



Staff photo by Dean Shalhoup

Armando "A.J." Conti stands with a restaurant-grade espresso machine made by his company Espresso Armando. Conti decided to pursue the perfect cup of espresso after designing a \$10,000 stereo turntable.

By FRANK BYRT
Telegraph Staff

When Armando "A.J." Conti gets passionate about something — look out world.

"I'm a fanatic about quality," he admits.

His latest quest is for a really great cup of espresso.

The result is a commercial espresso and cappuccino machine that his Hollis company, Espresso Armando, has just introduced.

It's the first restaurant-sized espresso machine made in the United States and, Conti says, it's better than any unit anywhere.

Trained as a mechanical engineer and designer, Conti also has a stereo turntable manufacturing company — it too the result of a passion.

Basis Audio, formed six years ago, makes turntables costing \$5,200 to \$10,000 for the audiophile market.

Conti, once an engineer and production manager with Teledyne Electro-Mechanisms in Hudson, loved music and fine audio equipment. When he couldn't find a mass-produced turntable to his high standards, he built one.

He already was selling audio equipment out of his home. When friends asked him to build a turntable for them, he realized he had found a market niche.

With Basis Audio an established company, its profits have helped to launch Espresso Armando.

The idea for an espresso machine company began with a malfunctioning unit in Conti's home. He had bought a used, foreign-made, commercial machine in hopes of brewing a better cup of espresso. But that machine broke down repeatedly.

So Conti, ever the tinkerer, took it apart and was shocked by what he found.

"Someone can do it better. Better design, better materials, longer lasting and one that can

Brewing a passion for quality

Hollis businessman A.J. Conti demands perfection in his products

make an espresso that tastes good on a consistent basis."

He saw the booming up-scale coffee market — from gourmet coffee beans to cafe espresso and cappuccino — and knew the demand for espresso machines would grow, too.

"All I had in my head was the question, 'Who didn't someone bother to do it right, with the proper materials?'"

He muttered the question aloud, while visiting a gourmet coffee shop in Boston. The owner overheard his comment and said she had often wondered the same thing, given the frequency of breakdowns and the scarcity of replacement parts.

He located one of the few espresso machine repairmen in the region who told him he had to scrounge for parts.

"I said 'Wow, it's that bad.'"

His idea of making and selling a better machine was reinforced.

It took four years from inspiration to the time a prototype was built.

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THE SUNDAY TELEGRAPH

July 17, 1994

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"The refinement of the machine was tremendously boring and time consuming. But we made sure we had the best materials, fittings, pressure gauges and wiring — because those details all add up to make a long-lasting, quality machine."

That workmanship and attention to quality is costly, though.

A single-server machine from Espresso Armando sells for about \$7,000 while the double-server sells for \$9,300.

The company now is making enough espresso machines to keep a regular delivery schedule.

Conti says his target market is quality restaurants and hotels which serve a lot of espresso.

"A high-volume business could sell 1 million (cups of espresso) a year," he says. A well-built machine will save costly repairs or lost sales due to down time.

The quest now is for recognition. Armando Espresso's marketing efforts are just beginning.

Conti's espresso machines are already popular with the few who've tried them.

Victoria Wallins, president of Beans, a gourmet coffee shop in Brookline and Chestnut Hill, Mass., says "They're a workhorse. They're a lot of machines out there and they tend to be finicky and erratic. But I've had four different machines and this is one of the most reliable."

"I'm biased because I knew A.J. before and I encouraged him to consider designing one since he was so dissatisfied."

A problem with espresso machines is the corrosive properties of boiling, pressurized water.

Conti's machine gets around that by using nickel-plated parts and a separate boiler for the steamed milk to make cappuccino.

"It a healthier machine," said Wallins. "They're really clean-running and they're easy for my staff to use."

Though she says Armando Espresso machines "are really pricey," she adds "they're worth it."

For Conti, they're worth the expense of making them, too, just like the stereo turntables.

"I realize no one's buying it because they're just a great machine. It's for the people that use them or frequent that business. It delivers pleasure to both end-user."

The heart of the bean

Some thoughts about the passion of espresso from a man who was willing to tinker for years to develop the perfect machine:

"Espresso is brewed by the cup, so it's absolutely fresh," says A.J. Conti.

"The coffee, fresh-ground from a high-quality bean, is ground much finer than with regular coffees, almost to a powder.

"And then, the water is forced through the coffee at high pressure in a short time. So the drink comes out quite different from regularly brewed coffee.

"The saying is: 'It gets the heart of the bean.'"

"Obviously, it's very strong. The comparison is that it's like having a shot of alcohol.

"People often say, 'This really tastes like what coffee smells like.'"

Cappuccino is espresso blended with steam-frothed milk.

There are other espresso drinks, blended with milk, syrups and chocolate.