

buyer's guide

Espresso Minus the Mess

Espresso pods & capsules—and the machines that use them—make it easy to serve perfect espresso at home

BY ADAM RIED

Ralph Waldo Emerson said, “A foolish consistency is the hobgoblin of little minds...” Perhaps, but honestly the home barista in me would welcome that hobgoblin with open arms. Even after years of making espresso at home with a decent, though not fancy, machine, my skills leave something to be desired. Assuming the machine holds up its end of the bargain—water temperature and pressure—there’s still ample room for user error. Are the beans fresh? Did I grind them properly? Have I put the right amount of grounds into the filter and tamped them down just so?

Sometimes I get it all right, and my espressos are great, with a thick crema (the surface foam widely acknowledged to be one mark of a well-pulled espresso) and a smooth, bittersweet flavor. But I’ve choked down far too many bitter brews, wondering where I went wrong and why my espressos aren’t good from one shot to the next.

And don’t even get me started on the mess. Have you noticed that dry coffee grounds seem to go everywhere and wet grounds go nowhere as they cling to the filter basket for dear life? These phenomena can make spooning the dry grounds into the filter basket and then emptying the spent grounds from it—for every single shot—into

an irritating chore. The mere thought of it has led to more than one nice cup of tea in my day.

Now the good news. Coffee roasters and espresso machine manufacturers have a variety of new machines that promise to deliver consistently good espresso without the muss and fuss. Instead of loose espresso grounds, these machines use prepackaged single-serve doses of espresso. There’s virtually no room for user error, so you’re ensured consistent, high-quality espresso—easily and quickly, too.

Given the advantages and the increasing number of home espresso machines that are designed to use espresso pods and capsules, we thought it time to take a closer look at this phenomenon. Turns out the machines fall into three distinct categories, and we tried at least one of each type. Speaking generally, each machine lived up to its billing of simplicity, cleanliness, and consistency. But there are some noteworthy differences among them. On the following pages you’ll find an overview of the options and the results of our trials.

What are espresso pods and capsules?

E.S.E. pods: “Easy Serving Espresso” pods are single-use disks of coffee with a paper filter covering, somewhat like tea bags. Each pod contains 7 grams of ground espresso, tamped and then hermetically sealed. These pods can be used in any E.S.E. machine.

Proprietary capsules: These are plastic capsules filled with a single serving of espresso that work exclusively with one manufacturer’s machine. Illy’s Hyper Espresso System capsules are clear with a red top, while Nespresso’s capsules are colorful tubs resembling individual creamer containers.

Where to buy:

Illyusa.com
Nespresso.com
www.lavazza.com
1-800-espresso.com
Aabrecoffee.com



Espresso at the touch of a button



Francis Francis
X6 Trio



Bialetti Mokona



Krupps XP4050

Espresso pod (E.S.E.) machines

About ten years ago, a few companies, spearheaded by IllyCaffé in Italy, formed a consortium and developed standardized, self-contained, easy-to-use coffee portions. Dubbed E.S.E. (for “Easy Serving Espresso”) pods, these packaged, single-use espresso servings contain 7 grams of ground coffee, tamped and hermetically sealed between two layers of filter paper.

Some experts say you can use the pods in the single-shot filter basket of any home espresso machine, but our research and limited testing suggest that E.S.E. pods work best in machines designed to use them specifically and exclusively. There’s a handful

Pros Consistency, ease, cleanliness. And the cost of the E.S.E. pods themselves, and thus the espressos, was reasonable. Our local upscale supermarket sold 18 Illy pods for \$12.95, which works out to about 72¢ per shot, and at our local Starbucks, 12-packs of Starbucks brand pods go for \$4.95, about 41¢ per serving. The pods are made of natural, biodegradable materials. And there’s no shortage of variety, as many coffee brands offer E.S.E. pods.

on the market, ranging in price from about \$200 to \$1,000 and beyond.

We tried one of the most widely available machines, the distinctive-looking **Francis Francis X6 Trio** (\$500 at Illyusa.com), which offers brewing cycles for ristretto (a small shot), a standard shot, and lungo (a large shot). It was simple and clean to use: Once the machine reaches operating temperature, just put a pod in the filter basket, adjust the filter for a small, standard, or large shot, press a button to start the water flow, and 20 seconds later press the button again to stop the flow. The espressos always tasted great and had impressive crema.

Cons There aren’t many. If you want to split hairs, serious espresso aficionados insist that the very best espressos are pulled by professionals with optimal conditions, materials, and machinery, and that because this unit uses pods only, it deprives you of that chance, however remote it may be.

The bottom line If you’re happy to have consistently good espresso with no guesswork or mess, an E.S.E. machine is a great bet. Write the check and don’t look back.

Convertible machines

Though “convertible” is not an industry term, it seems like a reasonable way to refer to machines that accept both loose grounds and E.S.E. pods. These machines are often marketed as E.S.E. compatible, because they come with an extra filter basket designed to accept E.S.E. pods. We tried two such machines: the **Bialetti Mokona** (\$349.50 at 1-800-espresso.com) and the **Krupps XP4050** (\$279.99 at Amazon.com).

Pros With E.S.E. pods, the machines we tried consistently delivered good espresso quickly, easily, and cleanly. And the loose-grounds option let us indulge our inner barista, too.

Cons Though the flavor of the espressos was very good, the crema was unimpressive compared with the machines that used pods or capsules only.

The bottom line It was no surprise that with both machines, using the E.S.E. pods was faster, easier, and cleaner than using coffee grounds. The results were more consistent, too. Nonetheless, some espresso drinkers may appreciate the flexibility these convertible machines offer.



Francis Francis X7

Le Cube C185

Nespresso's
Essenza D90

Proprietary capsule machines

Instead of E.S.E. pods, the espresso machines in this category use capsules designed to work exclusively with one manufacturer's machines. These proprietary capsules won't work in other brands' machines. We tried a few of these, including Illy's **Francis Francis X7** (about \$699

at Illyusa.com) and **Nespresso's Essenza D90** and **Le Cube C185** (\$179.99 and \$349, respectively, at Nespresso.com). As a group, these machines could not possibly be simpler to use. Quite literally, you can get espresso at the push (or two) of a button.

Pros Each of these machines produced an awesome crema on one delicious espresso after another. Dead easy to use: Just slide a capsule into the filter or specially designed slot, lock the capsule in place, and press a button. Some machines require you to time your own brewing, while others do it for you. About 20 seconds later, you have a lovely espresso.

Cons Although the espressos we made with the X7's Illy Hyper Espresso System capsules and the Nespresso capsules tasted great and had excellent cremas, the opportunity to explore coffees beyond each machine's brand is nonexistent. You're locked into using the proprietary capsule, though each brand does offer a variety of roasts.

Waste is also a big concern with this category. Though the foil Nes-

presso capsules are recyclable, it's best to empty them of spent grounds and rinse them first, a time-consuming and messy extra step that counters the hands-off, mess-free ease with which the machines operate. The situation with the hard plastic Illy Hyper Espresso capsules for the X7 is even trickier. Though a company representative assured us that the capsules are recyclable, we were not able to open them to empty and rinse them, so rather than struggling to do the right thing—recycle—we faced a very strong temptation to simply toss the spent capsules into the trash.

The bottom line If making impressive espresso consistently and easily is your primary concern, these machines deliver, but if you're a committed recycler you might want to think twice before going this route.

How we tested

It's possible to spend \$1,500 or more on an E.S.E.-compatible home espresso machine, but we focused on lower-priced models, ranging from \$180 to \$700. Three of our machines, the two Nespresso models and the Francis Francis X7, use their own proprietary coffee capsules. The Francis Francis X6 Trio uses E.S.E. pods only, and the Krups XP4050 and the Bialetti Mokona accept both loose grounds and E.S.E. pods (each in its own filter basket).

We tested the six machines by pulling 40-ml. espresso shots in a home kitchen using Illy brand medium-roast E.S.E. pods whenever possible. For the Francis Francis X7 we used the Illy medium-roast Hyper Espresso System plastic capsules that go with the machine, and for both Nespresso models we used Nespresso's capsules (the medium-roast Arpeggio blend). For the two machines that worked with loose grounds as well as E.S.E. pods, the Krups and the Bialetti, we used pre-ground Illy medium-roast coffee as well as the E.S.E. pods.

We made all the espressos using cold, filtered tap water. We assessed the first espressos we made after switching on the machines, as well as shots pulled after the machines were allowed to heat up for two hours. Ease of use, the flavor of the espresso (tasted in a heated china demitasse), its temperature (the ideal range being between 150° and 180°F), and the quality of the crema were the key evaluation criteria.

Food writer and culinary equipment reviewer Adam Ried is the cooking columnist for the Boston Globe Magazine. ♦