

# Perfect cup of joe can be complex

By Matt Richtel, New York Times

Tristan Walach has a tattoo of the famous Las Vegas welcome sign on his neck. He goes by the name Ant. He teaches people how to make coffee, professionally.

I have come to learn from him.

“People like you are the best to train,” he says, sizing me up. “You don’t have bad habits or preconceived notions. You’re a blank slate.”

We’re at Sightglass, a cafe near downtown San Francisco with a huge coffee roaster near the front door. But Ant and I are tucked away upstairs, cordoned behind a chain and a sign: “Training in Session.”

Such training centers are increasingly common, and not just at cafes: there are certification classes for baristas and even Camp Pull A-Shot, a four-day, three-night event. And there are also a growing number of regional and national “throwdowns” to find the most technically proficient, graceful makers of the best-tasting coffee drinks.

Am I skeptical? Well, making coffee, even espresso, roughly entails pouring or pushing water through coffee. Sometimes by flicking a switch or pushing a button. Sure, Ant, you can up my coffee game, and then I’ll spend three days at Camp Let’s Make Oatmeal.

And, hey, I’m not precisely a blank slate. Without any training, I brew a very solid morning latte. And it’s superior to Starbucks, I brag to my wife, using only a \$100 espresso maker and beans from a local cafe.

“How hard can coffee be? It’s an attitude we’re constantly encountering,” noted Ellie Matuszak, director of professional development for the Specialty Coffee Association of America, a trade group with thousands of company members and 1,200 people in its growing Barista Guild.

Ant, 34, whose title is director of education, says coffee requires a deft touch. “It’s the most complicated beverage we consume,” he said.

The training center at Sightglass includes a counter with several grinders, an industrial-strength espresso machine, a scale, coffee tampers and other paraphernalia. On a nearby island of reclaimed blond wood are 10 handleless cups, organized in five pairs, each half full of light-brown beans.

But first, we are going to watch Ant’s PowerPoint presentation about where the best beans come from and how they are picked. There is also a slide titled “The Origin Myth.” It’s folklore, a big-bang theory of the discovery of coffee by a goat herder in Ethiopia.

Then it’s time to commence cupping.

This entails smelling the contents of the white cups – beans from Kenya, Costa Rica, Ethiopia, El Salvador and Guatemala. I cannot detect much difference.

Ant then introduces me to the La Marzocco Linea, an espresso maker that runs \$8,000 to \$10,000. (The really expensive machines, the La Marzocco Strada and the Slayer, are downstairs for the actual baristas.) To its left is a \$1,500 Mazzer Major grinder. On top is a button. My job is to push that button, dispensing precisely 19.5 grams of coffee into the filter.

I’m supposed to give the coffee a little sift to even it out, then pack it down with the tamper. Ant shows me how to create about 35 pounds of pressure, a give-or-take amount achieved by

bending my knees for leverage and pushing on the tamper until the coffee pushes back.

This step is crucial, Ant says, because otherwise water flows unevenly through the coffee, creating unwanted channels. I press another button, to run the water through the coffee. We press a timer to make sure I leave the water flowing for 25 seconds. Brown and tan espresso flows into the demitasse, which Ant calls the “vessel.”

Ant sips. “It’s not terribly offensive.”

I sip. It is, actually, terribly offensive. Sour and bitter. Ant makes a cup using the same steps. It has a hint of sweetness, just shy of floral, no aftertaste. I make another. Just as bad as my first. Maybe I need milk.

Ant explains how to steam the milk. In brief: position the steam wand just below the milk’s surface until the milk swirls in a circular motion and puffs up as it absorbs the steam, then drop the wand lower until the milk reaches 135 degrees, as verified by a thermometer. There’s a sweet spot between milk and temperature, the point at which the sugars cook and the milk becomes sweeter, but before the sugars burn.

I try a few times. I make water-thin milk, poured over bitter shots. Finally, I get the milk consistency right, like wet paint. I try a little latte art. It looks like mating amoebas.

Ant offers wisdom: “The difference between a good barista and a great one is the great barista has the courage to toss a shot.” We toss my amoebas in the sink.

I have a second chance coming. I tell Ant that I’m getting more training with Chris Baca at Verve, a cafe and roaster in Santa Cruz. His eyes light up. “He’s great! I trained with him,” he says.

But first, I try to put some of my training to work at home

the next morning. I throw out the first three shots. Something is wrong. I was making excellent espresso just the day before. I have actually gotten worse.

Baca, 32, planned to be a high school history teacher. But he dropped out of college and took a job at a cafe in Modesto. He developed a love affair with coffee, moved to San Francisco to work for a trendy cafe called Ritual, then started competing in 2006. In 2010, he finished second out of 50 competitors in the United States Barista Championship. In the freestyle competition, he made a crème anglaise espresso drink, cherry infused with a citrus garnish.

“I know, this all seems like ‘Best in Show,’” says Ryan O’Donovan, an owner of Verve, referring to the faux documentary about dog shows. “It seems ridiculous. We’re trying to make it less ridiculous.”

Verve, where Mr. Baca is director of education, devotes 1,500 square feet to training. It’s part of what the cafe considers the “third wave” of the coffee movement – the first being campfire and drip coffee, the second the Starbucks revolution and the next understanding and evoking the complexity of coffee. Training, O’Donovan says, “is the nucleus of what we do.”

I show Baca what I’ve learned. He calls my first shot dry. He is being kind.

Baca asked me to bring my usual brand of coffee and makes a shot with it. It is not good. Lesson No. 1: coffee matters. Just because the bag says “fair trade” or “locally roasted” does not mean the highest-grade beans have been selected and put through meticulous roasting. We toss my \$13-a-pound coffee in the trash. Then Baca provides a math lesson.

The essence of good espresso, of good coffee in general, revolves around three numbers: the amount of quality dry coffee used, the amount of time water flows through it and the

amount of coffee that comes out the other end. When the ratio is right, the process extracts the best flavor. If it is wrong, the good flavor never surfaces or is watered down. A mistake in seconds or grams, I am coming to learn, is the difference between something wonderful and awful.

Baca explains that you have to experiment to find just the right balance of these three elements for each coffee machine and coffee grind, and then replicate them. He has tested the machinery at Sightglass and determined that we want to use 17 grams of high-end coffee and run water for 25 seconds to yield about 30 grams of coffee.

Again, this seems simple, given that the grinder is preset to deliver the grams I want, and I can verify using the scale. All I have to do is press buttons. My first shot tastes foul. But Baca calls my second "bright and snappy."

He shows me how to paint with steamed milk: hold the decanter six inches from the cup, pour a medium-sized stream at a constant rate and when the cup is half filled, lower the decanter close to the cup. When the cup is nearly full, wriggle your hand quickly to create a shape that will make the foam blossom out. Finish with a flourish by drawing a bit of milk through the middle of the design. After a few tries, I'm able to make something that looks like a pine tree, though I was aiming for a heart.

Great, I am improving. But this is impractical. I buy my coffee preground. I don't own a scale.

"A \$10 scale is the best investment you can make for your coffee game," Baca says. And because coffee density and brewing time are so significant, he says, a grinder is not far behind. Some experts say grinding your beans fresh is the most important priority.

Reality check: I'm trying to make it through chaotic mornings at home with a clamoring family. Mr. O'Donovan is amused. Why,

he asks, would I make espresso in the morning, let alone latte?

“I make drip coffee,” O’Donovan explains. Baca does, too. That’s because making a good espresso requires preparation and cleanup. Even when it all goes right, it takes time. Like making a good meal.

“Coffee isn’t just coffee,” O’Donovan says.

It’s “just like anything else,” Baca chimes in.

I instantly take his meaning: Coffee – what I assumed was just a simple, necessary thing to start my day – is something more than that. It may not require certification but it does require more attention than I realized.

With my cram session at an end, O’Donovan leaves me with a laugh and a warning: “You’re heading down the rabbit hole.”

In the ensuing days, I start using the timer on the microwave to make sure I’m pulling my espresso shots for 25 seconds. I troll the Internet for counsel on what might be a next-step espresso maker. But even with my old gear and a bit of leftover coffee from Sightglass, my shots have gotten discernibly better, and occasionally good.

I place an order for coffee from Verve. When two different roasts arrive and I make a show of my excitement, my wife rolls her eyes. She challenges whether I can even tell the difference between the new coffee and two other blends I used to swear by. So we do a blind smell test.

I nail it. My wife seems surprised; who is this new discerning creature? Just getting started, I tell her. Wait until you see what we can do with milk.