

# Baristo, Barista, Baristi

Contributed by Eric S. Chen  
Thursday, 15 June 2006

The SHIFTLESS BARISTO on fake Italian

The espresso-bar industry seems to have settled on the term "barista" for the profession, that is, those of us who brew the coffee, pull the espresso shots, and artfully create our signature espresso drinks.

Copyright 2006 Eric S. Chen for [www.BARISTO.net](http://www.BARISTO.net).

The term "barista" is a gender stereotype, or at least it sounds like one. I don't like it. Neither should you.

I don't infer that this is an intentional choice. The usage for barista stems from the trend apparently started by Starbucks<sup>TM</sup> to use Italian or pseudo-Italian vocabulary to lend an aura of sophistication to the product. Now, I agree that good espresso and those who pull the shots deserve respect and dignity. But sophistication is not aided by faulty grammar.

Italian-language purists are apt to protest, accurately, that "barista" refers to both male and female bartenders in Italian. That's correct, as far as it goes. However, in Italian, the word as used is still gender specific - la barista if a woman and il barista if a man. A group of bartenders are bariste if all female, and baristi if all male or a mixed group.

Our industry lets customers think that barista is Italian, and then pluralizes it "baristas." How sophisticated is that?

The MSN/Encarta dictionary states that the word barista (one r) has an origin of "late 20th century (Italian root)." This word is recently made up. I searched multiple online dictionaries for either "baristo" or barista". Wikipedia has what seems to be the most complete and current definition. Merriam-Webster added barista only in its 11th edition (July 2003). I was certain that the first time I checked Merriam-Webster online, they spelled it "barrista" (2 rs); however when I double checked my references for this article, they used the one-r variety. Unless I was mistaken, even the spelling of the word may still be in flux. Urban Dictionary does list the two-rs variant, though without a definition, but this means little as anyone can post a new word without editorial review. (I posted baristo and baristi, naturally.) Several other dictionaries that I checked did not include either variant.

Howard Schulz himself, the iconic chairman of Starbucks<sup>TM</sup>, states in his book, "Pour From the Heart" that Starbucks<sup>TM</sup> "introduced new words to the American vocabulary." In the next sentence, he uses the word *baristas* - in italics - for the first time in the book, clearly indicating that this term was started by Starbucks<sup>TM</sup>.

Barista, then, is not established well enough to be listed, or perhaps even spelled, consistently in dictionaries. If anyone makes up a word to describe our profession, we ought to have a say in it.

Further, for the average North American consumer (who is not adept at Italian vocabulary and grammar) referring to an espresso worker as a barista implies (by the -a, as in Spanish) that the espresso worker is a woman.

Coffee is not the only industry that has gender-stereotyped terms. If I worked in the garment industry, I would dislike being called a "seamstress;" and no one would ever call me a "seamster," since the word is not in use. However, I would have no objection to being called a "tailor" - a traditionally male term carrying a higher status and pay than "seamstress," though in the modern world, thankfully, women can be tailors too.

Other professions which traditionally have been skewed in their gender do not always carry such terms. Library professionals have traditionally been overwhelmingly women, but "librarian" is not, by itself, a gender stereotyping term. One does not hear reference to a "male librarian" in the manner that one does for a "male nurse."

It is regrettable that an industry that developed only in the last twenty years or so selected an inherently stereotyped term, or one that appears to be so, for the core workers who create its success.

I brought this issue to the attention of past store managers and area directors at my employer, and received an acknowledgement, but no action to revise the term. For the record, I pull espresso shots at StarbucksTM. However, this point is not about the company but about the proper naming of the profession, a concern that other baristi ought to share no matter who they work for.

Oh, all right. "...no matter for whom they work." You caught me.

What words can we use?

Problem one: members of our profession are not bartenders (alcohol professionals). We are espresso professionals. Applying the Italian term for "bartender" is on shaky ground from the start. Referring to the bar as in espresso bar, however, sounds fine to me.

Problem two: I don't know the language skills of the staff in your espresso shop, but where I work, I have three coworkers who speak Spanish and none who speak Italian. So it seems to me that if English is not good enough, we need to look for words that sound Spanish, not Italian. Of course, if we really want to sound sophisticated, we should make up something that sounds like Latin.

Noun endings in Spanish, where they refer to people, specify the gender. Words ending in "o" are male (abuelo, grandfather). Words ending in "a" are female (abuela). In Latin, male is "o", female is "a" and plural is "i."

Baristo, barista, baristi.

By the way, the use of baristo did not originate with me. NestleTM has even trademarked the word as a brand for espresso-based-drinks.

Here is a simple proposal.

A man who brews the coffee is a "baristo." Hence, this internet domain and my working nom de keyboard - THE SHIFTLESS BARISTO.

A woman who brews the coffee is a "barista." This does not require any change.

Groups of coffee professionals, regardless of gender, are "baristi." I regret to report that I was too slow to buy up that internet domain. Someone else got it. Very likely, other baristi have picked up on the same words obviously needed in the profession.

Espresso-bar companies of the world: please consider this a call for change. Brewing the coffee is not "women's work." Use terms that don't stereotype.

My fellow baristi: I encourage you to stand up and demand that you and your coworkers be addressed properly. Even if you are female, having your male coworker called a "baristo" neutralizes the implication that creating espresso drinks is women's work.

OK, then. We have settled what to call the people who brew the espresso shots.

Or is it espressas? Or are they espressi? Why is this drink male....?

Tongue firmly in cheek, this is the Shiftless Baristo, signing off to go make myself a perfect espresso...an espressissimo.