

Boughton's Coffee House

News Update on Tuesday, 15th September 2010

Following the explosion in a Sainsbury's café on Tuesday, the coffee-bar trade has been reminded of its responsibility for diligence in the maintenance and care of espresso machines and other containers of extremely hot water.

The first to respond from the trade so far has been the Coffee Council, which has said that although such incidents are so rare as to be virtually unheard-of, all caterers using espresso machines must remind themselves that they are using extremely sensitive pieces of equipment, for which servicing schedules and boiler-inspection procedures must be followed.

Details of Tuesday's incident are still not entirely clear, although it is now generally accepted that at 12.23 pm in the café of Sainsbury's in the Queens Mead shopping centre, Farnborough, an explosion occurred, as a result of which several people were taken to hospital and others treated at the scene.

Various media reports give different numbers of the injured; it has been reported by several media that one lady has been detained in hospital with injuries to eye, face and neck. The news media reported the event with different degrees of drama, one referring to 'panic', and one referring to a coffee machine being 'hurled across the café' by the explosion. An eye-witness said on television that 'the ground shook'.

Although first reports referred to an 'industrial coffee machine', the machine in question later turned out to be a conventional three-group traditional espresso machine, typical of the machines used in every high-street specialty coffee-house.

The aspect of the story which has puzzled the beverage trade is contained in a statement from Sainsbury's, which said: 'seven people sustained minor injuries when a pipe in a coffee machine at our Farnborough store ruptured this afternoon'. A reporter on local television later said: 'it was one of the pipes leading into the machine which ruptured, causing the explosion'.

In reply to questions on this, Sainsbury's has so far been unable to give any detailed clarification of this diagnosis, or how such damage could have caused an explosion.

However, several coffee-machine suppliers who have seen a picture of the damage, which has now been widely shown on the internet (it can be found at <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-england-hampshire-11302161>) have said that they are in no doubt that the situation was a boiler explosion, probably caused by a fault at a safety valve.

This, say several suppliers of main-brand espresso machines, is an extremely rare occurrence. Of the suppliers to whom Coffee House magazine has spoken, almost all say they have never ever come across such an incident; one supplier only said that he recalled stories of a possible similar occurrence in America, perhaps ten years ago.

While being careful to stress that the cause of Tuesday's incident has still not been established, suppliers of espresso machines have been unanimous in saying that the accident illustrates the importance of caterers treating espresso machines with care, and the importance of appreciating that such a machine is a 'pressure vessel', with a legal requirement of regular examination and certification by a qualified inspector.

Although no question has been raised concerning certification of the machine at this particular incident, one supplier of espresso machines has said that he has been campaigning for many years for caterers and café owners to take this matter seriously, and that this incident will serve to remind café owners of the importance of the issue. Several espresso machine suppliers say they now expect a large number of calls from independent cafes, seeking precautionary inspections of their machines.

Louie Salvoni of the Coffee Council said: "Although a very rare occurrence, this is a serious reminder to the catering operator that it is their responsibility to ensure that they adhere to health and safety directives. This is a directive that has for years been reiterated by suppliers but has all too often been ignored by some operators.

"We don't know at this stage what caused the explosion at Sainsbury's and therefore must not assume that this machine had not been inspected. However the message is clear to catering operators and suppliers alike - they are dealing with a pressurised vessel with boiling water. Follow the health and safety guidelines to the letter and do all that is necessary to ensure your customers are safe in your environment."

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