

Home Espresso... The Complete Buyer's Guide

So you're thinking about taking the big plunge into the world of espresso for yourself or perhaps as a gift... Congratulations in advance!

Creating espresso at home is not only an increasingly affordable possibility, but the coffee drinks easily rival favorite store bought concoctions in both quality and taste.

Maybe you're brand new to espresso. If so, don't worry – you're safe here! Let's cover the basics first...

Brewed coffee and espresso are not really the same thing. The term “espresso” actually refers to the process of using a combination of serious pressure and perfectly heated water to fully extract all of the best qualities from ground and roasted coffee beans.

Yes, espresso is stronger than brewed coffee, but is typically served in much smaller one ounce solo shots or as doubles. The espresso extraction process brings out the best in a coffee bean, resulting in a naturally slightly sweet flavor with a smooth layer of crema on top.

As opposed to brewed coffee, espresso is individually prepared and served piping hot and fresh, ideally within less than a minute after extraction. Of course, espresso coffee is also the base for our perpetually favorite cappuccino, latte, and mocha drinks – so espresso is versatile too!

The Vocabulary of Espresso

Barista – The person calling the shots. Well, kind of... Actually, barista is the term used to describe a person making the espresso.

Shot – One freshly prepared serving of espresso. A solo shot is typically one ounce while a double is two.

Pull – The process of extracting a shot of espresso from the espresso machine. The term comes from the original lever machines where the barista literally had to pull the lever to create the java.

Crema – The delicious and ever desirable brownish-red foamy layer on top of a shot of espresso that is the essence of the drink. Espresso is not espresso without crema.

Seven Awesome Reasons to Have a Home Espresso Machine

One. With a home espresso maker, delicious creamy espresso and other espresso based drinks are just a few steps away and ready just minutes after the urge strikes. No need to go out and brave the elements only to spend money for a subpar shot or two.

Two. By self-fulfilling an espresso fix at home rather than going to the café every day and paying several bucks per shot, the home barista will save tons of money even after investing in quality equipment.

Three. Home pulled espresso is usually done right every time, simply resulting in much better tasting java. Many cafés don't properly train their baristas or use the best ingredients available. Simply put, the enthusiastic among us can out-barista even the best baristas with a little practice!

Four. It's fun! Being able to create espresso drinks at home allows for more control, but also the ability to tweak, adjust, and experiment even with creating new recipes – something that can't be done at just any old coffee shop.

Five. Being able to make espresso at home is perfect for those who love to entertain. Coffee loving friends will want to visit all the time, knowing that they can coax an awesome shot when the stop by.

Six. The at home barista with the right equipment will definitely be the star of the neighborhood. Sharing with neighbors is a fantastic way to spur interesting conversation as well as long lasting friendships.

Seven. Why not? Professional quality equipment is finally available to the average consumer, so having gourmet espresso gear at home is an opportunity only recently possible. Plus the high end gadgetry looks really cool in the kitchen!

The Essential Components of Café Quality Home Espresso

The Burr Grinder

A quality burr style bean grinder is an absolute necessity for successfully making espresso. If the grind is uneven or off in any way, chances are the java will be less than desirable. It's hard to explain this without getting too technical, but the if the grind is not right, the espresso process will not work at all – it's even more than just a taste thing. For those who just want a budget-minded way to get started or are looking to save time, many of the entry level espresso machines will work with specially designed already ground and prepared coffee pods.

The Espresso Machine

This component probably wasn't too hard to guess! The key for real espresso at home though is to use an espresso machine that produces serious pressure while keeping the temperature just right. There are several excellent entry level machines available on the consumer market, but some of those who are really, really passionate about their espresso will choose to go all out with ultra-enviable commercial models. The sky's the limit!

The Tamper

Another essential component for equipping an at home espresso setup is the tamper. Basically, the tamper is a pestle-like tool used to pack the ground coffee firmly into the portafilter's basket compartment. Ideally, the grounds will be tamped at about a pressure of 30 lbs, slightly more or less depending on the espresso machine. Sometimes machines come with a cheapo tamper that'll work in a bind, but seeking something more substantial is only inevitable.

The Cutting Board

Any serious home barista would appreciate having a solid cutting board to work on as they pack the portafilter basket full of coffee with a tamper. Not only does it make cleanup a breeze, but it also protects the countertop or work surface from frequent wear and tear.

The Espresso Cups

Cups or mugs designed specifically for espresso are important for a couple of reasons. First, they are sized to fit under the spout of the espresso maker – something some larger coffee mugs can't do. Also, espresso cups are intended to be pre-warmed in order to not cool the temperature sensitive espresso as it's poured into the cup. Also worth a mention is that thicker isn't always better either – the extra material has a tendency to steal heat away from the java.

The Good Coffee

What good is having all the essential equipment if the coffee used is less than par? The perfect coffee bean is a matter of preference – some prefer darker roasts while others prefer a light roast. Regardless of the favoritism, quality counts here.

The Practice

Yes, practice is an essential too. Don't be frustrated if the perfect crema is elusive at first. Keep trying and espresso will be second nature in no time at all. Practice makes perfect!

Tips for Making Superb Espresso

- Most experienced espresso fanatics unanimously agree that the grind of the coffee beans is the most important aspect of the entire espresso process – focus first on achieving the perfect grind.
- Use an espresso machine that is comfortable and easy to understand. This varies for the barista, but it could be an artful (but finicky) manual lever machine or it could be a totally automated device.
- Ultimately it comes down to consistency.
- While learning the ropes, try keeping all things the equal all the time. For example, a tried and true formula for success would be using 9 bars of pressure, 195 degrees temperature, a 20 to 25 second pull, and 30 lbs. of tamped coffee grounds pressure. This leaves only one element for adjustment – how finely the beans are ground.

Getting More Familiar with Espresso Machines

The easiest way to get familiar with espresso machines is to understand the different terminology unique to the niche. As espresso based coffee drinks are quite a bit different than the drip or percolated brewed coffee that we've grown to know so well, it almost helps to sort of forget all about regular coffee for awhile and instead to think of espresso as a totally different drink with a very unique set of equipment. Let's get a little more familiar with espresso machines by looking at the components...

Steam Powered “Espresso” Machines – While they might make good strong coffee, steam powered “espresso” makers are not the real thing. They just don't produce the pressure needed to make real espresso and they're not capable of creating the ever desirable crema.

Lever Espresso Machines – The earliest form of the espresso machine and still popular today amongst those who appreciate the art of good coffee. The lever, sometimes aided by spring power, hydraulically forces heated water through the coffee to create espresso. Although they can make a really great shot of espresso, the learning curve is steep – therefore, they're not the best option for the faint of heart or for novice home use. We'll be focusing on automatic pump powered machines here.

Automatic Espresso Machines – Automatic espresso machines are usually the type best suited for home and professional use. They're powered by an electric pump instead of manual lever action, allowing for powerful pressure capabilities and ultra reliable consistency. Semi auto machines simply use an on and off switch to activate the pump – the barista still has full control over timing. Fully automatic machines add some extra features such as programmable pull times, taking some of the feel and touch ability away from the user. Semi autos are generally the most accepted by fanatics for their balance of power, control, and tweakability.

Ultra Automatic Espresso Machines – These modern marvels of espresso machines literally do it all, from grinding the coffee beans to pumping out the finished product with just the right amount of crema. They're pretty fancy, but they do take some of the control and artfulness out of the extraction process. And the price is another factor altogether.

Portafilter – If you picture the handle sticking out of the front of an espresso maker, that's the handle of the portafilter. The portafilter is the metal basket that actually holds the tamped ground coffee.

Boiler – An espresso machine's boiler is where the water is heated and the steam for the steamer attachment gets created. Brass is traditionally considered an excellent material for the boiler because of its superb heat retention properties, but it's also quite common to find aluminum or stainless steel.

Pump – All automatic espresso machines derive their pressure from an electrically powered pump. Quality varies by manufacturer and price of the machine. Some pumps make quite a racket as they operate, but that's just how they're designed to work.

Brew Group – In a nutshell, the brew group is just a fancy way to describe the internal plumbing that carries the heated water from the boiler to its final destination of the coffee in the portafilter's basket. Good thermal retention qualities are important here.

Steam Wand – An attachment on the espresso machine that uses steam produced by the boiler to steam heat and froth milk or other liquids used in espresso based drinks.

Do's and Don'ts of Buying Espresso Machines

- Don't pay for extras that you won't use. Simple is probably better.
- Do look for clear easy to read gauges and indicator lights.
- Don't worry too much about the cup warming feature. It's a nice addition, but it will probably still be necessary to preheat the cups via other methods.
- Do aim for switches that feel solid.
- Don't buy a machine that has a one push on and off button instead of a variable knob control for the steam wand. Precise control is important here.
- Do consider the ease of cleaning a machine.

Guidance on Buying a Quality Grinder

Because the grinder is such an essential part of creating good espresso, it's worth buying the best grinder a budget will allow. Getting the grind right is by all means the foundation that the rest of the espresso extraction method is based on.

When looking at coffee grinders, it's important to know that the burr type grinder is really the only variety that is best suited for espresso. Instead of using a sharpened blade to unevenly disintegrate the beans, burr grinders use rotating burred discs to accurately and evenly grind coffee to just the right consistency for espresso.

There's nothing wrong with choosing a simple grinder without a bunch of extras such as fancy dosers (they feed the coffee beans into the grinder). But quality is important. The better quality the grinder is, the more variations of grind size that will be offered. This allows for finer tuning for getting the formula just right for the most superb shot of espresso.

One additional thing to mention – it's better to have no grinder at all than to use a subpar device. Decent quality pre-ground coffee is available for those just getting started, but do make sure it is an espresso specific grind consistency.

Here are a few notes on four popular grinders frequently used by espresso lovers at home. There's one for each budget (all prices shown are averaged approximates)...

Mazzer Mini – \$400

The Mazzer Mini is an excellent high-end light duty – think home use – commercial grade flat burr grinder. It includes a doser too. Those who use it love the quality of grind it produces but also rant and rave about what a great value it is – even with its seemingly high price. It's considered one of those things that should be bought once and never replaced. High marks across the board for the Mazzer Mini.

Rancilio Rocky – \$285

As another persistently popular grinder, the Rancilio Rocky has been almost a cult favorite of espresso gurus ever since its initial market release in 1991. It's a remarkably solid unit that's intended to provide a lifetime of service to its owner. It does come in either doser or doserless models, although the doserless Rocky model is generally preferred by the pros. The Rancilio Rocky is literally rock solid and repeatedly delivers awesome results time and time again.

Capresso Infinity Burr Grinder – \$90

Despite its low price, the Capresso Infinity actually gets surprisingly good reviews. It's fast for the price and produces really good espresso ready coffee grounds. Featuring 16 different settings, it's possible to tweak for just the right consistency too. Even though the Infinity isn't built of fancy stainless steel, but plastic instead, it is still durable when used properly and should last for some time. For a burr grinder that's at the very beginning of the price spectrum, it's difficult to find any major faults. A certain recommendation for both newbies and novices alike.

Let There be Espresso Machines for All!

Now let's take a look at a few of the more popular makes and models of espresso machines. Keep in mind that the quality and controllability increases along with the price. The beginner level machines are a great way to start, but many fanatics will want to upgrade to high end and prosumer level machines as they become more comfortable being their very own barista. Please note, all prices are approximate.

Beginner – DeLonghi EC155 Espresso Maker – \$100

- Pump driven and capable of 15 bars of pressure.
- Stainless steel boiler
- Dual thermostats for accurate control of both water and steam functionality
- ESE pod capability

The DeLonghi EC155 espresso maker is the real thing, delivering plenty of pump powered pressure needed for achieving the elusive perfect pull. Notable for its ability of creating plenty of tasty crema – a rare find indeed for a model in the entry level category. And for the beginner to the world of espresso, the price tag is pretty nice too!

Another great feature of this DeLonghi machine is that it works with ESE certified pods for those that prefer the convenience and ease of prepared coffee pods with no grinding or tamping required. Of course, it works traditionally as well for those who prefer the more hands on tamping approach.

It's only prudent to mention that this loveable little gadget works really well and delivers excellent espresso, but it's not exactly professional level equipment. It is slightly smaller than many higher end machines and as a result, some find it cumbersome to work with. But overall, those who own the DeLonghi EC155 espresso maker overwhelmingly endorse it!

Beginner – Lello 1375 Cremissimo Ariete Espresso Maker – \$120

- Pump driven with 15 bar maximum pressure
- Works with ESE pods
- Complete stainless steel body

The Lello Cremissimo Ariete Espresso maker is definitely among the best of the bunch when it comes to low cost, entry level espresso machines. With a body constructed of stainless steel, it's indeed surprisingly solid for a machine in this price range – no slip and slide on the counter top here. Also worth noting, there's plenty of clearance to get a decent sized cup in there – something many lower priced models can't boast.

Lello has hit the mark with a design that warms up and is ready to go in a jiffy. But even more importantly, the Cremissimo makes superb tasting espresso for a maker of the entry level class. Just as it warms up quickly, it's equally fast when rebounding for the next pull. And the 15 bars of pressure is more than adequate for making espresso, so all is well in that department.

While they don't outweigh the Lello's pros, there are a couple of downfalls that need to be addressed. First, this unit has an artificial crema enhancer that creates foam even if the natural crema isn't there, hiding the telltale sign of a less than perfect pull. It is more of a distraction than anything. Also, there are some plastic internal components which don't affect performance, but might affect the device's longevity. However, all things considered, the Lello 1375 Cremissimo Ariete Espresso Maker is still a great unit for the price.

High End – Gaggia Carezza Espresso Machine – \$200

- All chrome-plated brass brew group (the internal plumbing)
- 17.5 bar pump
- Includes an espresso pod adapter for convenience

The Gaggia Carezza Espresso Machine takes the next step up in performance with its commercial quality all chrome-plated brass brew group, allowing for a constant and steady temperature to be maintained at all times. Also noteworthy is the substantial brass portafilter included. The Carezza features the same aluminum boiler used in even Gaggia's more pricey models.

Owners of this machine persistently approve of the café quality espresso this machine is capable of extracting when paired with a grinder that's of equal quality. No problems with perfect luscious crema. This finely crafted machine should have no problem being a frequently used workhorse in any kitchen for many, many years to come.

Some folks aren't exactly fond of the aesthetics of this model, with an exterior shell composed of ABS plastic. Like anything, it was probably a compromise to allow the first rate brewing components to shine through on a model that doesn't cost a small fortune. If the style isn't the primary focus, the Gaggia Carezza Espresso Machine is worthy of a seal of approval for the quality java it helps create.

Prosumer – Rancilio Silvia Espresso Machine – \$595

- Heavy and solid – weighs 30 lbs!
- Commercial quality – built to last with replaceable parts
- Highly customizable and adjustable

Quite possibly one of the most well known espresso machines on the market today. And for good reason – Rancilio's Silvia model has clearly earned its cherished reputation for quality, dependability, simple functionality, and the delicious espresso it delivers. If

there's one semi professional espresso maker respected and revered by baristas everywhere, the Silvia is it (you'll find evidence in the rants and raves literally plastered all over the internet).

Crafted with a solid stainless steel body, the internal components are of equal quality. A brass boiler and chromed brass portafilter help balance and maintain the perfect temperature. Remember, brass is considered the most desirable material for internal components because of its superior thermal properties even though it initially takes longer to heat up and is quite a bit more expensive than other commonly used materials.

This is indeed the hot rod in the world of espresso machines. Bottom line, the Rancilio Silvia, often referred to as "Miss Silvia," makes the perfect shot of espresso and will continue to deliver consistent results for years and years to come!

Always Favorite Espresso Accessories

Bodum Pavina Double Wall Thermo Glasses – Glass is popular right now for espresso cups. The thermal properties of glass don't take the coveted heat away from the espresso.

Krupps Stainless Steel Frothing Pitcher – The perfectly designed pitcher for steaming and frothing milk with the espresso machine's steamer wand.

Grindenstein Knockbox – A perfect no mess solution for emptying the spent grounds from the portafilter. Home baristas absolutely love the Grindenstein.

The Perfect Tamper – Every barista has their own personal preference, but all will appreciate the extra heft offered by solid heavy models as long as they'll fit the portafilter of the machine being used.

Troubleshooting Imperfect Results

A guide would be incomplete without troubleshooting, so let's highlight what to do if the only results of a newfound passion for making espresso at home seem to be poor results...

- Remember the keep everything even philosophy – only adjust one element at a time to troubleshoot where the problem resides.
- Chances are, most problems are with the grind either being too loose or too tight – work towards finding the ultimate grind consistency.
- Make sure temperature is okay – most espresso machines are well-calibrated, but there's a chance temperature is off. If so, follow the machine's instructions to adjust.
- Time pulls with a timer. It's easy to pull too much or too little. When all of the other parts of the equation are just right, a perfect pull should take between about 20 to 25 seconds.

- Use better water to eliminate off flavors. Yes, sometimes water can be the source of bitter or off flavors. If it's a suspect, try bottled water or perhaps pre-filtering with a charcoal filter.
- Practice, practice, practice. Espresso is an art and every barista gets better with practice. Don't be disappointed if the first few shots of espresso are less than perfect. They will just keep getting better and better as time goes on.

Welcome to the World of Home Espresso... Enjoy!