



HEY EVERYONE! Long time, no see! We've found ourselves digging our way out from under a rough year, and we're sure many of our readers have been in a similar situation. Seems so long ago that we were all looking forward to seeing old friends, and hopefully making some new ones, at the 2020 Specialty Coffee Expo that our hometown of Portland, Ore., was set to host! We were planning parties, and generally looking forward to a new year, when the rug was pulled out from under all of us by the global pandemic. What a crazy turn of events and a major learning experience for all of us.

It's seeming as though things are beginning to turn around though, and—at least for us here at Black Rabbit—we are hanging on to our hopes and trying to sweep away the discouraged feelings and bleak memories of 2020, and we hope all of you are, too. We know it ain't easy but we plan to keep on truckin' as long as old Mother Nature allows, and we plan to make the most of 2021 as much as we can. Our typing skills may be a little rusty, but our hands have never been cleaner and we have some really good questions this go-around, so let's get into it.

How long does it take for my coffee pots to be stained brown?

If your coffee pots are stained brown, you should be cleaning them way more often. There are a number of products available out there specifically made for cleaning coffee pots and espresso machines. Most manufacturers recommend running a cleaning cycle on your airpots, carafes, or shuttles daily, and we do, too.

A lot of coffee pots are made of stainless steel or glass. These materials are chosen specifically for their ability to resist staining. What you see when these items turn brown is a surface layer of old, rancid coffee oil. If you run a pot of cleaner once a day, you won't really even need to scrub. The coffee oil is broken down and rinsed away, never even having a chance to stain a coffee pot. If you don't do it regularly this oil builds up and becomes very difficult to break down, much like a well-seasoned cast-iron skillet. Unlike the skillet though, the layer of coffee oils contributes a nasty, bitter flavor to the coffee it comes into contact with in the pot. You don't want that, and neither do your customers.

—Alex

Should I be steaming milk for mochas/chais before or after adding a syrup/mix?

Generally we encourage folks to mix in any sauces, syrups, and powders after the milk has been steamed. All those delicious add-ins usually have a fair amount of sugar, and every time you steam, a little vacuum is created in the pitcher. So when you turn the steam off, some of that liquid can be pulled back into the valve. The sugars in that liquid can stick to and burn in the valve in a matter of seconds. Some items like chai, golden milk, and a few others need to be steamed with the milk to be enjoyed properly. I suppose the moral of this story is that no matter what you are steaming, purge and wipe the steam wands immediately after you're done and clean the wands every night with a dairy cleaning solution.

—Dblj

Removing and cleaning the screens should be part of your daily backflushing routine. That goes for anything else that the grouphead screw might be holding in place, like a dispersion block or spray plate.

When should I turn my espresso machine and/or coffee equipment off?

Most coffee and espresso equipment should be left on most of the time. Excessively heating and cooling these pieces of machinery to their extreme temps can cause premature leaks where joints and fittings expand and contract over and over due to the temperature differences—that's been my experience. I also see some more premature electronics failures for the same reasons. Once the brain boards are heated up, they like to stay around the same temperature if possible, to avoid expanding and contracting the more solid joints. If your concern is energy consumption, keep this in mind: Many machines these days are extremely well-insulated in order to keep them from losing their heat overnight, and therefore don't have to run the heating elements too much—that's all to say they were built to be energy-efficient. Many machines also have some sort of eco mode in their settings that will drop the temperature to something right around 140°F (or 60°C for you lovely metric folks), which keeps the water out of the food-safety danger zone and also limits some energy consumption overnight. It's a pretty good compromise, in my opinion.

—Alex

How often should I have my coffee brewer checked/recalibrated?

I think any time you have a technician in for preventive maintenance (PM), you should be sure to ask them to check

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on the brewer, too so maybe two to four times a year. We call these quality assurance—or QA—checks at Black Rabbit. We typically check water volume from the spray head, inspect and replace the spray plate if necessary, check the slurry temperature, and, time permitting, we might even clean your brew basket and airpots. We also take a look at the batch/bulk grinder to make sure the settings are correct and that there's a good distribution of grounds. If you have a measuring container like a graduated Cambro, and a good thermometer like an instant-read or bead probe, you can do QAs yourself whenever you like!

—Dblj

Should I leave parts of my espresso machine soaking in cleaning solution overnight?

Nope! When soaking portafilters, screens, baskets, and the like, you should only soak for about half an hour or so. If you are doing it every day, then this is all the time you will need to break those oils down. The other thing to be careful about is to not let the handles of your portafilters come into contact with the cleaning solution. Portafilter handles are typically rubber, plastic, Bakelite, or wood, and all of these will be damaged by detergents over time.

—Alex

Do I need to remove the grouphead screens in my espresso machine for cleaning? How often?

Yes! Removing and cleaning the screens should be part of your daily backflushing routine. That goes for anything else that the grouphead screw might be holding in place, like a dispersion block or spray plate. It's also important to pay attention to the order in which those things come out of the machine so you can put them back in properly. The group screen does double duty: It helps distribute water over the coffee bed evenly and also prevents grounds from being pulled back into the grouphead, so it's really important that you take good care of them. I generally start my backflush routine by removing the screens, then do a quick soak in some coffee detergent, and then a gentle scrub, and finish by rinsing with fresh water. I always put the screens back in before I begin backflushing the groups. Happy cleaning!

—Dblj

Got a question about coffee equipment?

We'd love to help! Just email your thoughts and queries to highmaintenance@baristamagazine.com.