

THE DEATH OF THE BARISTA?

A machine-made mocha? A faultless flat white? An express espresso? Is this where our speciality coffee is heading?

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Making Drinks Famous



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The automation debate has been around for a long time. With algorithms, self-checkouts and driverless cars just the tip of the iceberg, where do we draw the line between what makes life more efficient and what takes the life out of living?

As far as coffee is concerned, it's high time we woke up to the rise of technology and smelt the machine-roasted beans, as increasing advancements call the future of the barista behind the café counter into question.

In 2016 more than **a third of Brits owned a coffee pod machine** at home and yet today, we have **24,000 coffee shops in the UK**. Though we're clearly in a constant pursuit of caffeine bliss, the seamless creeping of machines into our kitchens is posing a similar invasion across the on-trade. It is within this limbo of consumer convenience vs. consumer satisfaction that our favourite corner coffee shops find themselves questioning if automation is the ultimate conduit to a perfect brew or whether some things in life are never worth omitting a handmade service for...

Put simply: Is it do or die for the barista?

With the push of a button and flick of a switch...

The growing popularity of speciality coffee means that it has fast become something that is complicated to make. With sophisticated machines involved, there's less room for mistakes and more capabilities to control every process to the minutest of detail. Though it may sound like a no brainer, we now find ourselves in that sweet spot between what technology can do and what we want it to do for us.

Across the on-trade, the likes of Eversys is making serious moves in the automation game, preaching their **e'Barista™ System** as part of a mission to provide the market with 'a super barista (where the machine allows them to) reproduce their creations, time after time'. With consistency playing a vital role in satisfying the customer, eliminating human error does make a lot of sense. The idea that the barista is 'free' from the manual labour side of serving and can instead take a step back to oversee the perfect roasting of the coffee and optimum temperature of the milk for several orders at a time, does have some merit.

However, can new technology be made quickly enough to move with the trends of the coffee world? New techniques and processes ultimately require the latest gadgets and tools, which have endless design and approval hoops to jump through before going anywhere near a coffee shop. Though Eversys claim not to devalue the making of coffee, can they rewrite preconceptions that machines often serve as a shortcut rather than an enhancement of a product? This problem has led some manufacturers to go back to more manual devices in a bid to show that they care about quality, which could have this movement going full circle.



Does man maketh machine or machine maketh man?

Something we need to remember is that this 'third wave' of coffee which has us coveting our cortados was spurred by the baristas' thirst to further develop their craft. To take the making

out of their work would be forgetting why there's demand for it in the first place, as well as quelling the frontline for future innovation within the category. Much like with cocktails, sipping into uncharted territory is rarely led by reading a menu or chalk board alone. The crucial element of conversation, consultation, or simply having the option to ask a question is a huge part of what pulls us to reach beyond the familiar. Talking through the difference between arabica or robusta beans, V60 or Chemex filters, nitro or cold brews is as much a means of exploration for the customer as it is development for the barista.

Another area that calls the role of man vs. machine into question is why we find ourselves in and out of cafés in the first place. Centuries ago, the Coffee House was a place to congregate for business, catch up on latest news and share views in company.

Today, the 21st Century Coffee Shop plays host to workers on laptops, readers perusing the newspaper and friends catching up. So in some ways, little has changed, prompting the question - are we there for the coffee or for the environment? And when it comes to answering that question, is it a machine or a barista that can deliver what we're after?

White Label's lens

With the complexity and infinite realms of the coffee world becoming more widely acknowledged, closer comparisons between baristas and bartenders are surfacing across the industry, including **our latest report** which touched on the future of coffee cocktails.

For bartenders, the personal touch is a huge part of the draw with cocktails, defining the meaning of hospitality over centuries. A good cocktail should offer the theatre that goes into the making of the drink and this has fast become an expectation from both sides of the bar. With coffee moving into similar territory, the replacement of the barista would leave this premise hollow. **Le Café Alian Ducasse**, **The Roasting Plant** and **Omotosando Koffee** are a mere few examples that spring to mind when thinking about the re-invention of the coffee experience that the likes of Starbucks' and recently purchased Costa are in dire need of taking notes from - this is where the future is headed, if only the giants paid more attention.

We're living in an age where the consumer is in search of meaningful experiences, quality and provenance. If human interaction and the hospitality that comes along with it was taken out of the equation, it could jeopardise the future of the coffee category as a whole, both in terms of development from the barista and exploration from the customer.

Sometimes, less tech really can mean more.