

## The Art of Tipping

By Gary Michael Smith

Tipping the employees in a coffeehouse is looked at by some as akin to tipping the executioner. Why tip a counter person, who is already drawing a wage, for the task of passing your order along to a barista for preparation, while ringing up a \$3 to \$5 check for a cup of coffee? Some argue that movie theater concession vendors don't display tip jars, nor do similarly low-paid fast-food restaurant workers. One wouldn't even think of tipping the person who flips her burger.



What's more, many coffeehouses make dirty dish tubs accessible to their patrons, encouraging them to bus their own dishes. One would, however, think that tipping is more appropriate in environments where servers deliver drinks to patrons' tables—like Cafe Nervosa on the sitcom *Frasier*—and clean up after them.

On the other hand, many arguments can be made for tipping at coffeehouses. For instance, some patrons view tipping as part of the cost of dining. In other words, they feel it's inappropriate to expect service without paying a gratuity. Others feel they spend so much time in coffeehouses studying, reading, or just hanging out, that they owe some sort of rent. Some view coffeehouse employees as highly skilled service people who prepare exceptional drinks in a professional and courteous manner and deserved to be tipped for their efforts.

A common and convincing reason to tip in a coffeehouse is that the barista remembers as well as constructs an often complicated drink and presents it beautifully using equipment the average consumer does not have access to. As expensive as household machines may be, they simply are not built as well as commercial equipment, which can hold the high-pressure steam that is necessary to prepare high quality espresso drinks.

A humanistic reason for tipping your coffee counter worker is that you aren't necessarily tipping the person who's working the cash register (although he or she may be sharing in the booty), but rather the person who is making your drink. Plus, because baristas are usually paid minimum wage, many of them depend on the additional income tips provide.

On the other side of the counter, some baristas say they can spot a tipper the minute he or she walks through the door. One of the best giveaways, some assert, is what a customer is wearing. When it comes to coffeehouses, many counter servers observe that those who appear best able to afford to tip are the ones who don't. These individuals probably have never worked in the service industry, have little appreciation of specialty coffee preparation as a culinary art and don't understand how difficult the work can be and how little money the job pays.

Then, there are the intermittent tippers who can't justify paying a little extra for each new cup of coffee but will tip for every other, or maybe every third cup. Finally, there are habitual tippers who tip out of custom, and will tip whether the drink is prepared correctly or not, and whether the service is good or bad.

But how much should you tip? The standard for diners in restaurants is 20 percent, although many still leave only 15 percent—even for good service. Average service usually guarantees the server 10 to 12 percent. Coffeehouse patrons should consider following these same rules, instead of tossing their spare change into countertop tip jars. One way to put tipping at coffeehouses into perspective is to look at how complicated your drink order is and how long you intend to linger taking up valuable space. Not having to worry about being rushed off, which is often the case in a busy restaurant, is worth a couple of extra dollars.

Don't fall into the trap of believing that the change in counter jars will make up for the baristas low wage. Based on the fact that the 10 to 20 percent left by restaurant diners actually translates to only 2 or 3 percent left in the coffeehouse tip jar, they probably won't. Remember that tipping is a serious business to those on the receiving end. Tipping is an old and practiced tradition in the service industry, having begun in the late 1600s at coffeehouses in London where boxes were marked "To Insure Promptness." Today, these boxes may well help "to insure a living wage."

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