safely. That's what's going to keep you in the game long-term. So what does that look like?

Practising Safe Barista-Craft

Barista work involves a lot of hot things. Boiling hot water, heated milk, and steam under considerable pressure. The barista's tools of the trade have a lot of ways they can go wrong, so to be successful as a barista, you need to play the long game. Learn to do things safely to avoid you or your customers getting injured or sick, and ensure you're in the business long enough to learn all the other aspects.

So what are some key safety factors you need to be aware of when making coffee with professional barista equipment?

Treat Your Espresso Machine With Respect

There are two reasons this is important. First, because this machine is your main tool and the heart of what you do as a barista - probably 90% of the coffees you'll be making will come from it. Second, because it's also one of the most dangerous things in your workplace. The espresso machine does what it does with jets of pressurised steam, meaning it's designed to push out scalding hot water with a fair bit of force behind it. And while you'll get used to hearing the noise of steam squirting into the milk jug dozens of times a day, you only need to get it wrong once to find out just how dangerous that is. When you're working with pressurised steam, second-degree burns can happen in a matter of moments.

As such, you've got to get used to not taking shortcuts with the espresso machine. There's nothing wrong with learning to work efficiently, but you must make a habit of working safely. Saving a few seconds isn't worth getting scalded for, even when things are busy. Or rather, especially when things are busy - because that's when mistakes happen.

Take care with hot liquids

Although hot steam from the espresso machine is a potential risk, it's also worth remembering that a lot of a barista's job involves hot liquids, often in busy, crowded circumstances. You need to form habits with the way you handle both the hot liquids used in the coffee-making process (such as the milk jug) and also the finished hot beverages with care. So, for example:

- Don't move hot liquids around too quickly
- Don't crowd too many hot drinks on a single surface
- Don't put hot liquid too close to the edge of a counter
- Make sure you're picking things up by the handle

All these are small things that might seem too obvious to mention, but you need to be deliberate about them. Otherwise, you'll find yourself placing a hot coffee on the counter's

edge when things get busy, and some customer is going to end up wearing a hot cappuccino. And in the worst-case scenario, that can mean someone ends up in the emergency room.

Take your time

This is a hard one when things get busy, but there are two important reasons not to rush your tasks as a barista. The first one is safety - mistakes get made when you're rushing with hot liquids and potentially dangerous equipment. But the second reason is quality. Coffee is one of those commodities where taking the time to make it well makes a big difference to the end product.

Working efficiently is important when things get busy, but don't rush and cut corners on time. Better to serve ten customers a great coffee that will bring them back next time (possibly with friends) than fifteen or twenty rushed coffees to customers who likely won't be back again.

Look after yourself

Believe it or not, being a Barista can be a physically demanding job. You're on your feet for most of the day, and many of the jobs involve using the muscles in unusual ways (such as tamping). Baristas have a range of repetitive strain injuries they're prone to, and it's not uncommon for people to move out of the industry after a few years due to muscle-related health issues (such as the condition known as "barista wrist").
Take breaks as you're working. Stretch your legs a little on breaks. Sit down when you need a rest. Try to do some stretches to ease the strain on your muscles during your break. Ultimately, whatever you can do to ease the strain on your muscles and look after your body will make it easier to stay in the barista game long-term.

Sort out spills as soon as possible

In the craziness of a busy period, cleaning up a spill can be an annoying, time-consuming job that can be easy to worry about later. But it's worth getting into the habit of cleaning up spills right away. Fluids or powders (such as sugar or chai powder) spilled on the floor can

be a big slipping hazard in an area with many staff moving about (or even one busy one). Spills on counters can look messy, unprofessional, and unappealing to customers. Particularly, you should remember that anything containing milk can spoil very quickly - a milk spill that gets overlooked or trickles down into a crack or crevice can end up smelling very quickly and potentially even be a health risk (bacteria love spilled milk).

As frustrating as it might be, it's almost always worth jumping onto a spill as soon as possible and getting it sorted out. If you're struggling to get to it yourself with a rush of customers, you could always try calling in help from coworkers.

Keep it clean

Make good hygiene a habit. Be careful with refrigerated food, drink, and dairy in particular - make sure your milk isn't left out. Take care with keeping coffee supplies in appropriate containers - airtight where possible.

Beware of cross-contamination (when bacteria are unknowingly transferred from one location to another). Be careful to use separate cloths for different jobs, keeping wet cloths and tea towels used for food and beverage containers separate from general equipment cleaning cloths. And be careful to use clean spoons when scooping out powders and other coffee supplies.

In particular, make sure you're careful about cleaning down your equipment, both at the end of the day and at required intervals. Take particular care with the milk steamer, which must be thoroughly and frequently cleaned to avoid contamination and prevent blockages - the nozzle can very easily get clogged if it’s not regularly flushed out. Don't get lazy with the cleanup. Learn to do it right, and then make that your habit. That way, protecting you and your customers from food contamination just becomes instinct.

What sets one barista apart from another?

So we've all seen baristas in action, and we know there are exceptional ones and run-of-the-mill ones. What factors can set you apart as a barista and help you stand out from the crowd and leave a lasting impression?

Master the espresso machine

This may seem like a no-brainer, but there's a difference between knowing the essentials of how an espresso machine works and really ***knowing*** your machine. This machine will be your bread and butter while working as a barista, so it pays to know it inside and out. Get familiar with the layout and setup of all the levers, knobs and switches. Know what everything does, even if you use only some of the functions on offer.

Does your machine have any quirks that set it apart from the ones you've used before? How long does it take to heat things up? Are there any corners or crevasses you must watch out for when cleaning? What is and isn't automated?

Knowing the ins and outs of your most important piece of equipment will allow you to work way more efficiently and help you get the best results out of the machine for your customers.

Show your passion

Barista work is one of those jobs where you need to be passionate about your product. It's not just a matter of "don't get into it if you don't like coffee" (although that's good advice). But coffee is one of those products where your customers could be more into your product than you are! When someone says "I ***need*** coffee", that's not like someone saying "I need butter". The implication is that the morning is going to go ***very*** badly if no coffee is provided.

A barista should be a coffee advocate. You understand why your customers are so passionate. You're keen to meet that need and be the person's personal coffee superhero just for that moment. And you love seeing the expression on a customer's face as they take that first long-awaited sip. Being a barista is not just about providing a product - it's about meeting a need and leaving your customers in a happier place once you're done.

Know your coffee (not just the menu)

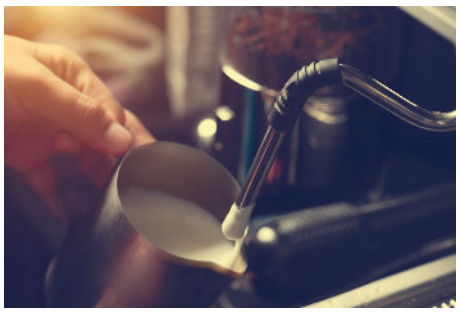
One feature almost every good barista shares is a good knowledge of their product. Obviously, this means a solid familiarity with your menu and how to make each item (more on that later). But it also means more than that. It means knowing about coffee. What sets a good coffee apart from a bad one? The craft and history of coffee. How it's made, and how to tailor it for your audience.

The first step is knowing your menu inside and out - not just how to make each item, but how to vary them for particular tastes and make recommendations for a customer struggling to make a choice. Practice with different beverages. Get to know the taste of each menu item, and how to make stronger and weaker variants of each. Know what you're offering and what's going to suit different types of customers.

Also, learn a thing or two about coffee. Spend some time on the internet, researching your product (making sure you check your facts as you go). Know the history of coffee and the background of some of the products you're offering. How long has espresso been around? Why are cappuccinos and mochas called that? What's chai made out of, and is it really caffeine free? Does the Australian coffee menu have the same options as you'd get from a cafe in Europe or America?

Not every barista you'll come upon is an expert in coffee lore. Some just know the essentials - what's on the menu, how it tastes, and what drinks will suit different customers. But if you're looking to present yourself as a master of the coffee art and the go-to girl or guy for coffee, then it's worth knowing not just how to make your product, but the detail and history around it. Know your product backwards, and people will probably assume you know a thing or two about making it.

Perfect your milk game



It's hard to stress the value of honing your milk-frothing skills when it comes to barista work. Most of the coffees you'll be making on an average day are a skilful blend of espresso and steamed milk - the injection of steam turning the milk into a delicate, silky froth to top the drink. And in many ways, the

frothing of the milk is as much an art as a craft - getting just the right consistency and monitoring the temperature so you don't overheat the milk (into "scalded milk" territory).

Milk frothing is something you'll want to practice and perfect. You need to get your head around the ratio of froth to milk in the milk jug, where to position the steam nozzle to create the self-mixing "whirlpool" motion through the milk, and the best method to pour. All these take practice to learn and perfect, so it's worth investing the time working on your skills - possibly brushing up on your familiarity with the Barista menu as you do so.

Once you've gotten your frothing and pouring game down, there's the whole world of Latte-art - crafting patterns and pictures on the surface of your milk froth. Not every barista needs to be a master of Latte art - drawing mountain ranges or the face of Marilyn Monroe on every coffee. But knowing a few basic tricks to produce an attractive pattern - such as the relatively simple heart pattern - can tell your customers you know your work. And, of course, the more proficient you become at such things, the more it tells your customers you mean business when it comes to coffee.

Provide excellent service

Although skill at making coffee is at the heart of the barista business, the most successful baristas are also masters of customer service. Being personable and polite are essential tools in the barista's skill set - no one will come back to a shop where the staff were rude, regardless of how the coffee was.

If someone's struggling to decide, ask them what sort of thing they'd like. Make a suggestion off the menu, and be willing to tailor it for their tastes - if they say they've had a rough night, ask them if they want it extra strong. If they have a kid, ask them if they'd like a babycino for the little one (that's basically just warm milk and milk froth in an espresso mug with chocolate dust on top).

Learning names is also a very powerful tool. Everyone likes to be known and valued, and having a barista who knows you by name and remembers how you like your coffee has a powerful attraction. You don't have to have a perfect memory - keep a notebook of names (somewhere out of sight - people prefer to think you remember them

without help) with things like "Moustache Jeff Goldblum - Dave - large flat white with 1" or "Curly hair dimple girl - Megan - small chai". Ask their name once you've seen them a few times, and get them in the book. And remember to keep descriptions friendly - just in case you leave your notebook out somewhere.

Whatever else someone's got going on in their life, it's nice to have someone who knows your name and how you like your coffee - especially if you discount the coffee now and then or punch a few holes on their loyalty card at once for being a good customer. Everyone knows that's part of your business, but it's nice to feel like a VIP.

Also, don't overestimate your small-talk game. Not every customer wants to talk - many will just want to order their coffee, check their phone, pay, and then get out. But some will want to engage, and good conversation will leave them with a good feeling about your business. Ask them polite questions - "got anything planned for the weekend?", etc. Listen patiently. In this role, you're a bit of a bartender, being a good listener and providing only as much input as the customer wants. Let the customer feel like there's a connection there. But be wary of controversial topics. Many people will think or believe things you don't agree with, but you don't need to be the person to set them straight.

Your customers can get coffee from 100 different places. But to have a Barista that knows them by name, knows how they like their coffee, and is always ready with a smile and a chat? That's something that will keep customers coming back!

Common types of Coffee in Australia

Brewing Styles

First, let's start with some essentials - such as how different types of coffee are made or brewed. There are actually a number of methods for brewing coffee, so what are some of the more popular methods you might encounter?

- **Espresso** - By far the most common method of coffee brewing, espresso-style coffee involves pressurised hot water being pushed through a small pot or filter packed with finely ground coffee beans. This is the most common brew of coffee used by baristas, and by far the majority of items on the barista menu contain at least one “shot” (that’s one serving) of espresso.

- **Ristretto** - This is a style of brewing similar to espresso but using around half as much water for a shorter period of time. This produces a more concentrated coffee with a stronger, bolder flavour.

- **Drip Filter** - This method of brewing is a slower process, but it needs far less equipment. Hot water is poured into a filter basket filled with ground coffee and then allowed to slowly filter through and drip down into a pot below. Produces a smooth, flavourful brew particularly suited for black coffee.

- **Cold Brew -** Probably the slowest method of brewing, but a good way to produce a smooth brew. It's also generally served cold, making it more of a summer drink. Room temperature water is poured into ground coffee beans and then left to steep for 12-18 hours (so you're often preparing it the day before). The coffee grounds are then filtered out, leaving a concentrated brew that's generally mixed with water or milk before drinking.

Types Of Coffee

When talking about styles of barista-made coffee, it's worth starting with the fact that coffee-making is far more an art than a science, and there's some variation in how people make their lattes and macchiatos. There are, however, various common beverages that you'll see in most Australian cafes, and for the most part, each is made in a similar (if not identical) manner.

The important thing is not to find out who's got the "Right" definition of a flat white, but to understand that the customer may have experienced different ways of making a flat white. So if they're not a fan of how you make them, ask how they normally like their coffee, and offer to do it that way next time.

White Coffees

Flat white - One of the most common types of coffee on the Australian menu, a flat white is the closest thing on the café menu to plain white coffee - so if you're a simple white-with-one type coffee drinker, this might be your go-to coffee choice. A single serve (or "shot") of espresso in a cup is topped up with steamed milk (generally one part espresso to two parts milk), sometimes with a thin layer of milk froth on top. They tend to use smoother, less frothy milk. Café style flat whites are actually native to Australia, so they can be a little harder to find overseas.

Café latte - One of the most popular choices on any café menu, the café latte (pronounced "Lah-Tay") is similar to a flat white but heavier on the froth. Originally hailing from Italy, it's generally one-third espresso (one shot), and two-thirds frothed milk, generally giving it a thick layer of froth at the top. It's normally served in a glass rather than a ceramic cup or mug, and the way the glass is presented varies greatly from café to café. Some have a special metallic handle around the glass (to avoid customers needing to pick up a hot glass), others make an art of carefully folding and tying a serviette around the glass, while other venues will simply serve a plain glass and let the customers work it out.

Cappuccino - Another super popular choice, a cappuccino is even frothier than its cousins, the flat white and the latte. It starts with a layer of espresso, to which a moderate serve of steamed milk is added. It's then topped with a thick layer of milk foam, which is normally dusted with a heavy sprinkling of chocolate powder to give it some sweetness and a mild sugar hit. The cappuccino originated in Italy in the 16th century, and it actually gets its name from the Capuchin Friars - an order of monks who wore hooded robes the same distinctive colour as the chocolate dust (the name literally means "little hood"). It's now spread worldwide and is popular in Australia and throughout Europe and America.

Mocha - Also called a "caffè mocha" or "mochaccino", a mocha is coffee and chocolate mixed together. The exact method for this varies - some add espresso to a hot chocolate, while others add chocolate syrup or powder to a latte. Either way, the result is a sweet mix of coffee and chocolate. The name comes from the city of Mokha in Yemen, which was a significant trade centre for coffee in the 17th century.

Piccolo latte - Also known simply as a piccolo or bongo, this looks like a smaller version of a latte. The fact it's commonly served in a smaller version of a latte glass adds to this, as does the fact that "piccolo" is just Italian for "small". While it is prepared in a similar way to a latte, the key thing to bear in mind is that although it's smaller, it still contains a full shot of espresso - so it's the same amount of coffee in a more concentrated form. It's sometimes thought of as a halfway step between a latte and a short black.

Café au Lait - Meaning "coffee with milk" in French, this term can refer to a number of beverages in Europe, and in some places is simply another term for a latte. In Australia, it normally refers to a stronger type of latte (half espresso, half milk) that uses scalded milk, giving a bolder flavour.

Magic coffee - This is a recent Australian innovation, hailing from Melbourne. It's made up of a double shot of ristretto coffee topped with steamed milk. This gives a strong coffee flavour with a smooth, creamy, syrupy mouth-feel.

Black Coffees

Short black - Also known simply as an espresso, this is simply a single serve or "shot" of espresso (around 30 ml) in a suitably small cup. Espresso is the basic ingredient of most types of barista-made coffee, so in a way, a short black is the simplest coffee you can get - 30 ml of espresso and nothing else. The coffiest of the coffees.

Long black - This is the closest you'll find on the café menu to the plain black coffee you might have at home - unless you're at a café or restaurant that serves drip filter coffee. Hot water is poured into a cup, and two shots of espresso are poured in after. Strong, simple, black, and bold.

Americano - While this name might give people a mental image of Italian-Americans drinking some strong, intensely caffeinated brew, an americano is actually a half-strength long black - hot water with a single shot of espresso. Although in this case, the hot water is normally added second. It's commonly believed that the term is a reference to the practice in World War II of American G.I.s adding hot water to espresso (to make it closer in taste to the coffee they were accustomed to), but it does appear in books as far back as the 1920s.

Ristretto - If even espresso isn't coffee-ish enough for you, this might be where you want to look. A ristretto packs the same coffee flavour (and caffeine) into a single 15 - 20 ml shot, giving it a very intense taste without being too bitter. Ristretto is Italian for "restricted", referring to the brewing method (which uses less water over a shorter time).

Macchiato - Also referred to as a short macchiato, this is a short black with a little bit of creaminess introduced - a small amount of milk and a small dollop of foam on top. A halfway step between a piccolo and a short black.

Other Drinks

Chai latte - This is a staple cafe alternative for non-coffee drinkers. Chai is a sweet mixture of black tea and spices such as cinnamon, cardamom, cloves, ginger, star anise and black peppercorns. It's sometimes thought of as a low-caffeine option, although using black tea as a base means it can still have up to half the caffeine of a standard coffee (although some spice-heavy mixes might only have a tenth of the caffeine). The drink is prepared in a similar way to a latte, and comes out looking much the same - although with a very different flavour profile.

Dirty chai - For someone who wants the best of both worlds, a dirty chai is a chai latte with a shot of espresso added. This can actually make it more caffeinated than a standard coffee, as it contains a full shot of coffee and the caffeine from the tea. But a good choice for someone who's looking for a morning pick-me-up.

Vienna - For someone looking for something sweet with some coffee punch, the Vienna coffee (or black Vienna) is possibly a good choice. Effectively, it's a long black with whipped cream - two shots of espresso topped with a heap of whipped cream, generally in a raised cone like a Sunday and dusted liberally with chocolate or cocoa powder. The whipped cream will generally melt into the hot coffee over time, making it slowly turn whiter and creamier.

White Vienna - Similar to a black Vienna but with more milk, the white Vienna is effectively a cappuccino topped with whipped cream rather than milk foam. Like a black Vienna, the cream is generally piled high into a conical peak and dusted with chocolate.

Affogato - Half coffee, half summer dessert, the affogato is a scoop of ice cream with a shot of espresso poured over the top. Sometimes, a serve of special liqueur is also added - so be wary if you're pregnant or otherwise not drinking. This is another one you don't want to leave too long, as the hot coffee and cold ice cream slowly blend together into a creamy mix.

Irish coffee - This is actually a sweet alcoholic drink, so it walks the line between being a coffee and a cocktail, and you probably won't get one at a venue without a liquor licence. It's a mix of coffee, sugar, thick cream, and some form of liquor - traditionally Irish whiskey, but more recently, it's become common to use Baileys or a similar type of Irish cream. Generally pricier than your average coffee.

Iced coffee - A very popular drink in Australia and widely available as a flavoured milk variety, iced coffee is a sweet, cold drink best suited for hot weather. It's generally a serve of coffee (either cooled-down espresso or cold brewed coffee) with milk, ice, and a scoop of ice cream - possibly with added syrup or sugar for some extra sweetness. It originates from Algeria - which explains a lot, given 90% of the country is covered by the Sahara desert.

Frappuccino - Originally trademarked by Starbucks in 1994, the Frappuccino is a sweeter version of an iced coffee topped with whipped cream, syrup, and other toppings. More recently, they've begun to crop up in non-Starbucks locations. It's sometimes regarded a little like a milkshake for adults.

Nitro - A recent high-tech invention out of the U.S. that's becoming increasingly popular with coffee connoisseurs, Nitro coffee is a cold, sweet coffee infused with nitrogen gas. Generally served black but creamy in texture, the nitrogen bubbles in the coffee give it a frothy head - making it look more like beer or stout than coffee. Some venues even serve it on tap!

The Takeaway

Working as a barista can be both a challenging and rewarding field. Many of the skills are easy to learn but hard to master, and some are as much an art as a science. It can also be a physically demanding role. But it can be a great way to share your passion for coffee with others and leave each of your customers (hopefully) walking out happier than when they came in.

Maintain a clean, healthy workspace, take the time to learn and know your craft, and treat your customers with respect and care, and you'll likely find the role of barista to be a highly rewarding one.

Happy brewing!