

Story by Steve Agi and the Slayer team

Slayer: Hard Core Espresso!

Slayer is an irrational exercise in exuberance, in thinking you can take a product category that has been around for over 100 years and make something that stands out as obviously much better and more useful than anything that currently exists or has possibly ever existed in the past. I am not talking about a trend, I am talking about the difference between style and fashion. Slayer is not an esoteric development, a new hemline or something like that – it's Sinatra, not Tiny Tim.



Slayer is a powerful industrial craft-built machine with virtually endless steam capacity plus brew temperature stability on multiple groups even during maximum volume use. Steam and brew systems are supplied with preconditioned water at 180 degrees Fahrenheit. All heating is provided by fail-resistant incoloy elements. Temperature control is maintained by purpose-tuned PID. Slayer's brewing system includes both mechanical and electronic components to enable discreet pressure control across the brew band.

The purpose of Slayer is to share information stories, and developments from the world of professional espresso. We want to explore it all – the coffee, the culture, the people, the equipment, the technique, and the philosophy, the things that define the world of espresso when it is taken to a professional level. We want to hear from those in the specialty coffee industry who may at this very moment stand at the top of their game with tremendous depth of experience and expertise. You may already have a creed firmly in place around your art based on years of exploration and practice. We want to know how this is working for you so that we can learn from it.

Slayer is also for everyone who just wonders if there is a better way. What comes after perfection? What lies on the other side of Caffè Artigiano, David Schomer, PID, FB80, Fair Trade, Cup of Excellence, and all the dreams of an organic, authentic coffee universe now circulating and seemingly just beyond our grasp? Whether we call ourselves this or not, the players in this industry are really coffee argonauts, students, on a journey of discovery and personal improvement around this one special thing – professional espresso, which remarkably offers us a context to improve not just the coffee, but possibly the world.

So what exactly are the conventions I'm referring too? Well you know them, probably by heart. The 18-25 second shot brewed with 14 grams of coffee into a 2oz shot glass at exactly nine bars of pressure at a temperature somewhere less than boiling.

In truth the motivation for Slayer may not be as outrageous as I make it sound. The market is already exploding in so many directions. This is particularly the case with sourcing and roasting and the rise of the artisanal players in a category that in its entirety is almost as big as the oil industry.

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Just look in Seattle, Portland or Vancouver, even in our own market in Australia. Here you have roasters and retailers like Stumptown, Vita, Zoka, St Ali and 49th Parallel that are going direct to source to find their coffees. These small companies are making big competitors, even multi-billion dollar companies like Starbucks irrelevant in the coffee category because what they are selling is not coffee the way these giants define coffee. It is something new and fresh. Size is not an advantage in carrying a Third Wave agenda – but small scale is. The de-commodification of coffee is where it's at right now. Maybe this is the definition of Third Wave, though I would say Third Wave has a social agenda too that seeks authenticity and not just corporate acceptance.

Almost everyone you talk to has been to or even judged a COE competition. There is no acceptance of the limitation that you can't buy direct from a farmer or coop. No one thinks you have to be Starbucks or Kraft Foods to go to origin to source coffee for yourself. And the farmers at origin love these small time interlopers because they make far more per pound for their product this way. It pays for them to be perfectionists. I would imagine growing coffee on a smaller scale with more attention to the details would be a lot more fun than churning out an earth-stripping commodity.

At any rate, the result of these individual efforts has been the emergence of these excellent coffees with limited availability that are so much more flavoursome and surprising than coffee in the past. When Starbucks began in the late 1980s talking about coffee geography, it was big news. But now it's about not just a place, it's about a certain farm or hillside or cultivar. What Starbucks was doing barely scratched the surface of what is out there to be discovered and experienced.

Coffee like this, sourced by small roasters and retailers and their selected agents from individual farms, is very much outside of the context of anything we have ever seen before. When I say the flavours are more complex and nuanced, remember that some roasters have actually been suspected of secretly spiking their Ethiopian Belayos with blueberry syrup, because the flavour of a top drawer coffee of this type is so outrageously pronounced, and outside the normal context of coffee for most people. This is no exaggeration – if anything this point is understated. With coffees like these there are almost too few words to describe them. You know what I'm talking about. The lexicon of descriptors for Third Wave coffee gets almost comical as we reach for that perfect sequence of words to describe a

flavour, to evoke a taste experience, which blossoms on your palette. For example describing a Nicaraguan that “cups like a fireworks show of bitter orange, chocolate, and jasmine flowers almost in bloom”. This is near poetry to my ear.

For this market, the tools are usually missing to prepare these coffees. Or the arsenal is incomplete. I think this is one reason you see a resurgence in retro brewing devices like siphon pots, chemexes, vacuum devices and lever machines. In the past, no one has had to make something to pull flavours like the ones we know now to front and centre out of an ordinary coffee bean. Who even knew we would be drinking a 100% Geisha cultivar of arabica two or three years ago? No one. What we have been doing is child’s play in comparison to what’s going on today.

Enter Slayer

Slayer was conceived to go there – into this world of the most extraordinary single origin coffees ever, to serve the amped-up expectations of what coffee should be. Slayer is a taste exercise that became a technical component, that became a design brief, that became an espresso machine. It was pure luck that the Slayer team stumbled onto the idea that pressure variability could unhitch the coffees we loved so much – the African, Central American, South American, and those wet processed Asian coffees.

But each person on Slayer’s team was destined to develop this product. Besides Eric Perkunder, the muse, Slayer consists of Jason Prefontaine, who comes from a long background of coffee roasting and cupping and has one of the strongest wills known

and the ability to pick up and assimilate information fast. The team also includes Dan Urwiler who is one of the industry’s technical geniuses as far as I am concerned, a national treasure who doesn’t just drink coffee – he eats, sleeps and dreams coffee too. Together these guys probably represent the most powerful concentration of brain power ever focused on getting more fruit notes out of 14 grams of high value coffee. Consistently.

Anyway, with this team a product was born, bringing in those who understood our passion and our idiosyncratic approach to help us realize this vision of a totally new concept for espresso brewing. It feels funny saying “espresso brewing” because Slayer transcends almost every notion on the planet of how coffee should be made. I am talking about the orthodoxy.





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Slayer has been pretty brazen about shattering the commandments of conventional brewing techniques. Shot times, sometimes taking a minute and a half, sometimes 30 seconds. Pressure, some coffees that work best at four bars then nine bars then back to four. Even shot volumes and temperature can be used to coax more out of the coffee and depend how they look and taste to us. Slayer is something that puts the control back in your hands. Do you drive a car by watching a TV screen? Slayer drops the top and gives you a tight little steering wheel and a great big accelerator. Then says, "gun it."

Analogies aside, the challenge was finding a way to make a device that didn't look like a diagnostic tool or something to tune a car. The interface had to be simple to understand and easy to learn. We love iPods, who doesn't I guess; but we also like cooking devices that are simple and purest like a whisk or manual mixer. We like carpentry tools too. And I think it was mentioned in one of the posts on the Slayer blog, because master carpenters develop a connection to their tools and keep them for many years. They imbue their tools with a soul or connection to themselves that elevates them above mere objects. Even after 20 years, these hand tools look worn to the tradesman, but in reality are only broken in. This was the inspiration. I hope Slayer can be the last machine anyone will ever need. Everyone, welcome aboard!

For further information visit www.slayerespresso.com or www.stali.com.au.

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