



Cole Hood keeps a close eye on his espresso during a barista training class at Intelligentsia's headquarters, 1850 W. Fulton. The monthly classes are open to the public and allow students to practice on commercial-grade equipment. | RICHARD A. CHAPMAN-SUN-TIMES PHOTOS

SO YOU WANNA BE A BARISTA?



ESPRESSO 101

Tips from Alexandra Switzer, Intelligentsia's wholesale training specialist:

- ◆ Grind your coffee fresh and only enough for one extraction.
- ◆ Distribute the coffee evenly through the portafilter with your fingers. Spread the coffee across the surface and around to the edges of the portafilter. Avoid pressing down on the coffee while distributing.
- ◆ Tamp evenly and firmly.
- ◆ Flush the grouphead (the part of the espresso machine that dispenses water) before inserting the portafilter. Insert the portafilter and immediately start brewing. Do not let the coffee sit in the group head.
- ◆ Pay attention to the color of your shots. With most espresso, you are looking for a reddish-brown color with very little light brown color.

STEAMED MILK 101

- ◆ Start with cold milk and a cold stainless steel steaming pitcher. Whole milk makes the silkiest and most flavorful foam.
- ◆ Submerge the tip of the steam wand slightly off-center in the pitcher. The purpose is to create a whirlpool when you turn on the steam wand.
- ◆ When the whirlpool dips down toward the steam wand, listen for a gentle crackling noise. This is the sound of steam hitting the surface of the milk and creating foam.
- ◆ You do not want to see bubbles while the milk is crackling. If you see bubbles, raise the pitcher slightly to create a smaller distance between the surface of the milk and the tip of the steam wand.
- ◆ Do not heat the milk above 160 degrees.

Jerry Soverinsky

TO REGISTER

For more information on Intelligentsia's barista training class, go to www.intelligentsiacoffee.com or call (312) 563-0023.

The next class is Thursday. Upcoming classes are scheduled for Feb. 11, March 11 and March 18.

HANDS-ON | Intelligentsia class shows coffee lovers secrets to flawless java

BY JERRY SOVERINSKY

I tend to live by the philosophy, "Need is a function of what's on sale at Costco."

And so it is that I awoke one recent morning, the proud owner of a \$450 espresso machine and 26 monster truck tires for my Nissan Sentra (less than \$22 per tire — how does Costco do it?)

I put the tires to use immediately. But for months, the espresso machine sat idly on my kitchen countertop, relegated to a role as a glorified hot water dispenser.

Don't misunderstand, the espresso machine wasn't defective. It's just that despite reading and studying the machine's instruction manual, my attempts at extracting a respectable espresso or crafting a drinkable espresso-based drink (my lattes had the consistency of vanilla milk shake backwash) were disappointing.

But with a Starbucks weekly tab that began steadily climbing as the temperatures dipped, I sought assistance with learning to fully exploit my Baby Gaggia's capabilities.

Enter Intelligentsia Coffee. The Chicago-based coffee roaster, a Lake View staple since the company's founding in 1995, has evolved into one of the country's most acclaimed coffee companies, adding two Chicago stores, another in Los Angeles and a cupping-training lab in New York.

Intelligentsia ships more than 2 million pounds of beans each year from its massive 25,000-square-foot roasting works on West Fulton to coffee lovers across North America.

In an effort to share its java passions, the company launched a barista training program three years ago, helping fill a growing need among its customers.

"Customers e-mailed and made requests in our retail stores for a class to receive training and feedback from Intelligentsia baristas," says Alexandra Switzer, Intelligentsia's wholesale training specialist. "It is a great opportunity for us to educate and interact with our customers to enjoy fantastic coffee."

The \$200, three-hour course is offered monthly at its Fulton facility and is limited to eight students, each receiving hands-on training and supervision from two Intelligentsia instructors.

There's no skimping on machinery or ingredients here. Within minutes of informal

introductions and step-by-step instruction, each of us set to work on commercial-grade espresso machines, practicing and eventually refining our extraction techniques with an endless supply of espresso beans.

I practiced on a hugely impressive, \$18,000 Italian-made La Marzocco machine, the same make as the one used in Intelligentsia's coffeehouses — just one of many reasons why the class has proven so popular among Intelligentsia followers.

"The class is a rare opportunity for home enthusiasts to gain experience on commercial-grade espresso machines," Switzer says.

Switzer says the class attracts roughly 75 percent non-coffee professionals and 25 percent "coffee people" from across the Midwest and sometimes beyond. My December class was composed of four local coffee lovers and a Denver coffeehouse owner.

"I wanted to be able to train my employees well," said Jetty Plooy, owner of the seven-year-old coffeehouse Espressoria in Boulder, Colo., who made the trek to Chicago for Intelligentsia's course. "I used to live in Chicago and know that Intelligentsia is very knowledgeable when it comes to coffee."

In addition to bean extraction, there's ample direction on how to steam and foam milk for producing that perfect latte, cappuccino or macchiato. My milk steaming efforts were less than proficient — continued attempts to craft a latte art leaf produced what appeared to be a ransom note written with Cyrillic characters. But having drunk all 14 of my "mistake" drinks, I had other things to worry about, what with my caffeine-induced episode of atrial fibrillation.

At the end of our training session, Intelligentsia's staff rewarded each participant with a pound of freshly roasted espresso beans — Intelligentsia Black Cat blend — a flavorful expression of gratitude for our concentrated efforts.

I couldn't wait to put them to the test on my Baby Gaggia. And if all of my hard work was for naught, and I was unable to transfer my skills to my at-home machine? Not to worry, I reassured myself, I could always return the machine.

After all, I bought it at Costco.

Jerry Soverinsky is a Chicago free-lance writer.



Intelligentsia training specialist Alexandra Switzer (center) shows foamed milk to students. Switzer says the barista training program was launched because of requests from customers.