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# Robots vs. humans

Cafés staffed by robots are popping up across the world – including New Zealand. But are these android baristas as good as the real deal?

The NZSCA was approached by the 8 til Late program from Radio NZ to find out who could make the best coffee between a robot and a barista. With three robot cafés opening in quick succession from November 2024 in the Auckland CBD, the radio team's interest was piqued.

We volunteered Wayne Burrows, Board Member and Competition Barista, to find if he could take on a robotic arm and craft a better coffee.

"Robotics is important for our industry, especially if it can help me make better coffee and to maximise the taste from that coffee, then that's hugely beneficial," says Wayne.

Cost effective, efficient, or gimmick? Overseas in big cities such as Seoul and Shanghai, robot cafés are widespread. In Auckland, however, they are a tiny part of the market, placed in busy places such as universities and high foot-traffic areas, mainly aimed at young professionals.

While robots add fun and innovation to coffee making, the team were surprised to find they work alongside the barista. The owners of the robot arms see them as a complement not competition to the barista. They can save on labour but only baristas can bring the warmth, creativity, and personality.

"The goal of the barista is to calibrate the coffee to get a delicious solution. But I do love the robots," says Wayne.

However, who was going to win the taste test? Wayne went above and beyond to clean the radio office machine. This meant the radio team would understand how a to make coffee and the best way to understand how to judge the coffee. They called him an "alchemist of caffeine". We agree.

Flat whites were "unavailable" from the robot, so that proved a stumbling block. The team persisted and assessed temperature, texture, and how the coffee shone through the milk. They recommended stirring the coffee produced by the robot. The robot's

Barista Wayne Burrows took on a robot barista to see who would craft the best coffee. Image: Wayne Burrows.



milk was aerated more, and the coffee was more bitter. The good news is that the integration of robots in cafés doesn't signal the end for human baristas.

Many industry experts believe that while machines handle repetitive tasks efficiently, the human touch remains irreplaceable, especially in creating a welcoming atmosphere and building customer relationships. As technology continues to advance, the coffee industry in New Zealand will find a balance between innovation and tradition, ensuring that while robots

may brew the coffee, the heart of the café experience remains human. We'd like to thank a special human, Wayne Burrows, for taking on the robot and remaining distinctly un-robotic. ■

You can listen to Wayne's interview at [rnz.co.nz](https://rnz.co.nz)



For more information on the New Zealand Specialty Coffee Association, or to join, visit [nzscs.org](https://nzscs.org)