

Represented

WORDS Anastasia Prikhodko
PHOTOGRAPHS Daniela Velasco

In January of 2016, Alex*, a trained barista and cafe owner, founded an anonymous Tumblr account, “Douchey Dude Baristas,” which named and shamed cafes that excluded female baristas in Melbourne.

Having worked in Melbourne’s hospitality industry for over ten years, Alex saw firsthand how divided the hospitality workforce became. For most of her career, she didn’t exceed the ranks of serving, bartending, and making coffee. It was only when a male manager saw her potential that she was suggested to the “bewildered and unsure owner” for a management role. Only when she became an independent business owner did he offer her a partnership role.

Once she was in a leadership role, Alex realized that she had been excluded from the inner circle and the economic and social benefits it conferred. “I never thought to ask for more,” she says.

Although women represent a statistical majority of hospitality workers in Melbourne, top leadership positions are still held by men. To Alex, it doesn’t add up. “When I walk into a cafe and see only men behind the machine, a little piece of my heart dies,” she laments. But you can’t deconstruct a wheel without taking apart the cogs.

For her, that begins with the figureheads for specialty coffee, including the stereotypical, slim twenty-something or thirty-something males. Their presence behind specialty coffee counters has almost become as expected as a menu featuring flat whites. “These baristas are the face of the cafes,” she says. “They have become idealized over the last ten years, even more so since they are most likely to engage with the public.” And the glass ceiling only gets harder to break as the specialty coffee industry in Melbourne becomes even more exclusive, high-profile, and established.

As Alex points out, the irony is that the success of Melbourne’s coffee industry has depended greatly on “pink collars,” like other industries associated with a female workforce, such as nursing and teaching. As recently as ten years ago, serving coffee was seen as a feminine role in Australia, viewed as less-skilled, domestic work. A woman was supposed to serve her husband coffee in private.

Now the coffee industry has become more overtly professional, and making coffee is seen as a specialized skill. Therefore, it has—likely unintentionally—pushed women out, relegating them to behind-the-scenes tasks. “Women are being moved onto the floor, the till, or other more domestic and seemingly less-skilled positions,” says Alex.

Alex started “Douchey Dude Baristas” after listening to conversation after conversation among friends and other baristas who were struggling to achieve certain levels of respect or opportunities for growth. “The conversations were becoming more frequent. I thought I would jot a few words down, because systemic sexism like this is very insidious unless pointed out.” But she didn’t foresee the site’s popularity.

“Melbourne is the coffee capital of Australia, so it makes sense that it is also the hellmouth of the nation’s douchebaggery,” says Alex, who

resigns herself to the idea that the behavior of Melbourne’s coffee industry is a reflection of attitudes that pervade in the city, and in Australia in general. Just last year, two students at the University of Melbourne created a Facebook page called “Hotties of Melbourne University” to rate female students based on their looks. And, as of 2015, the gender pay gap in the country is widening; according to data released by the Australian Bureau of Statistics, the national gender pay gap has increased to a record high of 18.8%.

“I have watched my favorite cafes change from employing mostly female baristas to only men, and almost all of the top cafes in Melbourne, consciously or not, have more men behind their coffee machines than women.”

Despite—or because of—its strong language, the blog has resonated with female hospitality workers all over Australia, including other major cities like Sydney.

Not everyone is pleased with her work. Since starting her blog, Alex has endured run-ins with some of Melbourne’s top coffee professionals for calling them out.

Marwin Shaw of Admiral Cheng Ho is one of them. Alex used to frequent his cafe, but described its staffers as “thick with male entitlement” and its service as “lazy, disinterested, uncomfortable, or even non-existent” in a recent post. He refuted several of her claims: He never had a redheaded barista or a Canadian woman working for him, and he currently has more females working out front than males. “I feel like articles like this don’t really serve a purpose but create divisions,” he says.

Her job, as she sees it, is to be the person asking the tough, uncomfortable questions: “Who’s missing in this equation? Who is this cafe representing? Who is being left out and why?”

--

“I know someone in the industry who felt that he needed a woman on staff to advertise his company, yet he hasn’t hired any women,” says Erika Rowell, part-owner and head roaster at Square One Coffee Roasters in Melbourne, disappointed. “It’s distasteful, disrespectful, and dishonest. As industry professionals we need to lead by example, and that means giving men and women equal opportunity.”

Rowell is one of the few female baristas, roasters, and business owners who has managed to break into the Melbourne coffee industry’s “boys’ club.”

She explains that often people see masculinity as a proxy for power, and then equate that to job experience, responsibility, or talent. Because there are more men visible in the profession, customers expect that the men are managers, and so on.

It can be hard to get your foot in the door in the coffee industry, and a big part of it is about who you know. Rowell adds that you need professional experience to be a barista, roaster, or green buyer, because “not all positions can be filled with people lacking experience.”

An internal Hewlett Packard report suggests that, while men apply for jobs when they meet only 60% of an application’s listed qualifications, women rarely do. They only apply if they believe they meet 100% of them. “I would say from most places I have worked in or run, we’ve taken on about 25% of baristas, per year, who have little to no experience in coffee making. And I do worry that women look at the industry from the outside and still feel intimidated to even attempt to enter,” she says.



Erika Rowell



Jade Jennings

Rowell says that if she is in the roastery with the male production roaster, who is responsible for roasting the coffee and reports directly to her; he is often mistaken for the person in charge. “I’ve had customers ask for the manager and when I’ve responded with ‘you’re speaking to her,’ they ask for a different manager,” she laments. “It’s a hard situation to deal with because ultimately it’s a cultural habit.” Yet she also expects the name-calling—moody, a bitch, references to her reproductive organs, she’s heard it all—just for doing her job.

--

Since Alex opened her own cafe, she has only hired female baristas and floor staff to act on the empowerment and professional development she tries to champion. For her, teaching women to operate as a sisterhood, to amplify each other’s voices and lift each other up whenever possible, is as important as the coffee they’re serving, she explains.

Some of the industry’s most influential players are also starting to wake up, says Rowell. At Top Paddock and The Kettle Black, where she works, for example, there is a very strict performance-based wage structure to promote equal pay. Instituting policies that encourage balance and equality, and discourage sexist behavior. It’s a feedback loop: Do that, and more women will want to work for you too.

“We carry out regular appraisals with all the staff members. If you can prove that you are a good worker and a fast learner, then it doesn’t matter what sex you are.” That way, they publicly celebrate what women do—not because they’re female but because they’re doing something great.

“I talk about the men behind the machine in detail, however I am not blaming them as individuals for being a part of the sexist society we live in—though in saying that, change can begin to occur on all levels, especially from the co-workers of women challenging their positions and the decisions of management,” Alex says.

--

Urban Fox’s Mark Fox has been in the industry for 23 years, and he strongly disagrees. He currently has a small team of ten members, consisting of seven female and three male staffers. He says that a mixed workforce is a happier workforce and suffers less from internal drama.

Yet he sees the specialty coffee industry in Melbourne as inclusive, and says that it is “up to the individuals to make the most out of it.”

The onus for him falls on the hiring manager. Individuals who fill a position dictate that cafe’s culture, he argues, “Whether you hire a male or female for a position is of little concern.”

--

Maria Paoli has been managing cafes, working with coffee roasters, judging competitions, and training baristas for over 15 years, and is pleased with how much more inclusive the industry has become since her early days.

“I was one of the few women in my field rising through the coffee industry at the time, and I was frequently reminded by well-established males in the industry that they had more knowledge than I.”

After already working in the industry for over five years, Paoli decided to organize, manage, and run the 2006 Barista Competitions for Victoria and Tasmania, but she was told by a male coffee manager that

she could never do it, because she was “too inexperienced and didn’t know what she was doing.”

Again, when Paoli told her male colleagues that she would sell Melbourne as a destination for cafe culture, she was told that it was a nice idea but not to expect to succeed.

Good thing, too. “The more I have been told to not do or expect, the more I have done and achieved,” she says.

Paoli also adds that in the past, women worked behind the scenes packing coffee or as personal assistants and general administrators. But, very slowly, women have shifted into jobs that were traditionally considered “male roles,” such as roasters, green bean buyers, and coffee shop owners.

--

Melbourne’s coffee industry still has a fair way to go when it comes to the competition arena, which still feels dominated by men.

“When I organized and ran the 2006 Barista Competition, I got into my car and traveled from cafe to cafe to recruit girls to compete.” Paoli speculates that females may not feel as competitive as males. But female competitors think otherwise.

Victoria’s 2016 Barista Champion, Jade Jennings from Veneziano Coffee took the title for the second year in a row at this year’s Southern Region Barista Championship, hosted by the Australian Specialty Coffee Association. Besides Jade, there was only one other female competitor.

“I’ve been competing on and off for the last five years and the number of female competitors has increased slightly, but not by much,” says Jennings, who will be the first woman to represent Australia at the world competition.

Jennings suggests that the lack of women competing could be due to the fact that women don’t feel the need to put themselves out there in the same way: “At the end of the day, when you look at competing as an opportunity to gain knowledge and build your skillset over winning, maybe more women will give it a go.”

In 2011, whilst working at Edna’s Table in Moonee Ponds, Melbourne, Jennings was approached by Craig Dickson of Veneziano Coffee, who offered her the position of managing First Pour, another one of his cafes. She worked her way up from an account manager to a trainer and eventually to the national training and development manager. Opportunities like that were available to her, but she also knew that many other ambitious, female coffee professionals are not given the same chance.

“I think we are more aware now that there’s a push for transparency—but we still have a long way to go,” she says, mentioning how lucky she was to have flexible hours when she was returning from maternity leave. Ultimately, she says, “I think it’s everyone’s responsibility along the chain to assist those at the beginning.”

Rowell shares one piece of advice for women starting off in the industry: “Don’t ever let anyone get away with treating you poorly because you’re female. I think it’s our responsibility, as women, to make it clear when we find something offensive or unacceptable. It’s not going to magically disappear. If we don’t communicate then the gender gap will never close—you have a voice, use it.”

*Alex is her pseudonym; she chooses to run the site anonymously. •