

The Cappuccino Community : cafés and civic life in the contemporary city.

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Field Report 1: the basics of becoming a barista

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Preface

This interim report forms part of the ESRC project 'The Cappuccino Community : cafés and civic life in the contemporary city' (R000239797). Its aim is to provide the beginnings of an ethnographic description of the *staff* perspective on the café. It can be profitably read in conjunction with our other initial interim report on the 12 short café studies (due April 2003), and other publications as they become available (from the Cappuccino Community website - www.geog.gla.ac.uk/~elaurier/dynamic/cafesite/). At a later stage in the project we will be publishing several reports on the *customer* perspective on the café and the life-world of the café. Our hope is that this report may serve a dual purpose as ethnographic data for a social science audience and as a supplement to the training manuals currently employed by Caffé Nero and similar espresso-based drink providers.

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1. Introduction

A passing profession

It is a perennial feature of low status jobs like shop assistants, bar staff and café baristas that those who do them tend not to stay very long doing them. There is constant entry and exit from the population of this part of the workforce. Nevertheless, cafés need competent, and in some cases excellent, baristas to make their coffee day in, day out. Without competent baristas making consistently top quality coffee, a company like Caffé Nero would soon lose its reputation and ultimately its custom. It is clearly essential to reproduce a team of workers who are able to make the company's product. Baristas cannot be bought off the shelf. Some come to the company with existing experience, some with a little, some with none at all. All need to be versed in the way that Caffé Nero does things. The purpose of this report is to draw on my recent experience of attending Caffé Nero's five day training course to set out obvious and less obvious features of *becoming* a barista with this particular company.

Caffé Nero

A major player in the café sector, Caffé Nero (CN) is currently one of the UK's six largest chains of cafés and one of the UK's fastest growing companies. Like Costa Coffee, it has an Italian theme to it, is well-branded and indeed has been voted best in terms of coffee quality, fashionableness and atmosphere (Allegra-Strategies 2002). It has over one hundred cafés, predominantly in London, but with a wide geographical spread from Glasgow to Portsmouth¹.

The course

Of the five days spent training baristas, the first two are spent learning in a fully working mock-up of a café, and these are followed by three days working 'live' in a café. In the initial two days at CN's training centre new recruits are taken by one of the company's trainers through the history and ethos of the company, the basics of using a commercial-scale espresso machine and its related equipment, the steps of a CN service encounter, basic food hygiene, health and safety, toasting and serving sandwiches, the recipes for each coffee drink made by CN, and the operation of a cash till. On completion of this first stage, each trainee barista is then allocated to a *maestro* (teacher) in a café, who will teach them *in situ*. At this point, the basic instructions that trainees have been given in making coffee, serving food and dealing with customers are developed into the practised, routine, core skills of a barista. There is a lot more to learn than can be taught or acquired in the second stage with a maestro; yet, it is during these three days that the learning curve is at its steepest, and by the end of them, the aim is for a barista to be, at least, adequate.

¹ More information can be found at Caffé Nero's website at : www.caffenero.com

In what follows I will not be providing a step-by-step guide that reiterates CN's existing handbook for Baristas. Instead I will describe aspects of becoming a barista that trainers explicitly offer instruction in, and further elements of the job that are somewhat more implicit.

2. What the beginner learns – at the training centre

Turning up

On the first day of my training course, the national fire brigades' strike had just begun and several of the new recruits, including myself, were caught up in the travel chaos that ensued. Despite having left half an hour early, I ended up sprinting in spurts from Waterloo Station across Waterloo Bridge, to arrive late, hot and bothered in the café basement. This was not the kind of first impression that I wanted to make, since although I am not the most punctual of people in the long run, I do like to be early for early meetings.

After breaking the ice by introducing himself, making us introduce ourselves (where we were from, how long we had been in London, why we had joined CN), making a mafia joke at the expense of the confident and friendly Sicilian trainee to his left, and then getting us to throw a ball to each other by name, our trainer Ignacio offered his first of many tips. When we work for Caffé Nero we should arrive ten minutes *before* the allocated time that our shift begins. Given that London transportation timetables are unreliable, we are best off being at work ten minutes early, but – more importantly - we can then take a CN coffee and chat with the other staff before we start. At the worst we arrive late but still in time to start work². Never just a trainer, Ignacio has to teach us how to work for Caffé Nero *and* how to commute across London in a way that will get us to where we ought to be, at the time we ought to be there³.

On the second morning of the training, Patricia, who had arrived early the morning before, arrived late. Ignacio inquired somewhat irritably, given his lengthy directive on the importance of prompt arrival the previous day and our new found knowledge of how much additional travel-time the strike was adding, why she had not turned up on time. What became clear by way of Patricia's excuse, which seemed to the rest of us pretty weak, followed by her confusion as to why nobody had any sympathy with her, was that her English was minimal. The day before she had failed to understand Ignacio's talk about early arrivals. From then on our trainer kept an eye on her for further moments, where she, as the least competent English speaker, was looking lost or not speaking. Listening in to her mild reprimand for turning up late we were also being shown, by way of this immediate enforcement of yesterday's lesson on commuting, that a barista must never be late for their shift. If you still think turning up on time is a trivial matter, then it is worth turning to chef Tony Bourdain's comments on his exemplary boss, 'Bigfoot' and his treatment of tardy restaurant employees:

² This extra ten minute method for arriving at workplaces on time every day will be returned in the project report on customers' lives in cafés.

³ To the outsider, it is a noticeable thing that Londoners accept a higher degree of lateness amongst their acquaintances than in other parts of the UK. CN, like other institutions that work to shared timetables, has to work against this accepted sense of what counts as 'turning up at X o'clock' in London.

In Bigfootland you showed up for work fifteen minutes before your shift. Period. Two minutes late? You lose the shift and are sent home. If you're on the train and it looks like it's running late? You get off the train at the next stop, inform Bigfoot of your pending lateness, and then get back on the next train. It's okay to call Bigfoot and say, 'Bigfoot, I was up all night smoking crack, sticking up liquor stores, drinking blood and worshipping Satan . . . I'm going to be a little late.' That's acceptable – once in a very great while. But after showing up late, try saying (even if true), 'Uh . . . Bigfoot, I was on the way to work and the President's limo crashed right next to me . . . and I had to pull him out the car, give him mouth-to-mouth . . . and like I saved the leader of the free world, man!' You, my friend, are fired. (Bourdain 2000, p95)

Seeing crema and tamping a dose

After an hour or so of talk from Ignacio, our trainer, on the history of the company, with questions and answers on what was at the basis of CN's success, its distinctive brand, quality control, how it treated its staff, its bean blend and finally tasting over-extracted, under-extracted and good espresso made by Ignacio, there was a noticeable perking up amongst the trainees as we were then asked to step up to the industrial-size coffee machine. For my part, given that I have a good quality dainty La Pavoni espresso machine at home which squeezes out a reasonable espresso for me every morning, this was like a model railway enthusiast climbing into the cabin of a full size steam train. I was thrilled and intimidated by a machine built to blast out hundreds of cups a day, consuming litres of water from a mains plumbing supply, a hissing steam wand at each end, covered in buttons, levers and dials: a machine able to churn out eight espressos at a time if need be. It is big and exciting, and, undoubtedly a distraction from its sister machine which is equally if not more important in the production of a quality espresso: the grinder.

The over-riding fact is that no matter how wonderfully large and matt black the coffee machine, if it does not have properly ground, dosed and tamped coffee, it will never make 'un buon café'. We trainees demonstrated that point amply by putting single doses into double handles, forgetting to even out the grounds by tapping the handle, and forgetting to tamp the grounds before twisting the handle into the machine. Nearly all of our first espressos were substandard even though the other two key variables had been sorted out for us in advance (the fine-ness of the grind and weight of coffee dispensed (7gm)) by our trainer.⁴ Even once we were able to correctly remember each step of filling the handle with coffee, our espresso remained inconsistent. Why?

It is a simple answer at the heart of acquiring any skill (and making espresso-based coffees is certainly a skill). The answer is practice, not the rote following of a list of steps to making an espresso, nor the most amazingly detailed description given by your trainer as a piece of talk whilst you sit in a chair and listen. What is needed is firstly practice in the sharp tap on the shelftop that rapidly evens out the dispensed coffee in the handle. Without an even spread of coffee, hot water makes a central channel for itself through the grains taking only a fraction of the flavoursome oils. And secondly practice in how hard to press when tamping the grounds down. Tamp too hard and the water flows too

⁴ In cafés the setting up fine-ness and quantity of coffee dispensed is done by experienced staff, generally the manager or their assistant, so in such a situation this is a contingency with which baristas do not have to deal.

slowly through the granules taking too much out of them; too soft and the water rushes through barely extracting any flavours. The barista has to press the grounds again and again and again, making cup after cup of espresso, gradually finding just the pressure required from their upward push against the little plastic disk on the side of the grinding machine. To become a barista you have to learn to tamp the same each and every time, to feel immediately when you tamped badly (in the way that a tennis player, even as the ball leaves their racquet, is able to say with certainty ‘it’s going in the net’).

The beginner barista tamps their coffee warily, tamps it slowly, inspecting the lie of the coffee after they have done so. As I watched Ignacio and as I watched my maestri and other seasoned baristas at work over the days spent working in cafés; I noticed how they glance at the handle as it flashes between grinder and its slot in the machine. They do no more than this, and it is so fast that I can barely see it and I am sure they are not aware of it, they are aware of the flattened powder in the handle but not the glance. It is the glance that would detect an uneven spread of coffee, although their technique is now so practiced they almost certainly will never see such a thing.

Meantime our trainer keeps making espressos, we keep making espressos, and each time they are passed from hand to hand and he asks us ‘is it the right colour?’ We have been told that the crema⁵ on top of the coffee should be ‘hazelnut’. Even if we were all native speakers of English we might have difficulty pointing (□) to some sample () and saying ‘that is hazelnut’. The nut, after all, comes in several different colours, its shell, its skin, the bare nut and these colours changes with age and cooking. Our trainer teaches us ‘hazelnut’ by showing us sample after sample of the espresso crema. Some are too light, some too dark and, thankfully, more and more are ‘hazelnut’. We are hence working out this quite precise shade from its relation to these other shades of golden-brown. They are a colour formed from tiny oily bubbles merging into streaks of dark brown and bright yellow. It is not quite right to say that it is one colour, it is a texture and a combination of colours. Our trainer shows us that the crema should have a duration too. He picks up cups of espresso that have been sitting for five minutes to show us that a good crema lasts a while. We are learning to see this [hazelnut]⁶ as its relational shade and as its temporal extension.

For the good barista, by using this [hazelnut] they are thus able to take a last check on their espresso as it travels in its small cup from machine to saucer. A kitchen chef’s taste-check with a fingertip into the cup might alarm the waiting customer, is too slow and would intoxicate the barista after a hundred were served; a glance at the crema is all that can be done in the circumstances. As Ignacio makes us repeat as one more mantra: ‘no crema, no serva’. Should we, having followed the steps, tamped as best we could, pressed the right button on the machine, still find that there is no crema on our espresso we should throw it away and start again rather than serve it to a customer. There are some sceptical eyebrows raised over this, trainees already imagining the impossibility of doing this during a morning rush. However, Ignacio reiterates the injunction, adding that, although it may seem like something that will annoy the customer, it will instead impress them since starting over shows you really care about the quality of their coffee. This

⁵ Crema is the layer of oily foam that sits on top of a cup of coffee, so called since it should be cream-like.

⁶ The square brackets are used by phenomenologists to turn around our *accepted* sense of a word and indicate that we will put our understanding on hold until we know what that thing properly consists of. The trainer, as a vernacular phenomenologist, takes his trainees on an investigation into seeing [hazelnut] - the correct shade, texture and duration of the crema on top of the coffee.

provides him with an occasion to give us a little tip about the inferences that we can make about a customer from a certain kind of coffee being ordered. As he says, when a customer orders a *ristretto*,⁷ then this is someone who is serious about their coffee. Few customers will order it and we should think of it as a person at a bar ordering a forty year old single malt whiskey. Make sure you make it correctly, take your time and definitely throw it away if it comes out bad.

In making the *ristretto*, Ignacio had ensure that we learnt another technique absolutely essential to the success of this short treacly espresso. Ignacio had to teach adults how to count to six. Okay I'm misdirecting you a little, he had to teach us how to count time rather than number. How to make time so that we could keep to time. After each number Ignacio told us with a grin, and a hint of mockery, we must say: 'one elephant, two elephant, three elephant...' He had to do this because counting to six can be used, and most commonly is used, in correctly working out how many, say coffees, we have. Whereas, here Ignacio, was teaching us how to use counting to six to make a reasonably standardised time period. Counting six espressos or six ashtrays can be done in a lot less than or a lot more than six seconds depending on the situation in which the counting is done. To give you a sense of this - how long it takes when someone is asked how many houses they have lived in their lifetime (and it takes over a minute to count them out) or alternatively asks how many cups of coffee are currently being made at the machine (and it takes less than a second). We are so used to counting up to six in this way, unless we are dancers, soldiers or musicians, that we tend to revert to it and Ignacio had to remind the class over and over again to produce six seconds using six elephants.

We make several other possible coffees, different sizes in different cups, with chocolate, with shots of syrup, blended with ice to make iced coffees. In learning how to make a hot chocolate, Ignacio amuses us by doing it in a flirty way, as if he were serving a woman who comes in every day and making it clear how he gives her extra big scoops of hot chocolate, whilst grinning and making small talk. He is making it clear that we can flirt, that we ought to flirt, that there can be more to this job than mirthlessly making drink after drink to a strictly controlled recipe. Where perhaps the best *ristretto* requires careful adherence to rules and recipes, the hot chocolate can only be gotten wrong by being measly with the chocolate. At another point, as we moved on to role playing, he played at being a customer who states flatly, as a challenge to all that a *ristretto* drinker holds dear: 'I want an ordinary coffee'. In return we learnt how to offer an *Americano* with or without milk as a possible response to this challenging customer. We are hence being taught not just how to make the different kinds of drinks but also how those coffees, chocolates and ice drinks related to kinds of customers, what those kinds of customers expect and how we should handle them.

Cleaning

During the training I found it hard not to be surprised by the hours given over to how to tidy, clean and wash the coffee machines, surfaces, cups and so on. Admittedly I don't have a background in catering or bar work (my holiday jobs as a student were working in shops, at reception desks or manual labour for gardening companies and builders). In a CN or any other place serving decent coffee, there are grinders constantly dispensing

⁷ A *ristretto* is an espresso type coffee with less water pushed through the grounds, thereby making a very short drink which carries only the first and arguably the best parts of the flavours and aromas of the beans.

their oily dark gritty-powder, there are steam wands intermittently splattering drops of hot milk, the panini squelching melted cheese into the toaster, crumbs from panini and pastries dropping on the counter, and hot chocolate powder floating over the sides of cups during sprinkling. So there are plenty of things producing ‘muck’ that is oily or sticky or fine-grained, and all of this ‘muck’ gets into the machinery. The machinery as you may have guessed from the previous section, is finely-tuned and needs constant upkeep. Perhaps most importantly of all, though, there are an abundance of health and safety regulations surrounding food and drink which require the place to be kept clean. Customers for their part, even at their most unpleasant, ought not to be poisoned by having their cups cleaned with caustic powder, nor should the staff burn their skin through accidental exposure to concentrates of corrosive liquids.

With a variety of concentrates and powders, soft bristle brushes and hard wire ones, the baristas have to learn what product and tool cleans what equipment. They have to learn how often certain items are cleaned. The steam wand, for instance, gets a wipe with a damp cloth after every use, and that ‘is a golden rule’, as our trainer reminds us every time we use the wand. If it is not wiped, the milk calcifies, forming a coating that is hard work to remove and likely will involve the scouring of the soft metal of the wand. Aside from the machinery which produces the coffee, and a lot of powdered and liquid pollution, the café itself has to be constantly cleaned, although this is something that is not so apparent during the basement training since we are still being protected from the depredations of customers. Customers, as I will later learn, make a constant mess that needs cleared up at appropriate moments.

English as a second language

During those first two days at the training centre I was the only person attending who spoke English as a first language. CN has an amazingly high proportion of employees from other European countries, and beyond, mainly Italy and Spain but also France, Denmark, Germany, Australia and Ecuador⁸. Many of these workers are highly qualified people who are taking a year away in London to improve their English before returning to high status jobs in their home countries⁹. In effect, CN has become a place where people learning English as a foreign language can practice their language skills in a work setting. They can acquire proficiency in a novel environment where there are other sympathetic non-native speakers around them, and at the same time plenty of native speakers demanding coffee from the other side of the counter.

Our trainer, Ignacio, was well aware of the limitations of his non-native trainees. Although now fluent in English, he had arrived two years previously from Spain with only a smattering of English and made mistakes aplenty. As he made his way through our

⁸ The catering trade has always been a home to newly arrived migrants, and in New York the restaurant trade is so full of immigrants that Anthony Bourdain suggests that any serious chef, even if they want to cook fine French dishes, should ‘Learn Spanish! ... The very backbone of the industry, whether you like it or not, is inexpensive Mexican, Dominican, Salvadorian and Ecuadorian labor – most of whom could cook you under the table without breaking sweat ... Also, learn as much as you can about the distinct cultures, histories and geographies of Mexico, El Salvador, Ecuador and the Dominican Republic. A cook from Puebla is different in background from a cook from Mexico City. Someone who fled from El Salvador to get away from the Mano Blanco is not likely to get along with the right-wing Cuban working next to him.’ p294-5. (Bourdain 2000).

⁹ What is of some interest here is that Starbucks UK seems to attract mainly North American and Australian migrant employees, with a smattering of non-natives from Europe.

lessons he would stop and ask: what is a 'rota?' what is a 'shift?' The tenor of his trainees' responses changed as they shifted to offering possible Spanish and Italian translations. Ignacio's training extended beyond versing people in making coffee and providing customer service. He had to instruct his trainees in those unusual parts of the English lexicon they would need for working in a café. When he noticed that the girl with seemingly the weakest grasp of English had gone quiet, he told her: 'Always speak, don't be shy and just accept that you will be laughed at. People were always laughing at me when I first started and so I just laughed along.'

The English as a second culture

Alongside rote-learning CN's six steps of service (1 Smile & Greet / 2 Serve / 3 Sell / 4 Stamp & Pay / 5 Sugar / 6 Say Thankyou Goodbye and Invite Them to Return), our trainer was tailoring his instruction to non-native users of English in another way, working through what linguists might call the pragmatic features of the language. Whilst saying 'thankyou' was the sixth step in the service plan, it was also, he urged his Spanish, Italian and Venezuelan trainees, to understand, a constant feature of speaking English in England ('...and Scotland', he would laughingly add for my benefit). He ran through with them how in Spain there was no expectation of a barista or shop assistant saying 'please, sorry, thankyou' all the time, whereas in England there is. Even if you don't mean to be, you will be taken by the natives as being rude if you miss out these phrases at appropriate points in the conversation. And in England (and Scotland) there are far more points where they can and ought to be used. This triggered talk about other associated features of English culture which seemed although not mysterious, arbitrary and irrational to the trainees (such as the milk jug thermometers using the antiquated system of 'Fahrenheit').

Institutionally, CN finds the accidental production of impoliteness a constantly problematic feature of drawing on the labour of a cosmopolitan migrant population, even as it benefits from the – as it seems to the English - warmth and friendliness of its Mediterranean staff.

3. What the beginner learns – in the café

Instructing you in the space of *this* café.

Day three of training for me was, in a break with the normal five-days-in-a-row induction, a month after day two. My ‘day job’ as a university employee in Scotland was getting in the way of training as a Caffé Nero barista in London. Bearing in mind Ignacio’s words on never being late for a shift, I gave myself two hours to travel from the East End of London to the affluent western suburb of East Sheen. Yet again I showed my inexperience in London commuting, since I hadn’t understood that for my first half hour of travel I might simply not be able to get underway on a tube carriage because every train that went by would be full. And I mean full to the point where, when a mean-looking commuter forced his way into the tangle of limbs, shoulders and heads on a carriage, thirty seconds later he was popped out again like cork from a bottle by the sheer physical pressure of compressed bodies. As it was I ended up running from tube to train at Waterloo and then walking more swiftly than I’d wanted to nip in the door of the café about three minutes before my start time.

After some introductions my manageress gave me ‘the tour’, walking me down to the area where I could get changed, showing me which space was used as the staff room, then taking me upstairs past the bar, pointing out the division between the smoking and non-smoking zones, and finally leading me to the back of the café where the toilets and the bins were located. Five minutes or so later, once I had gotten changed into my grey T-shirt and apron and come up to stand behind the bar, I was given a further tour. I was shown where things were kept behind the counter, where the food was, and, much as I desperately tried to take it all in, I instantly forgot where most of the equipment and food was kept.

In a further break with the normal five-days-in-a-row induction of a barista, I did a day in three different Caffé Neros rather than three days in one place. From my research perspective I wanted to get a feel for contrasting cafés and clienteles. Paul Ettinger at CN head office made sure I had three very diverse branches in which to work. The first day, ‘East Sheen’, in the affluent suburbs dominated by well-heeled parents and their children; the second day, ‘Long Acre’, a busy café near Covent Garden with a mixed crowd of shoppers, office workers and tourists; and finally, ‘Merrill Lynch’, a high-turnover café that, although on a city street, opened directly into a major international bank with most of its customers walking directly from their offices into the café. On my ‘first’ (and only) day in each café I was given the tour by the manageress on arrival. The layout varied between the suburban, the city centre and the international bank café. For instance, at East Sheen there was a neat divide in the rectangular floor plan between smoking at the back and non-smoking at the front, whereas at Long Acre, with a square floor plan and most tables in constant use the smokers are mixed in with everyone else. In fact at the Long Acre café the build up of smoke is a constant problem, managed by keeping the door permanently open. The ensuing draft was a cause of some complaint from customers during the bitter December weather while I was there.

It’s an obvious point, but the barista needs to know the basic geography of the café from the moment they start. As they start they will know only its roughest outlines, being able to locate the office, the bar, the toilets, the fridge unit storing sandwiches, cold drinks etc., but as they have to do various parts of their job they learn where those parts take

them (into the fridge for more skimmed milk/out the back with a full rubbish bag/to the tables to clear-up). The very first time you arrive as a barista you have the most to learn since you are learning not only *where* everything is in this particular café, but also *what* [everything] (in a CN) consists of. For example when you first arrive it has not yet dawned on you that there will be tea to serve since you've been concentrating so hard on the coffee. You have to learn that it is served in cups with bags, and tea bags in two basic variations (English Breakfast and Early Grey) and then several herbal varieties, so you have to learn that CN always has these specific kinds of tea and that they are stored 'here' ☐, 'here' ☐, 'there' ☐ and 'there' ☐. The experienced barista arrives at a new branch knowing that CN has these specific kinds of tea and their work is only to locate them (and CN standardise where they are stored in relation to the coffee machine, so this isn't too hard). The inexperienced barista like myself has a sense from their first two days training as to where to get their coffee and where to find the jug of frothed milk, cutlery, and saucers, but paper bags for take-away pastries were more challenging and I was flummoxed when a customer first asked for a decaffeinated coffee. At such a point I asked myself 'do we have decaff? Of course we have decaff. But do I have to grind it from beans...?' and then yet again pestering one of the other staff, 'eh, sorry, but do you know where the decaff is kept?'

Once the tour was over on my first day, the manageress then asked the big question: 'so can you make a coffee?'

In at the deep end

After two days of having a trainer watching over you, and saying what happens next, you build up the expectation: your superior from Caffé Nero tells you what to do. As you step behind the bar and really start becoming a barista in earnest, the small shock is that it is the customers that tell you what to do. They arrive at the counter and they say 'two regular lattes please, one skinny,' or 'I'd like three regular cappuccinos, one with low fat milk, one large cappuccino, and a hot chocolate to take away, oh, no, actually can you make the large cappuccino a latte instead, ehm a large one too? heh heh.' Sad to say there is no getting around this and the manageress, after asking me whether I could make coffee, then said 'serve a customer.' It's a fundamental shift. Not only do customers not ask you for the same drink each time (which would make your job nice and easy), they just keep coming. There is no time out for reflection, diagnosis or letting someone else have a go while you sit back down to laugh with your trainer at their efforts. They immerse you in the field of action with their orders (see *Appendix*).

The customers arrive in little rushes which make you realise that you were in a quiet period previously, and as a beginner you have not yet registered what a [quiet] or a [busy period] really is, nor, entails. After you have been through a rush then you have a little time for reflection and *post hoc* advice from your barista. It can be difficult to understand the different criteria in making and serving drinks and food for those who have not served at a bar or worked in a restaurant; customers are *not* like friends coming around to your place for a cup of tea who do not really mind if you have run out of Early Grey and give them Typhoo instead; friends, who appreciate the gesture and take what they are given with a smile and a thankyou. Customers want whatever it is you have listed as offering and they want it to be the same as, or better than, the one they had last time they were at Caffé Nero. A customer is not your friend. And when your friends arrive at the café as customers then you have to treat them as customers *first* and friends *second*, which

is a peculiar state of affairs since you were friends first. Customers can be friendly without being your friends¹⁰. Equally they can be unfriendly to a barista and that is within their rights. Customers start to pace from foot to foot and mutter if they are waiting more than about two minutes to be served in a short queue (and they know the difference between a short queue where they should be served quick and a long queue at lunch when they will be served slowly). Customers, even without being unfriendly, can cause panic and fear for the beginner barista. Well they did for me, until I came to realise that most were forgiving and more tolerant than my fellow commuters in the morning.

And thankfully for the beginner barista there is the possibility of saying 'I'm sorry it's my first day' and finding that customers are *remarkably* tolerant on such a basis. 'Enrico' at one of my three branches had been wearing the light grey trainee T-shirt for four weeks and was loath to trade-up to a black barista t-shirt since customers would no longer make allowances for him. For my part I was also glad to be grey t-shirted and thus highly visible as an incompetent trainee. The customers attuned to my status. When I offered an apology for taking three times the time it took a normal member of staff, they would say things like: 'don't worry you're just starting', 'everybody has to learn sometime,' or even 'I think you're very brave'¹¹. Not only do customers make allowances for having to tell you their order three times, watching you stare at the till buttons for a full minute, forget their teaspoon etc., they use your categorisation as a trainee to make sense of and judgements about what is happening. Customers do not take it that they are suffering slow, bad service, they see the service as the good service of a struggling trainee, even if the trainee misses two steps out of the normal six steps of service (and, anyway, customers don't count them the way trainers do).

Equally it may be the case that certain customers pick you out as a trainee. When a known 'difficult' customer appears, experienced staff may scatter leaving you to innocently deal with this customer as 'just another ordinary customer'. I was put in the position of serving an eccentric regular on my first day, who of course I treated as if all her requests were perfectly normal¹². One of the more experienced baristas came over to handle the situation, advising me by some well-timed shakes of his head not to grant all of this particular customer's requests. So far she had been the spirit of politeness and had only asked for a jug of milk to go with her Americano. In fact the only sign of her eccentricity that I was able to detect was that she slowly counted out about twenty copper coins to pay for her drink. Later as I cleared and wiped tables I became aware that she was staying for a long time with her one cup of coffee, yet unlike most 'long-stay' lone customers she appeared to be doing nothing. That is, she was not reading the newspaper, reading a novel, phoning on a mobile, writing a document or any of the other activities that 'long stay' customers do. Becoming a barista who belongs to a café means getting to know the regulars, the eccentrics and the troublemakers that also belong to this café. The longer a barista stays, the longer the list of known customers they have,

¹⁰ Customers can and do become friends of the barista however this will happen 'off duty', where each no longer has to act accountably as 'barista' and 'customer'. And there will not be nearly as many of these friends as there are customers with whom a barista is acquainted and is friendly with whilst still maintaining their professional/work relationship.

¹¹ This latter exaggerated comment came from a woman, who I later found out, was one of the café's eccentric regulars.

¹² Not all eccentric customers are difficult for the café, quite the opposite may be the case. Their category is nevertheless used to increase their monitoring by staff, their handling and also to increase their recognisability as regulars with known 'usual' drinks, preferred seats, habits and so on.

and some of them may become friends or more than friends¹³. Most customers, though, are known in terms of what is they drink and a few in terms of what they do. In my brief stays I really didn't get to know any of my customers as regulars, though it was clear who many of them were.

From one at a time to many at a time

As I noted earlier, just learning how to get your beginner's hands on the decaff coffee, the herbal tea, the tongs for moving panini on the toaster and so on, takes repeated searching and reaching for the many things that are used to make customer orders. Your searching and reaching is cumbersome and halting, and sometimes it is done in plainly the wrong place as you search for a tea bag under the counter when it is on a high shelf. The experienced staff keep pointing out where things are to you, but you don't want to overstretch their patience. This frustrating inability to find the ingredients and equipment is combined with having to 'walk through' each coffee recipe, saying to yourself 'now what goes into a small mocha again?' and then asking someone else 'what's in a small mocha?' And even while you are running over in your head the measures of coffee, the measures of chocolate, in what order you put them in: chocolate first or coffee first? You forget what other coffee the customer ordered. And you realise that you also forgot to ask them whether they wanted their coffees to take away or have-in. Smiling humbly you ask them 'ehm I'm sorry, did you want your coffees to have-in?' To your relief since you've already made coffee into mugs, they say 'yes to have in.' How on earth are you supposed to remember all this?

At the outset, like most beginners, I was trying to make as few mistakes in making each coffee as possible, so I took it slow... And it's *so* slow. And it feels even slower to you as the barista than it does to the customer – this is the time that you experience where a minute of making a cappuccino stretches to feel like quarter of an hour and you are expecting the customer to be red in the face when you turn around, or to be halfway through writing a letter of complaint to your manager on the saucer that you laid out for them ages ago. Working alongside your *maestro* (teacher), they make each order so quickly. It seems possible that with enough practice you will reach the speed at which they make individual orders. What is more intimidating is that your *maestro* serves at least two customers whenever there is a queue and in the time I was at Long Acre I witnessed staff managing particularly long queues by taking on four orders at a time. How on earth, you wonder, do they remember all these orders?

There is no abstract answer and my answers are somewhat tentative since in the five days that I spent training I was just starting to get a feel for doing multiple orders, but like a trainee juggler I would end up dropping items all too often. There are a series of transformations which build toward your becoming a barista. There is no way that, as in the film *The Matrix*, a human could download [barista] in a few seconds and throw together four customer orders at high speed. On the other hand you are not undertaking the lengthy acquisition of *know how* and *know that* which constitute deep sea diving or clinical pharmacy. At the beginning you are doing a lot of looking and searching and trying to fit your hands to the equipment. Getting the milk jug handle to nestle the right way against your palm and fingers whilst you are frothing the milk so that you do not tilt

¹³ During the service encounter as already mentioned customers that are friends still have to have to be treated primarily as customers.

it the wrong way and send a spray of milk across the bar. Banging the handle, tamping the grounds, wiping off any grounds sitting on the rim of the handle, slotting the handle into the machine, pressing the correct button from a choice of 4; all of this in a fast flowing movement rather than as a series of paused, contemplated steps. As each of these 'moves' starts to come together then you no longer have to 'think' about them; they become as fast as the tennis player knocking out a first service and then a forehand to follow. Not only do you do them at a much higher speed than a novice, you produce the same 'shot' every time¹⁴. Once you are no longer having to spell out what the steps of a cappuccino consist of, then you can redistribute your attention to what items a customer ordered. Also you set-up the basics for orders that are incoming so that you are already halfway to making them as their allotted time-slot arrives. Seeing one of your regulars coming in through the door, you may have made their regular latte with one shot of espresso before they have even reached the counter to ask for it.

What a beginner barista like me makes obvious is that each order of coffees can be made of highly varying quality and at highly variable speeds by the same person. The good barista *accomplishes* consistent quality and consistent speed through their organisation, through their practiced movement (see the Appendix to get a feel for just what it is, this ongoing production of consistent orders). Making orders in the café has the seemingly paradoxical qualities of stylish elegance and soulless repetition. As Bourdain says of cooks at work in a busy restaurant kitchen:

'Line cooking done well is a beautiful thing to watch. It's a high-speed collaboration resembling, at its best, ballet or modern dance. A properly organized, fully loaded line cook, one who works clean, and has 'moves' – meaning economy of movement, nice technique and, most important, speed – can perform his duties with Nijinsky like grace. ... Line cooking – the real business of preparing the food you eat – is more about consistency, about mindless, unvarying repetition, the same series of tasks performed over and over again in exactly the same way.'
(Bourdain 2000) p55-56.

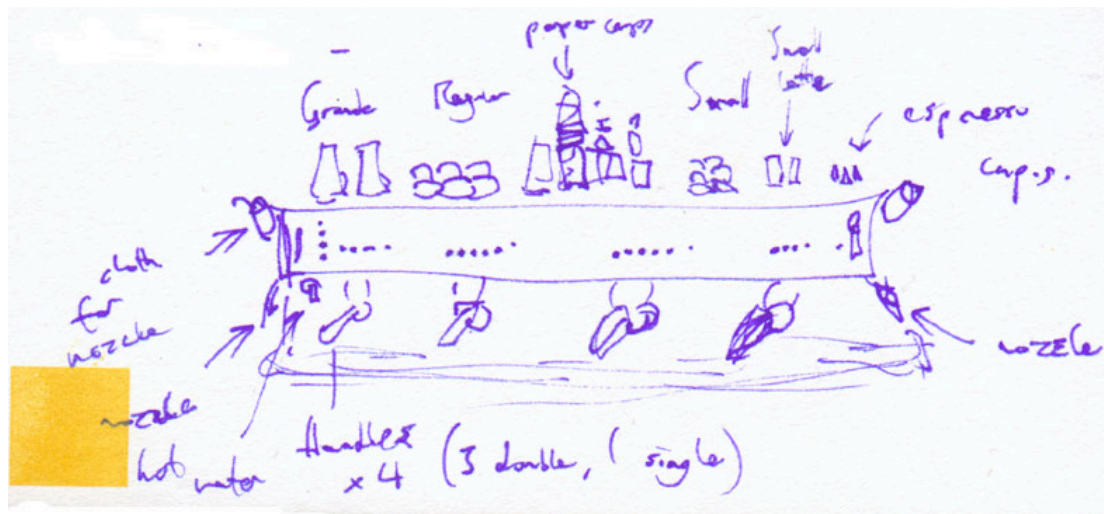
He continues by turning to coordination and articulation of tasks that are necessary to maintain the ongoing smooth and fast flow of the kitchen.

'The ability to 'work well with others' is a must. If you're a sauté man, your grill man is your dance partner, and chances are, you're spending the majority of your time working in a hot uncomfortably confined, submarine-like space with him'
(Bourdain 2000) p61

As Bourdain's descriptions of line cooks at work highlights, whilst a barista's work is an individual's accomplishment of consistency, it is also profoundly social. Although individuals may come and go, the shopfloor work of the staff remains the same. I say this, of course, not just as an interested observer but also as a committed social researcher.

¹⁴ To my dismay when Paul Ettinger dropped in for his afternoon espresso, I made an 'okay' espresso and then didn't have the nerve to throw it away and start over in attempt to make the perfect one. As a beginner I was still failing to make exactly the same coffee each time. Such exact repetition is no mean accomplishment.

Piles of cups and rows of panini



From my badly drawn sketch of the coffee machine you may be able to grasp that there are cups piled in rows according to size on top of the machine. They run from the compact espresso cups to the capacious grande mugs with small cups, regular cups, glass cups and parallel sizes of paper cups in-between. One of the reasons they are there is because there is a heated plate keeping them constantly warm. An espresso is, after all, only a thimble measure of coffee and if you put it into a cold cup of solid ceramic then in less than a minute it will be cold too.

The piles of warm cups are a shared resource for the baristas. Each of them draws their cups from the same store (although sometimes the machine is mirror split to allow two teams on different cash tills to work from each side without crossing over and disrupting the other team's flow). Chaos could be caused in any café by sneaking behind the counter and rearranging the rows of their cups or by just mixing all the cups into random piles. The experienced staff working at speed, barely look to see where they are grabbing a regular cup from – they are sure that it will be there. They are sure that it will be pre-warmed, clean, unchipped and ready to be used. Their certainty is reliant on the baristas' steady and consistent replenishment of these rows of cups from the dishwasher, the ongoing rejection of dirty or chipped cups there. Working behind the counter I came to monitor the supply of cups like all the other baristas becoming aware of when it needed replenishment. Experienced staff were attuned to the rush hours and would do their best to make sure the machine was groaning with crockery beforehand, since there would be little or no time for collecting dirty cups, rinsing them, loading the dishwasher, waiting ten minutes and then unloading and sorting it to the top of the machine.

At Long Acre the assistant manageress could often be heard to call out aloud that we needed more cups. All of the working staff hearing this, and ones who were not engaged on an essential task, could start replenishing the cups. The assistant manageress also watched the display units of sandwiches, drinks, cakes and pastries and would allocate staff to start replenishing or re-arranging the units. In busy stores like Long Acre replenishment and rearrangement is an urgent business as customers suck the water jugs dry, wolf down sandwiches at lunchtime and fill clean ashtrays with crushed butts. Whilst senior café staff were in charge and ensured that restocking and tidying of display units

occurred, all staff attended to them. I was taken at each store to be shown the importance of facing out sandwiches and cans. The shelf-fillers' ancient principle of product placement: putting the oldest product to the front and the newest to the back, is expanded upon by maximising the use of the shelves at a customer's eye level, making sure labels were easily readable, and that everything had a label (since 'mystery' sandwiches failed to lure customers into considering that a surprising filling at lunch might be good).

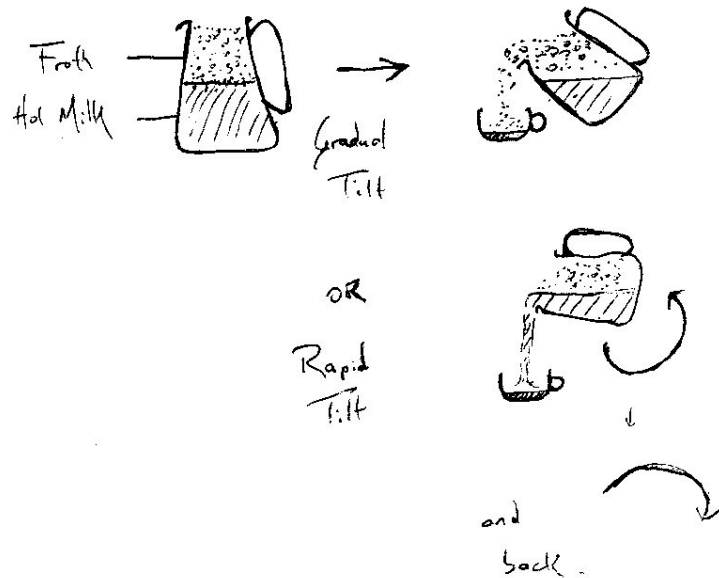
It takes a leader and a team to keep the flow of crockery in circulation, making sure that it doesn't logjam at any point. The circulation has to be maintained even though supply and demand are temporally out of whack – at lunchtime everyone needs crockery but the supply is rapidly running out. Customers take about twenty minutes to finish before their crockery can be retrieved, and collecting the crockery takes time. Rinsing the crockery of persistent lipstick and other magnetic gunk in the sink takes time, loading and unloading the dishwasher takes time, stacking the cups, plates and sorting the cutlery takes time, as it all has to be danced through the steps of the assembling of further drinks and food orders. Sandwiches, pastries, cakes, soups and pastas, on the other hand, do not circulate in the same way. They are about getting the balance just right between the impossible ideal of running out completely as each customer takes the item they want so that even the last lunch customer happily takes the very last 'roasted veg and goats cheese' panino, leaving the display unit empty, and the worst case where tons of sandwiches, cakes and soups are left in the fridge that none of the customers want or are willing to take. Each day's consumption of sandwiches is thus monitored to acquire a sense of what is popular and unpopular in this café with its particular clientele. Watching the rows of sandwiches as a real-time unfolding allows the staff to see which sandwiches go first, which are taken as perhaps second choices and finally what is left sitting unwanted.

Acquisition of unremarkable yet essential skills : the first latte / fresh jug problem

As I have said before, I never progressed beyond being a beginner as a barista, and there are a plethora more on-site skills that the good barista will pick up along the way. What is striking is that they cannot all be taught at once nor perhaps appropriately (or at all) in a classroom format. They are, like all skills, best learnt on the shopfloor in the midst of doing the job, as their necessity and their very essence become apparent. To make this clearer: there are tricks of the trade whose value a barista only appreciates once they can grasp that this particular problem even exists. The problem itself is something *unimaginable* until you do the job *live*. For the baristas that are settled into doing the job they may no longer be aware of the beginner's specific difficulties, since for so many problems they were shown the 'trick' that gets around it the one time. Once they had it, they used every day, maybe a hundred times a day, and forgot that it was something they ever learnt to do in the first place; that is until a beginner like me comes along and gets stuck on something *so* easy.

For me the problem was this. Having finally managed to almost effortlessly heat and froth jugs of milk with the steam wand, I was feeling rather pleased. This was a task set by Ignacio during the first two days of training that we only had time to do maybe half-a-dozen times; a task which, having then had dozens of runs on the shopfloor, was now something that I could do with ease and confidence. What happened, though, after quite a few 'real-time' bunches of customer orders, was this: if someone asked for a latte after I had just made a jug of hot, frothed milk, then for the life of me I could not get the hot

milk to come out, only the froth. If you picture the jug (see my other badly drawn sketch) the froth fills up around half the jug and sits at the top. You have a standard spoon to hold back the froth which works fine when the jug is less than full, but is hopeless to hold back the avalanche of foam that pours out of a full jug.



I puzzled over what to do, trying to picture how to get the milk out. One of my solutions was that, much like the first pint of beer from a new keg, there would always be a first cup that would be too foamy and have to be thrown away (unless it were supposed to be a foamy cappuccino). Or a second solution was that I poured a foamy cup and then spooned off the extra foam, though this seemed to take far too long and I hadn't seen anyone else footering around with foam in this way. When during a rush I ended up serving a customer a latte with too much foam, and he complained, my maestro came over to see what the problem was. I explained that I couldn't control the foam...

Once the customer's complaint was dealt with by my furtively spooning off the extra foam and pouring in some more hot milk, the maestro heated up a fresh jug of milk. 'Now watch' he said. I observed closely: he tipped the jug very rapidly into a steep pouring position, the denser liquid milk rushed through the sticky slow-moving foam, to gush into the cup. Almost as soon as he had started, he stopped pouring; the milk had come out far faster than it does during an ordinary pour of milk from a jug. To finish, he topped off the latte with a pinkie measure of foam. Perfect. So easy. Why couldn't I have thought of it; a solution to the first latte / fresh jug problem? Wait a moment. Firstly, let me remind you that this is a problem you only know exists in the world if you become a barista; secondly, that it emerges in the course of your work when inevitably and inescapably the instructions given by your trainer fail to guide you¹⁵. Quite how the

¹⁵ As Harold Garfinkel says of instruction manuals when we get stuck and cannot see they answer to our current problem: 'In vivo the manual offers a reader anything but just what is needed. The way the text fails you, just the thing you want from it, which you must have, now, just here, just where you are in your project – of that trouble it is guaranteed that it will be waiting for you, but there is no way in the world of prespecifying the conditions under which it is going to intrude upon your local island of order. That means that you have to be in the course of the action, and just there, just because, and

problem might be solved would surely require a genius, a team of researchers in foam-fluid interface dynamics, or of course, a maestro who has been taught by other maestri and has poured hundreds of thousands of cappuccini. In this way of passing on workplace tricks and tips when the occasion arises on getting stuck, making a mess, taking too long etc., we come to understand that it is not about an individual's abilities but the life of techniques. It is about how they inhabit and produce a particular workplace and its staff. The techniques are not mysterious or arcane, nor for workplaces are they ubiquitous; rather, they are socially distributed, they need to be passed along, and on the right occasion¹⁶. This was the right time in my historical development as a barista to learn the trick of the trade because this rapid pouring with a big jug of hot milk and a cup is something that a complete novice would find difficult to do, and would fail to grasp its utility. For me, however, having already poured hundreds of cups of coffee over the previous five days, I was becoming an expert pourer and had now come upon *the* problem.

There is no kitchen

There are many terrible and great things that go on in a restaurant kitchen, behind its swift-swinging round-windowed doors, out of sight of the customers. As George Orwell famously observed in *Down and Out in Paris and London* in the first half of the twentieth century: at an expensive restaurant you should expect your meat to have been fingered and perhaps even licked by the head chef. Tony Bourdain in *Kitchen Confidential* points out that, whilst kitchens have become a lot cleaner since then, the banter between line-cooks, waiters and prep staff has not. In CN, like most cafés, each coffee and every panino is prepared while the customers stand at the bar watching what goes on. This visibility of preparation is a boon to customers and a source of trouble for baristas since it removes the possibility of repairing mistakes made in the preparation of drinks or foods. If the food is dropped, then the customers see it being dropped and it has to be binned. Once behind the bar I realised that there were nevertheless nooks and crannies which baristas could make use of to do fiddly bits of preparation or 'saving' (such as when a toasted sandwich split apart spilled its cheesy guts and needed to be pieced back together). Essential, yet also normally invisible, repairwork done out of sight of the queuing customers.

Whilst the noisy, friendly ethic of Caffé Nero and the multi-lingualism of the baristas retains a hint of the lush and abusive professional jargon of caterers, the close presence of the customers at the bar inevitably means that all staff have to do some of the demeanour work associated with waiting and bar staff (Cavan 1966; Crang 1994; Goffman 1956). Whilst they are similar, the CN barista is not quite a waiter nor a barman or barmaid. Yes they clear tables, but they do not do table service, which also means that the show of good service which is central to good tipping is not at the core of their work. Yes they stand behind a bar, but the bar is so designed that there are no seats at the bar where customers can sit and expect to make small talk or tell their tragic life story to the barmaid. Nor are the customers becoming intoxicated with alcohol with all the tact that handling drunks requires of bar staff, although the customers may get a little edgy on too much caffeine. Akin to a waiter the barista has time-limited conversations with

just in the way you need more than anything in the world just this from the text, and it is in that, and in the way you want it and need it, that you cannot have it' p205. (Garfinkel 2002)

¹⁶ Ed Hutchin's study of the crew's distribution of navigation techniques on board a naval ship is a wonderful study of the situated distribution and distributing of skills. (Hutchins 1995)

customers as they take their order, make their order up and then dispense it whilst also dispensing with the customer. My trainer had told his trainees on numerous occasions that they should be talking to the customer while making their order and try their best never to turn their backs on them. For the beginner barista who is still spelling out recipes, trying to recall orders and trying not to press the wrong buttons on the machine, turning their back on the customer is pretty much inescapable and excusable for the time being.

‘Where are you from?’

The baristas at the cafés I worked in chattered away with customers, their regulars, ones they knew by sight and unfamiliar faces too. Alongside these conversations they talked to one another catching up with one another’s news and reports on events and problems from when they were not around. My conversations tended to be limited to the quiet periods since the rest of the time I was too busy trying not to make terrible errors. In these quiet periods, the classic opener was: ‘where are you from?’

As I noted earlier Caffé Nero draws on a cosmopolitan crowd of London migrant workers. Italians, French, Spanish, Irish, Danes, Australians, Venezuelans and the odd English person. Nearly everyone is from somewhere else, so everyone has rights to ask this question, since there is no shared nationhood. As an opening gambit, ‘where are you from’ taps into a rich resource. It then allows the questioner to say that they’ve been there or ask, ‘what’s it like there?’ To ask, ‘why did you come here?’ It can lead very quickly away from anything to do with the country, and did so in my conversations as to what I did, what they did. This is where the low status nature of the profession forms a background to these conversations¹⁷. For a start it would be redundant to ask people what they do since notionally we are all baristas working for Caffé Nero. The expectation is that you are a barista now while you are on your way to some other job that a person would really want to do. This is not an expectation we have of other jobs, in other workforces, and just imagine asking your doctor, ‘so what is it you *really* want to do?’

Baristas meet new people during training, their trainer, the other trainees, their maestro and staff at the café where they are placed. Beyond this, they then meet the staff at their final placement. CN arranges monthly parties for its staff where a venue is hired out with a finite quantity of free drink and there is the opportunity for geographically distant branches to meet up with one another. If we compare this café chain environment to an independent café with its limited staff, then we can see how CN builds an extensive community of café workers, even though theirs is only a passing profession.

The CN workforce is a transient one and yet there are strong bonds of community which is not only down to the company’s efforts to bond its workforce in the cafés and at their monthly events. In addition the typical informal practice in lowly service work of employing friends and family has been formalised in CN, whereby employees are actively encouraged to suggest new recruits from amongst their friends and are rewarded financially if the person is taken on. Moreover workplaces, as we all know, are the places where we make most of our adult friendships, and this effect is doubled amongst CN’s baristas since they are often new arrivals in the UK with only limited friends and family.

¹⁷ While barista are low status jobs in the UK, in countries such as Italy they form a more permanent if still not exactly high status profession.

Thus they are happy to take on new acquaintances from those working alongside them. Becoming a barista is, then, also about building friendships and a cosmopolitan community.

'I hate it when it's quiet'

So said my maestro at Merrill Lynch after sweeping effortlessly through a short batch of late-lunch orders that would have had me in a mild panic. During my three days in my three different cafés, it was only on the last day that I caught a hint of what was so bad about a quiet day. In my struggles to keep up with orders, and to rectify the mistakes that I made during the slam of lunch-hours, I was praying for the branches to stay quiet. On my last day I was finally starting to keep on top of my (still single) orders, the café was well-staffed, and at around three in the afternoon there came a point where 'nothing' was happening. For the first time I realised that there were no impending tasks coming my way. There was time to watch the clock edge from three to quarter past three, to wonder what I should do next, to seek out someone to ask what I ought to be doing right now. These are the points where we slip from the time that we make in and as an activity, and the time that the clock marks. It might be right to say that the barista feels the quiet periods acutely since they have seriously busy periods where customers keep arriving and they keep piling up orders. Unlike my day job as a researcher where there is always something I can turn to next - do email, start reading that article for review which has been lying on my desk for the past month, get back to writing this report - the barista can hit spots where everything is done. Well clearly not everything is done, but all the usual stuff is done: all the customers are served, cleaning and clearing up has been done, the shelves have been re-stocked, even the toilets have been cleaned. Studies of cooks document their preference for 'smoothness', and that they dislike slow days where they have too much time on their hands, not only is it dull but it has been shown paradoxically lead to mistakes (Fine 1996; Whyte 1949)¹⁸.

When I was working at full tilt (which was of course quarter speed for an experienced barista), I had a feel for the flow of time similar to that of when I play tennis or 'shoot 'em up' game on a computer. Although I was constantly reacting to customer orders, it would be wrong to say that this is a time made out of reactions. It is a time that is finely made by each and every thing you do, and each and every thing is part of doing just what it is you are doing. There is no spare time to smoke and savour a cigarette; there is no time to recollect who you have failed to phoned lately, or which monthly bills remain unpaid. You are 'living in the moment', yet this is a stretched out moment as it is extended toward definitely and rapidly realisable projects (two orders, one regular cappuccino already made, two espressos pouring into cups to make two more lattes). These orders play out, 'bahm! bahm!' and when coffees are all served, they are completed (like the levels of the video-game, having shot everything in sight on one level and gotten to the door that starts a fresh level). When you are rushed off your feet, you are sitting at that thresh-hold where there is a close match between what *can* be made with the time that is available as a customer waits, and the making and serving of coffees, panini, tea etc as the developing phenomena that need to be made in that time. Customers do not find your service to be slow by consulting their watches, they find it to be slow by knowing how long a cappuccino takes to be made at CN. They and you know when it is being done with efficiency and fluency, and when you make a large complex order of half

¹⁸ The finest example of this relational contrast is in the film 'Pushing Tin' about air traffic controllers.

a dozen coffees with a certain economy and faster than seems possible, it's a great thing, right? It's a hole in one. It's a winning rally. It's a cryptic crossword solved on a short train journey.

No wonder a barista wants it busy.

Crowds

To finish this report I want to make a few remarks in passing on the three different cafés where I served coffee. They were, as I mentioned earlier, the affluent suburbanites of East Sheen, the busy mix of shoppers, office workers and tourists of Long Acre and the international bankers of the Merrill Lynch café. The latter was of considerable interest to me since, as many people know, at its inception Lloyds Bank, a century before we knew what banks were, was run on the fly out of a café. How the tables have turned over the last two hundred years. The Merrill Lynch building dwarves the Caffé Nero where some of its bankers still do their business over a discounted cappuccino. The café itself has a distinctive daily and weekly rhythm to it, with spikes in its custom: pre-work from 8.30-9.30, mid-morning, lunchtime and then a mild rush in the late afternoon. It had to be geared up to serve coffee at a faster rate than any of the other branches of CN, and was probably the slickest operation that I worked for, which is no surprise if nearly all of your customers are international bankers, a group who you really wouldn't want to keep hanging about. The bankers assisted in the slickness since they kept their hours, and their numbers predictable; they tended to tidy up after themselves, or it might be that they just didn't make a mess in the first place. Whilst I cleared tables I was aware that banking was being done constantly around me: lone bankers were doing paperwork, groups were having meetings. The newspaper racks were stuffed to overflowing with abandoned copies of the FT. In the entire day I saw not one child. The most conspicuous customers were staff from the adjacent hairdressers (also engulfed by the Merrill Lynch building); in a sea of suits they were wearing leather trousers and black t-shirts.

By contrast East Sheen was filled with children running up and down the aisles, doing jigsaw puzzles on the tables, fighting over muffins and some even sitting quietly. There were rushes at lunchtime and a long quiet period in the afternoon, with the neighbourhood high street going quiet not long after five pm. As the manageress noted, what was pleasant about the café was that it served the residents of the close geographical neighbourhood. Lots of the customers knew one another as fellow local inhabitants and used the café as a place to meet between shopping and home. Parents on their way to and from nursery, shops, gym and school would meet up there unexpectedly and catch up with their news. Children were expected and welcomed in a way that would certainly not be the case at Merrill Lynch.

Long Acre was hectic into the evening since Covent Garden stays open late and during the Christmas shopping period, when I was there, it stayed busy throughout the day. A cold snap had driven more people indoors and, aside from having a run on hot chocolates, this led to desperately cold and tired shoppers sitting on the floor in the warmth rather than drinking their coffee on the hoof. In the extreme congestion a running problem for the staff was student groups who would, after ordering a cup of coffee each, take over a table to study for up to three hours at a time. Attempts were made by the staff to hurry them along by hovering over their table and offering to clear

away their cups. The students remained entrenched, impervious to the indirect efforts of the staff and the hostile stares of other customers standing waiting for tables. Long Acre is intriguing because its more socially mixed crowds, lead to these conflicting expectations of how long a table could and should be occupied: where for an office worker, or equally a Christmas shopper, taking a two hour lunch break in the afternoon is not on.

A sociological endnote

For the barista, for Caffé Nero, for its customers, and for the cultural geography of the place, a 'crowd' is something any café (or bar) has (Oldenberg 1997). While each café might be a little vague as to what is the 'right' crowd, it does not want the 'wrong' crowd. A café can have a 'young crowd', 'mainly office workers', 'parents and children' and various other crowd constructive and reflexive categorisations. Whether they are the wrong crowd depends on the type of café: a youth café for delinquent teenagers for instance does not want to be colonised by international bankers. Any customer, on entering a café, can assess from a look at the actual crowd in front of them what is their relation to it: are they a crowd of which I'm a central part (i.e. I'm here with my daughter, as a parent, and East Sheen has plenty of kids tearing around already), is it a crowd which I form an acceptable sub-part (i.e. the multi-crowd Long Acre); is it a crowd in which my presence would be seen as potentially troubling (a parent with two boisterous toddlers in amongst the quietly industrious bankers)?

The social sciences have tended to treat crowds as if they were like clouds of atoms held together by social forces. Technical knowledge of the social force which holds crowds together and controls what they do then becomes the province of sociologists, psychologists or human geographers. By way of contrast this project is devoted to how crowds are made by their 'population' and how they are used and analysed in and as part of our everyday knowledge.

Crowds are not only made and learned about by customers walking through the door, they are used by everyone to analyse the conviviality of any public gathering place where they go. Some customers spin on their heel in the entrance to a café having taken one glance and decided that is full of a crowd with which they would rather not mix (or that dimply a café is *too* crowded where such an assessment is not done by *type* of crowd). So it is that my friend Sally said to me before I ever went to East Sheen, 'oh it's the kind of place full of posh mothers and their well-dressed kids', a crowd with which Sally with her two well-dressed well-behaved children were not in an antagonistic relation. Finding public places that are child-friendly is a constant task for parents of babies and young children.

The customer's social analysis of a café crowd is a topic which we will examine in further project reports on customer perspectives. For this report on becoming a barista what is notable about any CN's crowd is that it is for all practical purposes out of the control of the barista. CN's by design are of the same design wherever you find them, so they do not use different furnishings, menus or reputations or other such devices to attempt to select their crowd (e.g. compared to MacDonald's division of their fast food outlets from

their Aroma chain¹⁹). By my selection of cafés I was able to select different crowds, yet those cafés were not able to select their crowds. The crowds were not exactly a surprise – you build a stylish Italian café connected to a huge international bank and you will get a banking crowd.

And for the beginner

The good barista assesses the tolerances of their crowds for flirting, waiting in line, tidiness of the shop and tailors her or his conduct accordingly. The good barista learns to be an informed anthropologist of their local tribe – ‘cafe customers’. She talks to them when she can, knows their peculiar rituals, their dining habits, something of their business, who knows who and she shows them respect. And at the end of the day she leaves her tribe to go home and discuss with her friends and colleagues some of the typical peculiar things the ‘customers’ did that day.

¹⁹ Caffé Nero recently acquired the ‘Aroma’ coffee chain from McDonald’s (who in turn had bought its original owners out several years earlier). Instead of trying to deal with two quite different branded chains, McDonald’s have concentrated on their familiar market by instead creating the McCafe chain which will notionally draw on their existing market sector. It builds continuity with the fast food outlets in its name, colour choices, furnishings, speed of service and, apparently, the weakness of its coffee; the menu on the other hand is altered to concentrate more on pastries and European sandwiches.

Appendix - Seven 'morning' orders:

A first note is that morning orders have the characteristics of being mainly coffee drinks with intermittent additions of pastries or muffins. There are only two staff working at this time in the morning. It is around about 8.30am. Customers are often time pressed in the morning... Say grabbing take-aways on their way to their office. Or stopping off for a mere five minutes to drink a cappuccino and glance at the newspaper. The staff attend to this characteristic. Also the time is of import. In the 8.30 to 9 slot, time is particularly pressing and bursts of customers are likely as trains and or buses drop off people and also as 9 approaches...

1. 'Tall latte' - customer

'To have 'in'?' asks Barista One

(for a 'tall latte' CN is in most cases a 'Grande Latte')

Two shot handle filled with two quick pulls of dispenser handle. Banged even. Wiped clean with hand. Inserted into machine, slightly too tall cup has to be angled and then righted to get it under the coffee spouts and button 4 is pressed.

15 seconds.

Steel frothing jug, relatively full. Banged mildly on counter and then stirred a couple of times with barista's spoon.

Tall mug has to be angled back out from under coffee spouts, watching not to slop espresso out of it.

Milk is poured into the mug, using spoon to hold froth back, up to level finishing with finger of froth. Let loose the finger of froth by lifting the spoon out of the way. Last drop of milk is added to bring froth right up to rim.

Brought to counter. Milk slops slightly.

On arrival at counter, barista pulls out napkin from under counter, wipes milk off side of mug, puts long handled tea-spoon in and presents to customer, 'anything else?'

2. 'Cappuccino'

'What size would you like?'

'Don't know.'

Barista One points to each cup.

'That one'

'Regular size'

Loads double shot handle, presses button 4.

Starts frothing milk, another customer arrives. 'Can I get you a coffee?'

'No' Machine would have to be abandoned to do something other than coffee. So continues with cappuccino making.

Milk is poured, one third froth, one third liquid, using barista spoon to dispense froth and then hold it back while milk is poured. Then choc powder on top.

3. Meantime second barista arrives from dishwashing area, takes order from waiting man.

'2 teas. Breakfast tea please'

Opens sealed plastic jar, unwinds string from around bags, drops into two regular cups.

Cups go under boiling water tap one at a time.

First barista takes money, stamps card, lays out two saucers with teaspoons for second barista.

4. Customers arrive quickly, making queue: '2 grande cappuccinos to go' Barista One is now working till, taking order, taking money and stamping card. We'll stick mainly with making the coffee at the machine..

Barista two loads two handles swivels them into the machine in close succession. Pops small paper cups under handles. Coffee grinder is low on coffee so turns timer handle to grind a fresh load into the dispensing chamber.

Loud grinding noise for a minute.

Small paper cups taken over to prep area, then poured into two large paper cups. These 'Grande' take away cups are too tall to fit under the handles (though in some Nero cafes they prop them at an angle under the handles and bend the rim so that they fit – its another way of getting around the restrictions of the standardised spaces of an espresso coffee machine's dimensions).

Milk from jug poured into large papers cups, one third froth, one third milk, then a sprinkle of chocolate on top. Two lids taken from pile at back of prep area. Takes a few fiddles since they are stuck together and stuck to a larger pile.

Milk jug is now empty.

Having placed the two sealed cups on the bar for the customer 'two grande cappuccinos', the second barista pours chilled milk from large plastic carton into jug and places jug under frothing wand.

5. 'A regular Americano to take away'

Barista Two, loads double shot into handle, tapping and tamping, inserts into machine. Puts paper underneath. Hits button 4. Returns to milk, checks temperature and picks up jug to bring the frothing wand to the surface of the milk to start building up foam. Foam rises and gets to rim level before 140 Fahrenheit is reached. Alter jug from tilted to angle to vertical for more space for foam. This works bringing milk to 140 without overflow. Jug is put down in prep area.

Paper cup returned to, taken over to boiling water tap where it is filled to near rim with boiling water. Paper cup then double cupped, as Americano is too hot to hold with one cup.

Plastic cap for takeaway prised loose from pile. Squeezed onto cup. Cup is then put on to bar where customer collects.

6. 'A large skinny cappuccino'

To take away

'Yup'

Handle is filled with 2 pulls of dispenser. Tapped, tamped. Twisted into machines. Small paper cup from earlier is placed under. Button 4 is hit.

'Chocolate on top?'

'Yup'

Barista pulls out second jug from back of prep area which still has frothed skimmed milk in it, puts it under steam wand to heat it up slightly. Edges 'normal' milk jug out of the way in prep area.

Customer asks for apple cinnamon muffin. Barista One picks up paper bag from under counter with one hand with other slips tongs off rail, reaches under see-through plastic to pick up muffin which is then dropped into bag. Bag is placed on counter in front of customer. Barista one stamps loyalty card and rings up order on cash till, taking customer's money and giving change.

Meantime small paper cup is removed by Barista Two now that coffee is finished pouring. Poured into large paper cup which is taken to prep area. Milk poured in, spoon dividing: up to one third, then froth on top. Choc dispenser is passed over surface of froth. Plastic

top is popped on. Barista two swings around back of Barista One to place cup beside muffin bag. Customer picks up order and goes to collect sugar and stirrer from the accessories stand beside the bar.

7. A 'regular' arrives. He normally orders a single macchiato with extra hot milk.

'Two double macchiatos'

'Sitting in?'

'Yup.'

'How are you this morning'

'Be more awake this morning with a double dose'

They laugh.

First barista still working till. Places two medium saucers on counter, then rattles teaspoons on to them.

Second barista dispenses two shots into handle, taps, tamps, wipes top and twists into machine. Places small cup under spouts. Hits button 2.

Repeats above while first is pouring with second handle and second slot on machine.

15 seconds.

Takes cups to prep area. Spoons some froth onto double espressos.

'Do you want extra hot milk in one?'

'Yup, that'd be great'. The regular smiles, it's their 'usual' customised macchiato.

Second barista adds extra milk, using spoon to hold back froth.

Brings cups over and places on to waiting saucers. Regular says thanks and takes cups over to table where other regular is waiting for them.

No one queuing after the brief rush, so second barista walks back to sink area to continue emptying dishwasher, leaving barista one alone to take orders and make drinks while it is quieter.

These seven orders stretch over a time period of less than five minutes. Each order has to be made. This can't be repeated often enough – each one is assembled from a slightly different set of ingredients, it has to be accomplished each time as the order that it is. There are repetitions of start points of course. Yet in a typical sequence of orders such as we have here, there are 4 cappuccinos but they come interspersed with other kinds of drinks. They come in different sizes. They come as: staying-in/take-away, one cappuccino = one order, two cappuccino's = one order, regular & grande, with chocolate on top.

There are routine difficulties – cups that don't quite fit in the machine.

The jugs of milk (semi-skimmed & skimmed) in their quantities of hot milk and froth do not match exactly to orders. Cappuccinos can be made quickly and easily when they are full with hot, frothed milk but of course the jugs empty out and need remaking. They also cool down if they left sitting for a few minutes. Depending on what is ordered all the froth can be used up quite quickly.

Frothing milk takes time and is a constant source then of disruptions to the flow of coffee orders. Maestros and experienced baristas are expert at matching up the rhythm of the hot milk jug to the making of espresso drinks at the machine. They never seem to have long delays while milk froths.

Final manipulations to the milk: Freshly made frothed milk has to be stirred with a whisk to make it 'soupy'. When it's poured it requires control with a spoon placed at the neck of the jug to control flow of milk or froth. Hot milk can be 'gushed' out of a fresh jug using the quick tilt technique described above. Froth can be poured freely, can be held back with a spoon, can be swept out with the spoon and can be scooped out with the spoon.

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