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With my previous cheapo espresso machine finally giving up developing any pressure at all after nearly 3 years of intense use, and after trying everything to fix it, including changing the pump, i decided to finally trade up to a Sage Barista Express.... a machine i had been eyeing even when i bought the previous machine. However, I was astounded by the price. I remember only a few months ago this was on sale for around £400 - £420, however recent events have causes nearly ALL coffee machiens to shoot up in price, and I had to pay significantly more!Nevertheless, price aside, it is a very good device that probably suits most kitchens, and fits well on a worktop under most kitchen wall cupboards.Note this is not a fully automated Bean to cup machine, where you just select a drink and press a button, despite some third party sellers labelling it as such. It does require involvement, and experimentation to get right. If you are not willign to learn some of the intreccacies of creating an espresso or other coffee drinks, but enjoy consuming them, then i recommed you get a casule, or a fully automated bean to cup machine. However, if you are willing to learn this can potentially create far better and more satsying coffee drinks.PROS:- I like the fact it is easy to clean, and maintain. My old machine and grinder did leave a lot of mess, this is more contained.- Its thermocoil is relatively more efficient in electricity than a more "professional" boiler/dual boiler type, as it does not need to heat much more more water than whats being used, and its ready to start within about 30 seconds from cold, its perfect for where there is one or two people living in a household, who drinks coffee 2 or 3 times a day.It has a nice storage area for the spare baskets/cleaing tools.- It also comes with both pressurised and unpressurised baskets on both sizes (4 total) which is very handy. Many machines only include either pressurised, or unpressurised, and whilst some home "baristas" dismiss the pressurised ones, they do have a use in certain situations (preground or old or dry beans), and also helps beginners to get a decent enough shot at first, before learning all the intricacies of an espresso machine to be able to successfully use the non pressurised baskets.- It has a proper 3 way solenoid valve to release pressure.- You can manually chose the dosage aount as well as automatic (some machines only give either manual or automatic, not both)- likewise you can also manually do the preinfuse, and extract, or simply set up for 1 or 2 shot to let the machine automatically stop when a certain amount of water as flowed through. You can also problemthe automatic amounts.- It has a hot water dispenser for americans and other long coffees.- It has a professional steam wand (not a panarello one) which gives you more control over the steam creating process, however, does require some skill, as opposed to the panarello types, usually found on cheaper machines.- There is enough clearance to fit a mug underneath the spout.- water temp seems very consistent (though see con below)- pressure gauge! the more expensive versions of the barista range (professional and touch) do not include this very usefull tool.CONNS:- When you switch on from cold, you do need to run at least one or two shots through the machine with the portafilter empty to heat up the pipes and portafilter to a satisfactory. Whilst you may see some on people suggesting that you leave it on for 10 minutes before pullign the first shot, in my experimentation I have done, I find running one or two shots is better at stabilising the temp from the initial cold start, as well as heating the portafilter better, as well as heating the cup/mug.- the baskets do fit quite snugly into the portafilter, and need a bit of work to take out. I carefully use a teaspoon to lever it out.- Although more than capable of creating good steamed milk with great microfoam, the steam power is a bit low on this machine (similar to other thermocoil machines) and does take a while to build up. This does mean it takes a bit longer to steam/froth milk compared to more powerful machines, however, it is also an advantage for newbies, as the slower steaming gives you time to adjust the wand accordingly during steaming, rather than messing up the milk because you were not able to react quick enough, important considering it is a professional wand, as opposed to a panarello one , which does require a bit of technique. If you need more powerfull steam, look at the Sage Barista Professional.- Being a single boiler, You cannot steam milk and brew coffee at the same time, as the boiler needs to adjust to the different tasks, which can take a few seconds. Not a big issue for a household makign coupel of drinks at a time, but probably more annoying when making many more, espeically waiting for the temp to change.- like ANY proper espresso machines it does take time to master! Also be sure to read: The best home espresso machines for sale right nowThe Barista Express offers just enough adjustable controls and manual settings that you feel like a real barista when using it. It's also simple to operate, performs as well as machines costing hundreds more, and grinds beans right into its portafilter. Of course a gadget like this isn't for everyone since it requires some effort and patience to operate. Those who demand their concentrated coffee fix with a minimum of fuss (and who are willing to pay for it), a fully automatic machine like the \$3,000 Philips Saeco GranBaristo Avanti and \$2,500 Krups EA 9010 will be more your speed. Design and featuresMeasuring 16 inches tall by 13.5 inches wide and reaching a depth of 12.5 inches, the Breville Barista Express is roughly the size of a standard drip coffee maker but about twice as wide. Compared with compact espresso machines such as the De'Longhi Dedica and Mr. Coffee Cafe Barista, Breville's espresso maker is larger and physically more robust.Aside from its girth, on looks alone Breville's machine gives the impression that it means business.The stainless-steel chassis, and the the hefty steel portafilter and handle attachment help its appearance, but the large bean hopper, companion burr grinder, and pressure gauge really seal its serious looks. You usually only see those features on premium semi and super automatic espresso makers. Enlarge Image This machine has a real pressure gauge. It's the pressure gauge that most communicates the Breville's brewing chops. Placed front and center on the control panel, the circular dial displays whether the internal pump is pushing hot water through your coffee grounds within the optimal pressure range. Too little force and water will flow through the grounds too quickly, missing much of its potential flavor, and resulting in under extracted and sour-tasting espresso. Too little hot water flow under high pressure will likely yield espresso liquid with a bitter flavor. Cheaper espresso machines tend to lack pressure gauges either to cut costs, or mask that they have inconsistent performance. Enlarge Image To the left and right of the dial are large circular buttons for "Power," "Filter Size" and "Program," along with two for choosing to brew single or double espresso shots. Here too is a knob for setting the amount of coffee grounds the grinder will produce automatically for either single or double-sized espresso filters. To make life easier, ground coffee drops directly into the Barista Express' steel portafilter. From there it's a cinch to gently press (or tamp) the portafilter's contents down (Breville includes a metal tamper) and twist the entire apparatus (handle, filter and all) into position under the machine's single brew head. Enlarge Image Grounds drop right into the portafilter. A swivel-joint mounted steam wand along with a hot water nozzle live to the right of the brew head, both activated by a large knob on the machine's right side. On the far left of the unit sits a grind size selector that boasts 18 settings including "coarse" on one end and "fine" on the other. Other thoughtful touches include a drip tray that's easy to clean and a removable water tank with its own sturdy handle.Pull shots like a barista! admit that at first all the Breville Barista Express' knobs, buttons, and dials were intimidating. Thanks to the detailed manual, after pulling just a few practice shots I had the basic process down. First I filled the bean hopper and the water tank. Next I dropped a double-walled, double-shot filter into the portafilter basket (I always prefer double shots) and pushed it backward into the grinding cradle. Enlarge Image Fill the grinder's bean hopper. One short push and release hits a button at the back of the cradle telling the grinder to automatically fill the filter basket to the size you've selected, single or double. Also factored in is what grind amount setting you've selected, controlled by the grind amount dial. You can grind manually into the portafilter too by pushing it back and holding it in place. Releasing backwards pressure off of the portafilter handle stops the grinder.Finally you tamp down your grounds, swivel the portafilter into place to lock it under the brewhead, then hit the single or double espresso button. With any luck a thick, concentrated stream of espresso liquid will flow into your glass or cup. Keep in mind that many factors can affect your espresso pull quality. These include the coarseness and amount of grounds used, how hard a tamp you exert, and whether the machine has been properly primed right before you brew. Performance and tasteInitially I found it tricky to pull a decent shot with the Breville Barista Express. Once I properly honed my technique, I was treated to the best espresso I've tasted from a home machine. For example I first set the grinder to a level 5 coarseness but my resulting shots tasted decent, though flat and lifeless, essentially a shadow of what's possible using my Costco Colombian test beans. Refractometer readings of shots pulled at these settings confirmed what I tasted, with the average percentage TDS (total dissolved solids) returning as 7.7 percent. Given my final espresso volume of 1.6 fluid ounces pulled through the 0.5 ounce of coffee grounds within the portafilter, that translates to a low extraction percentage of 13.1 percent. Just like drip coffee, ideally espresso should clock in with a high enough TDS to hit an extraction percentage of between 18 and 22 percent. Enlarge Image Pulling shots was easy once I put in some practice. Next I bumped the grinder down to level 3 coarseness and had another go. The Barista Express rewarded my patience with a shot that was truly spectacular. The taste was rich, and packed with complex flavors such as chocolate and smoke, balanced by sweet caramel. The crema was thick, stout, and a lovely golden brown. I also measured a higher TDS percentage of 12.4 percent from this shot, giving it an excellent extraction percentage of 18.6 percent. From this point on I had no trouble pulling shot after shot of similarly delicious espresso.Indeed, coffee I drank from the Breville Barista Express tasted better and lingered longer on the palate than what I made with either the Philips Saeco GranBaristo Avanti (4.2 TDS Avg) or Krups EA 9010 (3.9 TDS Avg), both excellent but exorbitantly priced appliances. Enlarge Image Crema was thick and rich. Of course, as with any semi-automatic espresso machine, if I altered any of the brewing variables, all bets were off. For instance when I got greedy and added a larger amount of grounds, tamped the filter down too hard (or both), I typically lost control of my carefully balanced brewing pressure. In this case, not enough water could enter the filter or escape it. Regardless, the results were undrinkable.There is a way to salvage an extremely strong, or "short" pulls of espresso by using the hot water nozzle. I found the machine combined hot water with espresso very well, creating astonishingly tasty Americanos even from the most botched of my shots. Enlarge Image Steaming milk was fun as well. I had no trouble steaming milk with the Barista Expresses either. Once the steam boiler reached temperature (approximately 20 seconds), it had plenty of power to complete the task. Other products such as the Mr. Coffee Pump Espresso and De'Longhi Dedica timed-out after a few minutes while the Barista Express steam wand could practically run indefinitely. Enlarge Image Add frothed milk for sweetness. All espresso machines require constant cleaning to stay in good working order, and in this regard the Breville Barista Express is no different. With far fewer moving parts or messy milk reservoirs to maintain compared with super-automatic gadgets, this espresso maker is relatively easy to keep tidy. Enlarge Image Use hot water and steam to clean. As long as you remember to empty the puck of spent grounds from the portafilter immediately after pulling a shot, give it a quick rinse, then flush hot water through the brew head, the machine is good to go. The drip tray is a cinch to remove and empty too. ConclusionBrewing espresso with the Breville Barista Express takes time, effort and practice. That's especially true if you're spoiled by the pushbutton functionality of super-automatic espresso makers like the \$3,000 Philips Saeco GranBaristo Avanti and \$2,500 Krups EA 9010. And while you don't do any work up front before enjoying drinks from those products, you'll certainly be busy servicing them constantly either by emptying drip trays or conducting daily, weekly and monthly cleaning. Those patient enough to stick with the \$600 Breville Barista Express though, tweaking its settings and various options etc., will be richly rewarded and ultimately spend a lot less money. Not only is it capable of making better coffee than cheaper espresso machines such the De'Longhi Dedica and Mr. Coffee Cafe Barista, the Express produces superior flavor than even luxury models like the afore-mentioned Philips Saeco and Krups at a fraction of the price. Sure, you could buy a fancy Italian machine like the \$400 Gaggia Classic but unlike the Breville it lacks a grinder. All this helps the Breville Barista Express earn our editor's choice for a home espresso machine.



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