

ESPRESSO, GRAZIE!

FREE Guide to espresso coffee and coffee machines



Espresso coffee originated with the pavement cafes of Italy, where the patrons beneath their umbrellas sipped the sharp brew fresh from the big chrome-plated machine hissing and gurgling to itself in the shady interior.

Today, modern technology has miniaturised the process and brought the espresso machine to the home. It is now possible to enjoy fresh espresso at the touch of a button, even if you can't add the warm sunshine or the ambience of a Florentine piazza.

What *is* espresso?

Well, it's strong, dark and arrives very quickly in small cups. What's not so obvious is that also arrives without some of the less wholesome components of the coffee bean, and is consequently the healthiest way to drink coffee.

Espresso is made by forcing hot water under high pressure through the freshly ground coffee, where it rapidly extracts the coffee essence in full measure without lingering long enough to release any unwanted elements.

Fresh espresso is also the base for other popular coffees, wearing a hat of frothed milk and chocolate powder as a cappuccino or lengthened with pure hot water into a milder Americano.

The making of a good espresso



As with any other culinary process, the freshness and quality of the ingredients are of paramount importance. You won't make a good cup of coffee by any process if you start off with the remains of a pack of coffee-grounds that have been lurking in the fridge for a month or two!

Good-quality fresh coffee grounds and fresh water are the basis of good coffee. (Tip: If the tap water in your area is does not taste that good, either use bottled water or water that has been through a Brita filter.) With the speed of the espresso process, these qualities of freshness become even more important – which is why the more sophisticated espresso machines grind their beans immediately before brewing. Manual ground-coffee machines leave this job to you.

At Art of Living, we would always advise you to grind your coffee from the bean just before use rather than using a pre-ground coffee from a packet, no matter how illustrious the maker's name or how clever the re-sealing system.

The other popular method of ensuring fresh grounds is the use of the Nespresso system, where new-ground coffee is packed into vacuum sealed foil capsules. The seal is only broken by the machine forcing the hot water through the capsule. The coffee is thus kept in peak condition until the moment of brewing.

Espresso coffee is always delivered direct into the cup, and should be drunk straight away. The process does not demand very hot water, so the coffee is at sippable temperature straight from the machine. No coffee is improved by being kept waiting!

Stove-top espresso

A true classic of the kitchen is the cast alloy Mocha coffee pot, which makes espresso by heating water in the bottom chamber until the pressure builds up and forces the hot water through the grounds held in a filter clamped between the lower and upper chambers, delivering fresh coffee into the upper chamber.



This was the traditional way of making coffee in Italian homes until the domestic espresso machine was developed. Although far simpler than the machine, in skilled hands the old Mocha pot can still make a very fine cup of coffee, while as an object it's a delight to look at.

Electric espresso machines

An electric espresso machine takes and heats the water, then uses a pump to force it at a pressure of from fifteen to twenty bar (225 – 300 lb/sq in) through the coffee grounds held in a small metal filter – fresh grounds for each cup.

The cheapest and simplest machines use either pre-ground coffee or the vacuum-sealed Nespresso coffee capsules. Some of ground-coffee machines can also use coffee sachets made by Illy or E.S.E. The more sophisticated 'bean to cup' machines grind the coffee immediately before use, to the exact quantity and coarseness required, from beans stored in a hopper.

With the exception of the most basic Nespresso machine, all our espresso coffee-makers provide a steam nozzle for frothing the milk used to make cappuccino. Quite a few of these will also provide hot water at the correct brewing temperature to add to espresso coffee to produce a long cup of Americano.



Once used, the coffee grounds need to be removed before the next cup can be brewed. On manual machines, this must be done by hand, but automatic bean-to-cup types discharge the waste grounds to a hopper inside the machine;. These machines can thus produce cups of coffee on a continuous basis – well, at least until the water or coffee beans run out!

The Nespresso system

The Nespresso system of vacuum-sealed capsules is a very clean, consistent and convenient way of making good coffee.. The capsule is placed in the machine, the switch pressed and voila! Espresso. Some machines will even dump the used capsule into a waste hopper for you.

The capsules are only available from Nespresso. There are ten regular coffee blends in the range, including two decaffeinated, and additional 'guest' blends are offered from time to time. Capsules can be ordered by phone (0800 442 442) or online (www.nespresso.com) and are delivered direct to your home or office – usually within 72 hours. They can also be bought 'over the counter' from Nespresso's London shop in Knightsbridge.



Only dedicated Nespresso machines can use these capsules. The dual-use ground coffee/sachet machines accept coffee from other suppliers such as Illy or E.S.E.; these are available from some supermarkets.

Care and convenience

Like all machines, espresso coffee makers need a little looking after to give of their best. Waste grounds hoppers will need emptying from time to time (automatic machines will usually tell you when this needs doing), and the same goes for the overspill catch trays incorporated in the cup stand.

The quality of the water supply has an important influence on coffee-machine operation, as hard water will produce limescale that needs to be removed at intervals. This is done by passing a special solution through the machine, allowing sufficient time for it to act on the scale; on automatic machines, there will usually be a programme for this purpose. A few machines also incorporate water filtering systems, with elements that need cleaning or replacement.

And, of course, you may well want to give your machine an occasional loving polish; the traditional Italian café machines are always a paragon of gleaming chrome and glittering glass.

Espresso machines come in many guises ... from retro through hi-tech to avant-garde, from stove top pots through manual Nespresso machines to highly sophisticated programmable automatic bean-to-cup machines ... the one thing they have in common, however, is that they will all make really first-class cup of coffee – enjoy!

