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Max Cui's championship glory

The freshly minted Aotearoa Barista Champion tells Emma McDougall how he keeps calm under competition pressure and his plans for worlds in Milan.

The 2024 Aotearoa Barista Championship was a huge celebration of coffee talent. Regionals set the tone in March, laying a solid foundation for an outstanding nationals in October. Despite an early earthquake and a fire alarm, Max Cui from The Beanery by Mojo Coffee in Wellington won the title.

Max moved to New Zealand in 2020 and didn't get into coffee until 2021, when a colleague's latte-art skills inspired him. A key moment for the new barista was visiting The Beanery, where he enjoyed exploring different espresso recipes and flavour notes, which sparked his deep interest in coffee.

"They had a board with espresso recipes and flavour notes of the day," he says.

"I'd challenge myself to pick out those exact flavours when I tasted the coffee. It became a fun exercise and it really pushed me to ask more questions, like why they chose certain origins, varieties, or processing methods for their espresso. That experience deepened my interest in espresso and how different factors can change the flavour profile."

For his winning routine, Max chose Ombigon from Finca El Diviso in Colombia.

"It has endless possibilities when pairing with different milks and signature ingredients," he says.

When Max was announced as the winner, he collapsed.

"It took a second to sink in. I didn't expect to win my first time competing, so I felt like I'd been hit by an electric shock," he says.

"My mind immediately started racing, thinking about everything that comes with winning, such as preparing for the World Championships. I looked at my coach Logan Collinge, who had just trained two champions back to back, so I was eager to see his reaction. I also texted my parents right there on stage and I would've reached out to my grandpa too if he were still with



us. He inspired my latte art routine at last year's nationals."

Winning has given Max a platform to improve and inspire others in the coffee community.

"I have been put on a brand new platform where I get more opportunities to improve meanwhile influencing more people to be more passionate about coffee," he says.

He also notes that his customers have become more patient during the morning rush, knowing he strives to provide the best coffee experience.

Espresso is Max's favourite course in the Championship, which he admits is difficult but also the most rewarding when done right.

"A great espresso is a layered experience, with complex flavours and textures that really stick with you. I love how challenging it is because when everything clicks it's unforgettable," he says.

His preparation for the World Barista Championship in Milan will be similar to his approach to nationals, focusing on delivering a message through coffee and creating a perfect flavour experience.

"I would practise about four hours after

an eight-hour shift, two or three times a week with a different focus each time. We try to be efficient and effective with clear goals for each practice session," he says.

Max uses mentor Freya Knudsen's advice, "Remember your training, let your muscle memory do the work", which helps him to stay calm when competing. At home, he likes to relax with a filter coffee.

"Pourover is a slower, more meditative process for me. I'll put on some music and take my time with it. It's my way of relaxing, whereas competition brewing is much more high-pressured and precise," he says.

"I'd like to thank Logan, my coach and roaster, who has been a huge support, as well as Freya, who constantly pushes me to improve. I've also learned a lot from John Cole and Hoony Chae, among others. And of course, I have to thank Mojo Coffee, the company that introduced me to coffee and supported me every step of the way."

Max will compete in the World Barista Championships in Milan in October 2025. ■



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