



*Barista certification
adds value to cafés,
baristas and industry*

*by
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Training GROUNDS

As an undergraduate at the University of North Carolina, Michael Harwood walked into his first day of work at The Open Eye Café in Carrboro, N.C., with nary a trace of industry knowledge. Soon, however, he fell in love with all things coffee.

Now in his fifth year at The Open Eye (his employment with the company interrupted only by a two-year stint in New York), the 28-year-old Harwood has elevated his status in the barista world. The current Southeast Regional Barista Champion, Harwood has taken to perfecting his skills, learning the barista craft and exploring the professional avenues the coffee world has to offer.

And yet, something remains absent.

This year Harwood plans to pursue Level 1 certification from the Barista Guild of America (BGA), an endeavor he says has been a long time coming for him. "I think this constant skill building is important and believe certification is a worthwhile program that will show others I'm committed to being the best at what I do," he says.

Certification is escalating in an industry that has long touted quality as its defining characteristic. And that makes sense. Quality coffee is developing into a more competitive game, as shop owners and baristas dedicate themselves to exploration and perfection, and then expose

more consumers to premium cups. Even for veteran baristas like Harwood, the skills (and verification of those skills) that certification provides are becoming increasingly valuable.

PATHS TO CERTIFICATION

Certification follows two paths: the in-house route and the certificate of a third-party organization, quite often directed by for-profit agencies.

In most in-house programs, baristas-in-training generally undertake entry-level certification rooted in coffee industry knowledge (think seed-to-cup training and coffee blends) before moving on to introductory espresso training, light shifts and

more hands-on training regarding the menu, ingredients and machinery. Thereafter, staff members might pursue certification in higher-level areas such as customer service, machine operation, quality control and artistic presentation.

In-house certification's chief advantage, many argue, sits in the fact that a proprietor can tailor the program of knowledge, skills and expectations to the needs and standards of a single shop. "Each café is different in its bar flow, drink recipes and standards of quality," says Caleb Peterson, co-owner of Noble Coffee Roasting in Ashland, Ore. "We want to train our staff in the way we do things so that each barista knows our expectations and goals."



STUDENT OF COFFEE: Reigning Southeast Regional barista champ Michael Harwood is pursuing BGA certification to continue to raise his game.

Alternatively, third-party certification is handled by the likes of the BGA (a trade guild of the SCAA) and the International Academy of Special Coffee (IASC). Many roasters also offer their own certification programs. In most cases, third-party certification curriculums teach and test a mix of fluidity, technical skill, customer service, consistency and proficiency.

At the three Jolts & Juice Company cafés in the Pacific Northwest, all certified staff members earned their IASC designation at the Coffee Fest trade show. Jolts & Juice owner Todd Heinz nudges his most passionate and energetic staff toward the IASC certification, which he believes

sends a positive ripple through the company. "Those who get the certification return with a greater energy for the work, and that filters to others in the store," Heinz says.

Other operators choose to marry the two certification paths.

At The Open Eye Café, for instance, co-owner Scott Conary's mandatory in-house certification mimics the guidelines established by the SCAA (not surprising, considering Conary regularly judges national barista competitions that follow those same SCAA ideals). However, Conary injects particular areas of focus that apply specifically to his establishment. He then encourages third-party accreditation. Next fall, as many as a dozen store employees—about one-third of the café's staff—will be BGA Level 1 certified.

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While some may debate the merits of in-house versus third-party certification, Harwood says that conversation should take a backseat to the ultimate goal of any formal certification program: creating more knowledgeable, confident and proficient baristas. He believes certification of any type allows best practices to flow from industry veterans to those eager to know and do more. "Your skills are only as encompassing as you allow your ring of teachers to be," he says, noting that certification's primary purpose is to ensure a barista's work is correct, current and consistent.

VALUE FOR THE CAFE

From Starbucks to successful independents, the competitive nature of the coffee business has many operators seeking ways to get ahead of the curve. When customers see certifications, positive marketing buzz can follow. "Displaying certifications shows that people care about their work and that the café is invested in its people and a quality product," says Tommy Thwaites, co-founder of Coda Coffee in Denver and the head IASC trainer at Coffee Fest trade shows for the past six years.

Coffee Fest producer David Heilbrunn believes certified baristas lend validity to a café and a seal of approval that sparks trust. "Simply put, people are more comfortable spending money at places that give them quality and consistency," Heilbrunn says. "Certification is a strong step in that direction."

In addition to creating a systemized way to hold people accountable, Noble Coffee's Peterson believes certifications help to create a consistent product that benefits the café as well as the customer. "If there's no understanding of quality or if it's not articulated in a formal manner, then an ambiguity exists that lends itself to inconsistency," says Peterson, himself a BGA Level 2 barista. "It's



ASHLAND, ORE.'S Noble Coffee Roasting uses a certification system that rewards baristas with pay raises as they move up the ladder.

critical to have guidelines as well as expectations."

And while customers might not have the slightest clue about certification or what a specific designation means, Conary believes the consistency and quality that come from certification will inspire return visits. "The customer craves a consistent product, and certification helps get us there," says Conary, who is a BGA Level 1 tester and standing chair of the United States Barista Championship Competition Committee.

VALUE FOR THE BARISTA

Though baristas may once have been derided as "button pushers," the role has shifted in more recent times into an artisan title on par with baker or pastry chef, and it's a job coffee lovers are proud to hold. Certification helps to further increase the level of respect customers bestow upon their drink creators. "The certification can give a professional designation that

shows a barista is committed to his craft and that the job has merits," Heilbrunn says.

Thwaites, who has worked hands-on with hundreds of baristas at Coffee Fest over the years, believes certification provides baristas a confidence and passion for what they do. "Someone has signed off on their proficiency, and that gives these baristas a morale boost," he says.

Though an expense for baristas, certification can heighten self-worth, purpose and professionalism. Heinz of Jolts & Juice says he has witnessed changes in employees' confidence and commitment after they received their certification at Coffee Fest. "They start to see the job as more than something behind a counter, and as a job that has value and real skill," Heinz says. "They see how vast the industry is, which lends enthusiasm to the work."

Certification often produces tangible benefits as well. At Noble

Coffee Roasting, baristas receive a pay increase when they attain B2 status (the first in-house credential) and another raise when they earn the B1 designation (the store's full-fledged barista certification). The increased pay arrives with enhanced benefits and perks, including prime shifts. "I want our people to see growth and possibility, which helps bring in employees that want to stick around," Peterson says.



NICOLE O'BANION

BARISTA CERTIFICATION can lead to well-executed, consistent drinks, which can inspire return visits.

VALUE FOR THE INDUSTRY

As cafés across the country battle for customers, credibility and marketplace differentiation, many believe certification sparks customer-satisfying consistency and higher expectations. As baristas invest in their work, the certification can create greater stability in the café world, thereby reducing turnover and increasing competency. "People are like water," Heinz says, "and they tend to gravitate to the area of least resistance. If we can set up parameters and train in a high-quality way, then the whole industry can benefit from improved standards and more capable baristas."

Conary is similarly convinced that a widespread application of best practices enhances the level of professionalism throughout the ranks and spurs a broader impact on the entire industry. "What we're ultimately doing with certification is getting our customers to have greater expectations—and that's a good thing," he says.

For certification to take the next step, however, Thwaites believes some level of standardization must occur. "There are all these questions about which certification is the best," he says. "Is it the one that costs the most? The one with the toughest standards? The longest?"

Harwood agrees. As third-party certification in particular gains footing, Harwood believes shop owners will hire baristas based on the credibility of certifications, putting more stock in those that boast firm, documented guidelines. "That standardization could help every shop owner move through applicants and ensure the skills of staff," he says. "And more skilled baristas in the world can only help the industry." ☪

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