

What's Brewing

Coffee, Etc.
By Alisa Morkides



Photo provided by Brew Ha Ha!



Shane Walsh opted for a “martini lounge” theme for his entry at the recent Mid-Atlantic Barista Championships, crafting a specialty drink made of espresso, heavy cream and chocolate shavings.

Battling Baristas

After the Mid-Atlantic Championships, local competitors are bloodied but unbowed

Maybe the judges should have downed a couple of double espressos to wake up before they reported for duty.

At least that's what I kept telling myself as I watched Jason and Shane, two of Brew Ha Ha's finest baristas, put on a dazzling display of barista skills at the Mid-Atlantic Regional Barista Competition earlier this spring—and then fail to make the finals.

But, unlike over-roasted coffee, I'm not bitter. Believe it or not, in a world where baristas push a button and schlep triple skinny iced decaf grande macchiatos, it's nice to find a small but growing cadre of professional baristas who devote themselves wholly to hand-crafting simple, elegant espressos and cappuccinos that actually taste like coffee.

For the past several years, these dedicated aficionados have descended upon the various annual regional barista championships that lead to the National Barista Championship and culminate in the World Barista Championship. This year's Mid-Atlantic competition was held in March in a small resort in Macungie, Pa. There, history was made with the watershed arrival of the Brew Crew—me; Greg, our barista trainer; and baristas Jason and Shane—ready to strut our stuff in front of industry peers and judges.

The barista competitions are sponsored by the Specialty Coffee Association of America, and all, whether conducted on a regional, national, or international level, are bound by the same rules. Each barista has to make 12 drinks—four espressos, four cappuccinos, and four specialty drinks of the barista's choosing—in 15 minutes.

Pretty straightforward—in theory. The devil is in the details: Each drink is evaluated based on an extensive set of sensory and technical parameters. The technical parameters include espresso shot dose and timing and the number of clean cloths used to wipe down the equipment and work area. There are 26 technical criteria in all.

The 16 sensory criteria evaluate the taste, body, and “mouthfeel” of the drinks. For a cappuccino, the milk must be correctly textured so that it has a shiny, smooth, and bubble-free finish that is free-poured into the espresso, allowing the espresso to rise to the surface and blend harmoniously with the milk. Baristas who dollop mounds of stiff, white milk foam on top of the espresso are immediately eliminated.

In addition to whipping up drinks at breakneck speed for the sensory judges, the baristas also must demonstrate creativity, professionalism, and *panache*. During the first several minutes of the 15-minute time allotment, the baristas set up the judges table with hand-selected tablecloths, china, and display items such as menus and fresh flowers, all while making small talk with the judges and demonstrating an *uber*-passion for coffee. Picture Tom Cruise in *Cocktail* and the headwaiter at New York's Le Cirque and you'll have an idea of the demeanor of a championship barista.

On day one of the championships, 14 baristas from New York City to Virginia were ready to begin. First on deck was one of La Colombe's top “celebrity” baristas, Doug. As I expected, his presentation was

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polished and elegant, delivered with an acerbic wit and La Colombe's trademark Gallic attitude. Doug's specialty drink was an espresso laced with freshly made *zabaione*. As I watched Doug cracking eggs onto a hot plate, I looked over at my nervous, first-time-competitor baristas, and I began to sweat. The competition was intense.

When it came time for Jason to perform, I relaxed a bit as I watched him skillfully juggle drink-making with his customer service duties, while bantering with the judges. He was as good as any barista I'd seen up to that point. I thought we were going to do it, that we'd make the finals. But I was wrong. Jason was disqualified from the competition because he took 17 minutes to run through his presentation—two minutes longer than the 15-minute time limit for the 12 drinks. Bummer.

Shane, Greenville's celebrity barista, took us back to the '70s with a "martini lounge" theme. Hipster music played in the background while Shane, dressed in a bowling shirt, poured his specialty drink made with espresso, heavy cream, and chocolate shavings—topped with a chocolate "olive"—into a funky-looking martini glass.

Despite the high cool factor, Shane didn't make the finals either, nor did Doug, La Colombe's finest. A lovely young woman named Katie from Murky Coffee in Washington, D.C. took home the prize and the right to compete in the nationals, held in May. Her specialty was an "espresso boilermaker," a beer mug filled with steamed milk into which the judges were asked to drop a shot glass of espresso and quickly chug the drink. While not quite as interesting as Jason's blood-orange-infused macchiato, Katie's technical abilities were unmatched that day.

"We were robbed," Jason said to me. "If only I could have minced my chocolate while steaming milk, balancing a spoon on my head, and whistling *Dixie*, I could have shaved minutes off my time." We were bitter (unlike Brew Ha Ha! coffee), but the judges had rendered their judgment. We were left to pick up the tattered pieces of our lives and reflect on what we had learned from the experience.

For one, we were happy to connect with an active community of espresso-lovers, like ourselves, looking to take coffee to the next level—even to the status of culinary art, like

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fine wine and chocolate. We also learned that we were strong on the details of fine espresso-making, but need to bone up on the rules of the barista competition game.

So, you may ask, why go to all this trouble? Isn't espresso just espresso—tasting pretty much the same wherever you go? No, Grasshopper, for the love of all that is good and Holy, no! A well-made espresso really does require minute attention to detail, and there are many details that contribute to the taste of the drink. If you are lucky enough to be served an espresso drink made by a pro—and we'd like to think that we have more of them at Brew Ha Ha! than your ubiquitous national coffeehouse chain—you can taste the difference.

Alisa Morkides is the owner of Brew Ha Ha!, an espresso-driven coffeehouse chain with 13 locations in New Castle County and Philadelphia. Morkides is an admitted "espresso-aholic" but is trying to take life one day at a time. Her column will appear periodically in Out & About.



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