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a five-year journey: an interview with david

David Makin, Barista at Veneziano in Australia, recently placed 2nd at the World Barista Championships using an Espro Tamper. We sat down with David to talk about coffee, his journey to WBC and the challenge of making a world class cup of coffee.

ESPRO: We were excited that you chose to use the Espro tamper in your competition. Why have you made the Espro Tamper part of what you do and how you do it?



DAVID: At Venetziانو, we have always said that if we are going to recommend something we have to use it ourselves. So I started out using it because of that, but more than everything it was about the fit and the feel of it - and I have always felt very comfortable with it. I find the click to be a great guide to where I am in the pressure and then I push slightly more or less depending on the coffee.

ESPRO: So am I right that you would say that for the beginner, the Espro Tamper gives you a set point and for the advanced user it gives you a guide?

DAVID: Yes, that's exactly right. I think that's the right way to look at it. I think people should be open minded about it. Some people think that just because it's a calibrated tamper that that implies that the barista doesn't have the same level of skill. I think that these days people are using all sorts of new technology to improve the way we make coffee - I think the calibrated tamper is part of that plan to try and make more consistent coffee. And I think that is one of the things we face in all the espresso bars in Melbourne: you can go in one day and have a great shot of espresso and go in the next day and it's not so great. I think that trying to get that consistency in your business is the hardest thing. That's what the calibrated tamper provides, that's what volumetric provides in the machines. That's what reverse osmosis water and all the different technologies that are coming in our business: trying to improve the quality and consistency of what you offer your customer every day. Ultimately that is what customers want: they are not as into coffee as we are. They know what they want and they want it to taste that way every day.

ESPRO: Yours has been a long competition road! Take us from your start in competitions to this year.

DAVID: I started competing in 2004. It was the Victoria Barista Championship in my home state. I entered without a whole lot of knowledge about the whole thing and was lucky enough to win! So that took me to the Australia finals where I came dead last; it was abysmal: I was obliterated by everyone else in the country. That inspired me to come back and train harder. In 2005 I won my regional and then came 5th in Australia. Then I came back and won my regional again in 2006, and won in Australia in 2006 which put me through to Byrne Switzerland for the World Barista Championship (WBC).



Well we went over there a little bit off the pace: we didn't really know what the world stream was about. We finished 11th in Byrne and considering that it was our first time there, we really enjoyed it. We came back even more motivated to make it to the Worlds in 2007. In 2007 I was lucky enough to win my regional again but just missed winning the Australia championship by 4 points to Scott Calahan who represented Australia in Tokyo Japan. So I had to try again in 2008! So this year I won my regionals for the 5th year in a row and then won Australia by 107 points! It was a

massive win that took us to the WBC in Copenhagen which is where we were 2 weeks ago.

ESPRO: What did you do to prepare this year that put you over the top?

DAVID: We really focused on green coffee and making sure we had the freshest possible bean. We imported some coffee direct from El Salvador via air freight to make sure we had the freshest bean possible. And that made a big difference in the quality of green that we were sourcing. I also tidied up some technical things as well and some of my presentation as well.

I know a big part of why I did so well this year is that in October of last year I spent a month overseas: I went to Portland, Oregon, Seattle Washington and Vancouver Canada (where I quickly caught up with Lynore from Espro) and then went from there to Chicago, then Copenhagen, then to London where I spent two days training with James Hoffman and then traveled from there to Milan, then to Germany and then traveled home. And so basically spent a month on the road drinking coffee, tasting coffee and understanding coffee on the world scene.

On the trip I learned that the coffee that people drink around the world is always good quality but distinctively different in taste. The coffee I drank in Europe for example is a lot more unique - it has a brighter note to it than in Australia. In Australia we tend to drink coffee that is more full bodied. Actually Vancouver is a lot more similar to the coffee we drink here in Australia - a lot more body, a lot more richness. In Europe they tend to be larger, a little more acidic, a little brighter. With the WBC, you don't know where your judges will be from - you could end up with a judge from Mexico, one from America, one from Sweden and one from Australia.

The key is trying to find a coffee that all four of them are going to enjoy and give you a reasonable score for.

ESPRO: A coffee that everybody is going to at least respect, right?

DAVID: Yes, I still think everyone is going to respect what you've done and what you've presented - it may not be their personal preference, but this competition is not about personal preference it's about putting a quality cup up.

ESPRO: Take us behind the scenes to the WBC in Copenhagen.

DAVID: We spent almost 6 months before the event training to make sure we gave it our best possible shot. The WBC is really like the Formula 1 of coffee and it has the same high expenses associated with competing.



ESPRO: What did you bring along with you from Australia?

DAVID: 240kg of equipment were checked in at the Melbourne airport. I brought 2 grinders, 2 Espro tampers, all my cups, saucers, glassware and 130kg of roasted coffee. We were definitely making sure we left nothing to chance this year. I actually brought in fresh cherries and other raw ingredients with me as well.

ESPRO: Tell us about the competition itself.

DAVID: This year was the largest entry list ever - 51 baristas from around the world, a record entry for the WBC. On the first day, we met all the competitors and then everyone did a 15 minute routine that was judged. Based on the scores, the top 6 made the final - and then we all started the final again with zero points.

I have to say that while there were a couple tiny things that were not 100%, I did come off stage and say to Peter Wolff - my roaster - that this was the best I've ever done - we should do quite well off of that. Everything went to plan, we'll have to see how the scores come down off the sheet now.

ESPRO: As you look back on the WBC, what do you think separates the good from the great - everyone is at such a high level!

DAVID: Wow. It's just the tiniest little things! One of the things I have learned in the past year or so is that the presentation has to represent you and everything you are about. You can't look at someone's routine from last year and replicate parts of it and think that this will be a winning routine. You really have to look and feel comfortable and enjoy what you do; if it is manufactured then the judges can really tell and I think that is the big difference between the good and the great. It's people being able to tell and see the passion and dedication that you show onstage - that you really are into espresso and that you would make a good ambassador for Specialty Coffee for the year ahead.

ESPRO: So much of what the WBC is about is hiring the spokesperson for the industry for the next year?

DAVID: Yes, you know every year before the competition the judges are reminded that the winner will represent everything that Specialty Coffee is about in the media. We need to pick someone that is passionate and dedicated and is going to push ahead and may push the boundaries of what our industry is all about.

ESPRO: What would you tell would-be competitors - people that are at the same place that you were at in 2004?

DAVID: It's a long term plan! Trying to win your regional, to win your national, to get to the WBC, to get to the final, let alone to win the competition is a very hard proposition. I think people do need to go into it - especially in the first few years - to meet the people and have a good time. You may or may not do well. Just keep trying and keep pushing the boundaries of what you do. As long as you are improving as a barista and improving what you do back at home I think that is the important thing.

ESPRO: Will you be competing in Atlanta next year?

DAVID: No I will not be competing in Atlanta - I will be cruising around and enjoying myself for a change. That's it for me. I've competed for 5 years and although I was terribly close to winning I think that is it. I really have enjoyed myself and the people I met there, and I will continue to go to the WBC to be part of the event, but competing takes so much out of your life - nights, weekends - the pressure it puts on everything in your life.

CONGRATULATIONS David on your passion for perfection!
The Espro Team

