

Espresso Sensory Test and Taste Test with Kim Sammons

Espressos are the most basic coffee a Barista is ever likely to make. However, it is also the most important coffee a Barista is every likely to make. The espresso is the most pure form of coffee and makes up the base of any coffee drink found on a barista's coffee house menu, and a poorly constructed espresso results in a bad tasting coffee. In this test I'm going to show you exactly what you should be looking for in the perfect espresso.

In order to help you understand the following test it is important that you have a prepared espresso in front of you, either prepared by yourself, or purchased from a local coffee house. With a fresh espresso in front of you let's begin.

There are four different parts of an espresso.

The four key parts of an espresso are:

- Appearance
- Aroma
- Taste
- And finally the aftertaste

Appearance

Take a look at the espresso. It should have been poured into an appropriate espresso cup, a small white china/porcelain cup that sits on a small saucer. The level of the espresso should never fill the cup. A single espresso is only ever 30ml, and a good espresso cup will leave the espresso coffee just over the halfway full mark. Many espresso cups are manufactured with a line indicating the correct fill level. The cup will be clean, splash free and the remaining unfilled part of the inside of the cup should not have any drips on or splashes. There should also be no evidence of runs down the outside of the cup.

Now look at the espresso color and texture. The espresso itself should have a rich and deep golden crema on top; this is usually evident in 2 different shades of gold. The crema should look quite thick, under 1/8 inch. If you take the espresso cup in your hand and gently tip it from left to right the crema should move so you can't see any coffee underneath and the crema should remain intact. If you take your teaspoon and slice through the crema with the handle, you should see the crema move back closing the gap without disappearing. Finally, if you take some "Azucar Moreno" and sprinkle it on the crema it should slowly dissolve through but not make the crema dissolve.

Aroma

With the cup placed down on the table, place your hand over the top of the cup and slowly move the cup clockwise in a swirling motion, so that the espresso moves around inside the cup. By doing this you are stirring up the aroma of the espresso but keeping it in the cup and under your hand.

Now lift your hand away from the cup, but not off it and smell the espresso softly with your hand cupping your nose and the espresso cup. This will concentrate the different aromas of the espresso that your nose picks up (clean hands are essential). Close your eyes whilst taking the breath in through your nose and really concentrate on the smell. Now try and identify the different smells you get – write them down on a piece of paper. Normally, a perfect espresso will create aromas associated with:

- Chocolate
- Hazelnut
- Burnt wood
- Flowers
- Toffee/caramel

Everyone has a different nose but you should be able to pick out a few of those quite easily with a good espresso.

Taste

Tasting the espresso is done in 2 different ways. Firstly, slowly slurp the espresso drawing in air at the same time. Move the espresso around your teeth and mouth without swallowing. The initial tastes you should experience are a sweet taste on the end of your tongue and a bitter taste on the top of your tongue toward the back. The bitter taste shouldn't taste sour at this point, just bitter. You can swallow now.

For the second tasting, take a normal sip of the espresso and let the coffee sit in the bottom of your mouth and relax your tongue over it for a couple of moments. This time you should experience an acidic or sour taste and your mouth will start to water. Once you have swallowed you should get a dry taste under your tongue.

When you taste an espresso try to focus on the taste, identifying the taste and where the taste is on your tongue. I've added an illustration of a tongue and where you should expect to taste the tastes you get from a perfect espresso.

Lastly, once you have drunk your espresso you'll be left with an aftertaste this is best analyzed if you take a drink of water.



Aftertaste

Once you have taken a drink of water you will notice a sweet taste in your mouth. It is generally good practice to drink water after an espresso as it cleans your pallet and also as coffee can dehydrate you.

Conducting this simple sensory taste test on espressos will help you identify the quality of the espresso and it is also a good indication of the quality of other coffee-based drinks on the barista menu at any given coffee house. If you are a Barista yourself and have conducted the espresso tasting on your own prepared espresso you will be able to identify if there is room to improve your espressos and can recalibrate your equipment accordingly. Remember that the perfect espresso is the important starting point in achieving superior quality in all your barista drinks.