



KITCHEN NOTES · ESPRESSO

Stop Guessing How Much Espresso to Pack in a Shot

How much coffee belongs in the basket, how much should land in the cup, and the small habits that make a home shot taste like coffee — not homework.

WHY THE SHOT FALLS APART

You can own a nice machine and still pull a sad shot.

Making coffee is mostly measuring, even when it feels like a cozy ritual. Drip has a golden ratio people actually use. Espresso has one too — and a lot of home setups skip it. Pack the basket too full and the water has to fight its way through. Pack it too light and you get a thin, sour trickle. Either way, it will not taste like the cup you paid five dollars for.

You do not need a cafe budget. You need a machine that can hold pressure and heat, a grinder that can go fine, a cheap scale, and a few habits you can repeat on a weekday morning.

That is the whole game: same dose, even puck, honest ratio. The rest is tasting and nudging.



A good shot looks like warm honey, not a leaky faucet. The look is a clue. The taste is the test.

Weigh the coffee. Stop treating the portafilter like a guessing cup.

Kaleena Teoh teaches coffee and co-founded Coffee Project New York. She talks about espresso like a method, not a lifestyle. The notes in this issue follow her advice on grind, ratio, how you pack the puck, and that foam people take pictures of. If you already bought the machine, good. Now use it like a tool, not a trophy.

START HERE

Espresso is a method, not a drink.

The word itself is doing extra work. Espresso is not a type of bean, and it is not automatically the dark, bitter shot from a chain menu. It is a way of brewing: hot water gets pushed through a tight puck of finely ground coffee. You can do that on a machine with a boiler, or even on a stovetop pot. Chrome and lights are optional.

Teoh's rule is simple. The two things that actually matter are whether the machine can hold pressure and whether it can hold temperature while the shot is running. A lot of home models will not let you tweak either one. That is fine. A gauge is reassuring. Following the manual — including any preheat step — matters more.

Keep the machine clean. Brush old grounds off the portafilter rest. Run hot water through the group head now and then. Leftover coffee oils go stale, and then every shot tastes a little off and you blame the beans.



You can pull a serious shot on a budget machine if heat and pressure stay steady.

WHAT “GOOD ENOUGH” MEANS

If the machine keeps pressure and temperature while you brew, it can make real espresso. Extra budget belongs on a burr grinder, not a shinier boiler.

WAIT FOR HEAT

If your model asks you to wait for a ready light, wait. Pulling a shot into a cold group head is an easy way to get sour coffee and then decide you just don't like espresso.

USE DRINKING WATER

Heavy scale in the tank is not a flavor note. It is a clog waiting to happen, and it throws off temperature over time.

FLUSH THE GROUP

A short blast of hot water before you lock in rinses old grit and warms the metal. It takes five seconds. Skip it and the first sip tells on you.

01 · MIND THE GRIND SIZE



A burr grinder with a real dial is the upgrade that changes the cup.

Fine sand, not dust.

There is no such thing as espresso beans. That is marketing. Use whatever origin and roast you like, even a light one. The grind is what turns those beans into espresso instead of drip.

Teoh says you want something around the texture of fine sand. Finer than drip, pour-over, or French press. Not as fine as Turkish coffee, which is basically powder. If the shot gushes out in ten seconds, go finer. If it crawls and tastes harsh, go a little coarser.



The grains should still look like grains. If it looks like cocoa powder, you went too far. This is why a burr grinder with a real dial beats a blade grinder or a machine with three mystery settings. If you have extra money after a basic machine that holds pressure and heat, spend it on the grinder. Teoh does not soften this: a good burr grinder is very, very important for espresso.

Freshness counts too. Grind right before you brew, and buy beans roasted in the last few weeks — not the bag that has been sitting under grocery lights since last season.

02 · NAIL THE COFFEE-TO-WATER RATIO

Weigh what goes in. Weigh what comes out.

Drip coffee has a golden ratio. Espresso has one too, but you are not really controlling a kettle. You are looking at how much ground coffee went in versus how much liquid espresso came out. Pros weigh the cup. You should too. Eyeballing “a double” is how you get a different drink every day.

Teoh’s window is 1 to 1.5 up to 1 to 2.5. In plain numbers: for every 1 gram of coffee in the basket, you want about 1.5 to 2.5 grams of espresso in the cup. That range is strong without tasting like syrup, and it is not watery.

If you want an easy target while you learn, aim for 1-to-2. A smaller yield tastes more intense. A bigger yield tastes lighter. The smaller the grounds-to-liquid ratio, the stronger the cup.



Volume in a glass lies a little. A scale does not.

***For every gram in the basket, shoot for about two grams in the cup.
That is the average that keeps most people out of trouble.***

A SIMPLE 1:2 STARTING CHART

LIQUID IN THE CUP	COFFEE IN THE BASKET
2 oz	1 oz
3 oz	1.5 oz
4 oz (a double)	2 oz

Cafe shorthand for a double is often about 18 grams in and 36 grams out in roughly 25 to 30 seconds. Use that if grams feel easier than ounces. Same 1:2 idea, just in numbers a scale already speaks.

If your machine has a strength button, play with it. If it does not, you still have grind size, how evenly you spread the grounds, and how hard you tamp. Change one of those at a time so you can tell what actually helped.



Despite the bags that say otherwise, espresso beans are just coffee beans. Roast and grind do the real work.

There is no secret espresso bean.

Grocery shelves love the word espresso on a bag. That usually just means a darker roast that can stand up to milk. You can pull a shot with a light roast from Ethiopia or a chocolatey blend from your local roaster. The basket does not care about the label. It cares about particle size and dose.

What the bag should tell you is roast date. Aim for beans that are a few days to a few weeks off roast. Brand-new beans can be gassy and messy. Ancient beans taste flat and make less foam. Somewhere in the middle is the sweet spot for a home machine.

Match the dose to your basket. A single basket wants less coffee than a double. Your manual is not being fussy when it lists a number — overfilling is how you get a messy, bitter puck and a shower screen caked in grounds.

A WEEKDAY DOUBLE

18 grams of coffee in. About 36 grams of espresso out. Fine-sand grind. Level, then tamp until the puck pushes back. Taste. Adjust tomorrow, not all at once.

Write the winning combo on a sticky note: dose, grind click, time, yield. Beans drift as they age, so that note is a starting line, not a forever law.

03 · BUILD A PUCK THE WATER CANNOT CHEAT

Level first. Tamp second.

After you weigh the grounds into the portafilter — using the basket size and whatever dose the manufacturer suggests for a single or double — level them before you tamp. Teoh's move is low-tech: use your fingers to spread the coffee so it sits even. Fancy distribution tools exist. Fingers work.

Water always takes the easy path. If one side of the basket is packed and the other is fluffy, the water will punch through the fluffy side. Baristas call that channeling. Half the puck gets over-extracted and bitter. The other half barely gets touched. The cup tastes confused, because it is.

A heavy tamper that actually fits your portafilter helps. Home baskets are usually 51 or 54 millimeters across. If your machine came with a light plastic tamper, replace it. You are trying to press a cake, not stamp a library book.



An even bed is more important than a heroic tamp.

*If the grounds are uneven before you tamp, you already lost.
Tamping a hill just makes a denser hill.*

Wipe the rim of the portafilter before you lock it in. Loose grounds on the edge keep the basket from sealing, and then you get a spray instead of a shot. It is a small, slightly boring step. It is also the difference between a clean pull and mopping the drip tray.



The surface should look smooth and level, like packed brown sugar — not a crater, not a dome.

PUSH UNTIL IT PUSHES BACK

You do not need your whole body weight.

Tamping is not a workout. Teoh says push down until you feel the puck start to push back. You are not leaning on a door. You are also not tapping a credit card on a counter. You want a dense, tightly packed cake with a flat top.

If you like numbers, a lot of guides say 20 to 30 pounds of force. That is firmer than a handshake. Keep your wrist straight so the tamp lands level. A tilted tamp is just channeling with extra steps.

Spring-loaded tampers exist for a reason. They click at a set pressure, which is helpful if your hands are still learning how “enough” feels. Consistency beats heroics.

A TAMP CHECKLIST

Dose. Level with your fingers. Tamp straight down. Polish with a light twist if you want. Wipe the rim. Lock in. Brew.

Do not knock the portafilter on the counter after tamping. That crack you think is “settling” is often a fracture in the puck, and water will find it immediately.

Plant your elbow over the basket so the tamp comes down like a piston. If your wrist cocks to the side, the puck slopes, and you are back to channeling. Same pressure, same angle, every morning. That is the whole trick.

04 · TASTE IT, THEN CHANGE ONE THING

Your palate already knows the assignment.

The golden ratio is a starting line, not a law. Your espresso, your palate. Slight changes in freshness, roast, grind, dose, tamp, and temperature all show up in the cup. That sounds like a lot because it is a lot. You do not fix it by buying a new machine on day two.

Teoh's most useful reminder is also the most obvious: you might be new at making espresso, but you are not new at drinking it. You already know if a cup is too sharp, too muddy, too thin, or actually good. If it is not right, something in the list above needs a nudge.

Give a new setting two or three shots before you panic. The first one after a grind change is often a liar. And keep notes, even messy ones. "Click 12, 18 in, 36 out, 28 seconds, a little sharp" is how you get to "actually great" without starting from zero every Monday.



If you change grind and dose together, you will not know which one saved breakfast.

If the cup is not right, the machine is not haunted. Something needs a small adjustment.

A FAST READ ON THE CUP

WHAT YOU TASTE

WHAT TO TRY NEXT

Sour and fast

Grind finer, or stop the shot a little sooner so you are not chasing extra liquid.

Bitter and slow

Grind a touch coarser, or check that you did not pack more coffee than the basket wanted.

Thin and watery

You let it keep pouring after the good part was over. Cut the yield. Aim closer to 1:2.

THE FOAM QUESTION

Crema looks fancy. It is not a report card.

That foamy layer on top of a shot is fun to look at. It is not proof you did everything right, and it does not carry most of the flavor. If your shot has a thick cap and still tastes hollow, trust your tongue.

Teoh explains it like this: roasting traps carbon dioxide in the beans. Brewing lets that gas out, and it turns into foam. The puck's density is not what decides whether crema shows up. The foam is gas plus oils plus tiny bits of coffee. There are aromatic compounds in there, but the actual flavor lives in the darker liquid underneath. Crema helps with mouthfeel more than taste.

No crema? It might not be your technique. Light roasts and stale beans both make thin foam. If you want more, buy a darker roast that was roasted recently. Fresh plus dark is the simple formula. Old plus light is the thin-film formula.



Pretty foam, quieter flavor. Stir it in if you want the texture. Judge the shot by the sip.

TAKE THIS TO THE KITCHEN

Weigh the coffee. Grind like fine sand. Level, then tamp until the puck pushes back. Aim for about twice as much espresso out as coffee in. Taste. Change one thing. That is the whole curriculum.

THE MORNING SIP · SIPOF.COFFEE

Kitchen notes for people who actually drink the coffee. Advice in this issue draws on Kaleena Teoh of Coffee Project New York. Words by Jordan Hale.