

A Cart to Start

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Many working baristi have thoughts of starting a shop of their own, but at \$8 or \$9 an hour, saving the capital to open a store is a daunting barrier to getting started.

This new article series looks at finding, buying, equipping, and operating a simple espresso cart as a way for a very small scale entrepreneur to get started in the espresso business.

First up: where to look.

[Click Here](#) to see Espresso Carts for sale right now on eBay!

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A Shiftless Baristo column

Even though we may not admit it to each other on the job - since it sounds almost insurrectionist, doesn't it? - A lot of working baristi have thought about how much they would like to own their own espresso shop.

After all, we already have the product skills and the people savvy. What's to keep us from replicating our employer's success (using our labor) across town?

Well, capital, for one. Plus the store manager's working contacts with all the suppliers, contractors, repairmen, and other critical cogs that keep the well-oiled espresso shop machinery running.

Now, the usual disclaimer - I haven't done this myself! Hopefully I will hear from some of you owner-operators about it.

As for capital - how much does it take to open a storefront?

One point of reference: The Coffee Beanery, which is a franchise, requires new franchisees to pony up \$27,500 in their initial franchise fee. However, they estimate that the total franchise investment will run between \$300,000 to \$400,000. That does not include the 8% of gross sales that they expect back from you. And they require a franchisee to have substantial assets, to the tune of \$350,000 - \$400,000 net worth.

OK. So you earn, say \$8 an hour plus tips, minus taxes and commuting costs - probably close to \$6 an hour when all is said and done. At 40 hours, 50 weeks a year, you net \$12,000. Coming up with a franchise fee will be just a bit of a challenge, eh?

A much lower-buck way to get started is with a cart - one of those one-worker, manageable street carts. Used ones go up for sale all the time on eBay (see the link above), or on Craigslist, or even in your local newspaper. Often the seller will toss in the fixtures, espresso machine and accessories and you will be more or less ready to go for a couple of thousand dollars, maybe less if you get lucky. New espresso carts run \$5,000 to \$10,000 and up, so going used is the low buck way to get started.

You may need to invest in some other used equipment to assemble your own kit.

Keep in mind, too, that you need to transport the darn thing. If you drive a pickup truck, you are good to go. Otherwise you might end up having to rent a truck when you take it out on a job. But if you plan well, truck expense will be a small fraction of your daily take.

What can you do with a cart once you have one?

First things first: register a business, and obtain a food permit. Requirements for these things vary by state and town, but generally the business registration will be done by your county and the food permits are issued by your town's health department. Do not try to skip these! You do not need government trouble just as you are starting out.

As I said, I haven't done this, but I would start out small - one day gigs at a time, say, at special events such as outdoor concerts. You will need to obtain a concession from the organizers. Plan ahead in case you need to haul your own water in, and be sure you have electricity or you are stuck. Remember that many commercial espresso machines draw a lot of power (4,000 Watts in some cases) and some electrical circuits will not be up to the load. If you have to get a generator, be sure it is rated for the full wattage of all the equipment that you might run at the same time. Also check - some espresso machines run on 220 volts, not 110!

If you can find a venue where the crowds are there, especially when they are having fun, you know as well as I do that you will be selling coffee, lattes, and frozen drinks all day long. If you serve a customer every two minutes for 4 hours, and they spend an average of \$3, you have just grossed \$360. Probably your beans, syrups and mixes cost you a third or less than you charge for the drink, so you will have made about \$250 in half a day. How does that compare with your daily earnings at your employer's? If you can hire someone to ring up the orders while you make the drinks, you can probably double your productivity without even having to train another barista.

After you have worked a few events like this, you will have fine tuned your starting inventory, setup and working procedures to the new cart environment.

If my math is anywhere nearly right, you could work crowd events just two Saturdays a month (with your helper) and still net about as much as you make now working full time.

Beyond the espresso cart, there are also plenty of options in kiosks such as drive-through espresso stands, concession trailers and even self-powered concessions trucks; but they all cost a lot more.

It seems to me that the espresso cart is the low-buck, achievable way for a working barista to set up shop on her own.

Who out there among you readers has done this? I would be delighted to interview you to get your story and any tips that you may have for others who may want to do the same.

I hope to hear from you!

- Shiftless