

DALLA CORTE MINI – A CLOSER LOOK



[HTTP://WWW.BELLABARISTA.CO.UK](http://www.bellabarista.co.uk)

Overview

You will not find too much information about The Dalla Corte Mini on the Internet, perhaps a little on the Dalla Corte web sites, but certainly no reviews or pictures of the insides of this machine. My first impressions, are, that the engineers got round a table and designed this machine. As a result, it is superbly engineered, but a bit utilitarian.

Build quality is good with high quality (commercial quality) components and assembled with care. The quality is noticeable when lifting the machine, which weighs around 22kg (a lot considering its size).

The Dalla Corte Mini is a dual boiler machine and is a little more complex than the usual prosumer HX machines. This complexity refers to the design and type of components (and in some cases the cost), but not the speed and ease with which faults can be fixed, in part due to the on board electronic fault diagnosis.

Once set up (which is quite easy), it is very easy to operate. It is extremely compact, to the point of being surprising how they managed to get it all in the case and still have a “proper” 3 litre internal tank!

Specifically built for the domestic market, the Dalla Corte Mini requires no specialised power supply or complicated installation. This does not mean poorer internal build quality, just the opposite; it is very well engineered machine.

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The details were correct at the time of writing, but the manufacturer and Bella Barista reserve the right to change the technical specification of the packaging, machines and any accessories supplied with the machine (including quantity and type of accessories supplied)

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Dalla Corte mini closer look v2.doc

Overview – cont.

Some coffee enthusiasts buy second hand commercial machines make quality beverages at home. These are very large, heavy, plumbed into the mains and have 3–6kw heating elements in 5 litre or larger boilers to. The Dalla Corte Mini should give the same quality, without the hassle.

The Dalla Corte Mini is small, not just small for a twin boiler machine, but small compared to most of the machines I have reviewed for Bella Barista. It gives plenty of room under standard height kitchen cupboards, giving a useable but smallish cup warming tray. The Mini is compact (unbelievably so) and will not take up much space in the kitchen. This compactness does not come at the sacrifice of function; it delivers a real professional punch when steaming or brewing coffee.

Built by engineers, a strange expression, but looking at the machine I get the impression that the engineers have the upper hand at Dalla Corte. It is functional, the buttons feel nice, the little knob for temperature does the job and the plastic (imitation carbon fibre) group cover stops you burning yourself. It is a small, but really heavy machine, even the porta filters are much heavier than usual.

Placing the Dalla Corte Mini in my usual favourite corner location was ideal, because the machine is swallowed up leaving loads of counter space.



The Dalla Corte Mini, positioned in the corner of my kitchen

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Overview – cont.

Having used the machine for a while now, I really like it; I have even stopped worrying about how it looks. It simply works and works competently. Now the observant reader will have noticed the lack of a water wand, for some I guess this will be a major problem, but not for me. Readers of past reviews will know I do not think expensive espresso machines should be used as a Kettle. I also find boiler water from boilers (especially copper) taints after a while. However, this machine can still heat water for an Americano, simply steam a mug of water for about 15–20 seconds and it's plenty hot enough (yes the steaming is that powerful).

The Mini arrived well packed; the packaging is hi density foam, shaped specifically for the machine). The box was also clever (**and very tough**) and from a reviewers perspective made it easy to get the machine out. Repacking it was slightly more challenging (as I do not have a bander). Bella Barista double box the machines, so this will be added protection. However, I do not think double boxing this machine is necessary.

Bella Barista provides comprehensive documentation covering all aspects of operation, routine maintenance and production of espresso based drinks. A valuable addition to the Italian manufacturers' user guide which in my case was in Italian and for a different machine! Even if you are completely new to coffee making and this type of machine, you will have no problem making all those great coffee drinks in a very short time.

The Dalla Corte Mini is easy to keep clean, a quick wipe with a damp cloth on the plastic panels and a buff with a micro fibre cloth on the steel, keeps it looking great. More complex tasks, backflushing, group head cleaning etc.

are actually very easy to do and explained in the supplied Bella Barista user guide.

Descaling the Mini would usually be done by a service centre as part of any regular inspection and maintenance regime. The Bella Barista user guide will explain in general terms how to descale, but does not encourage, or provide detailed instructions for the untrained user to perform this task as removal of the case is required.



The Dalla Corte Mini comes well packed



Clever!

How it works

This simplified diagram of the Dalla Corte Mini shows how the machine works and put the internal pictures that follow in context.

The cold/hot water (steam) pathways shown in blue/red respectively

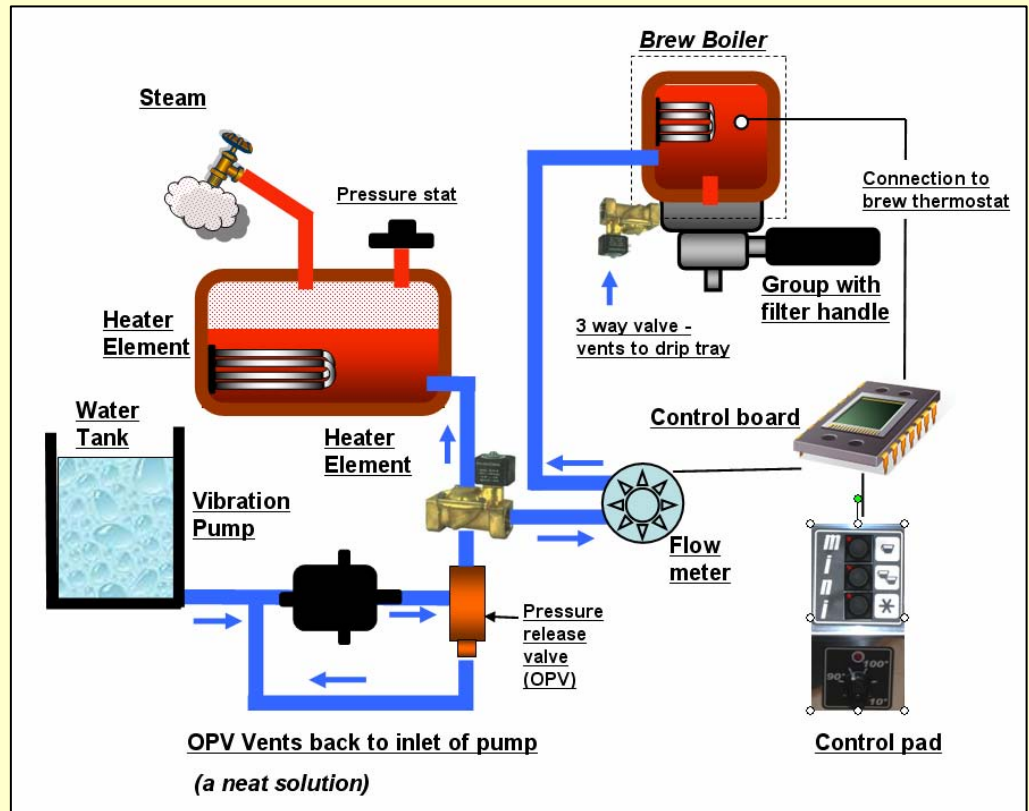
The Mini has "electro-valves" to control water flow and vent pressure from the group after a shot.

The flow meter controls the espresso shot volume.

The control board manages all the advanced functions of the machine, such as temperature, fault diagnostics, flow control & pre-infusion

The sensitive thermostat is located in the water of the brew boiler

Simple conduction warms the metal of the group.

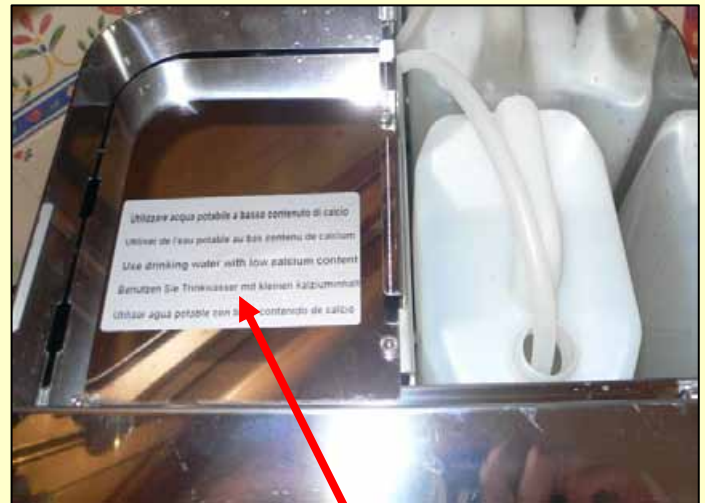


It is highly recommended to ensure the water used in these machines has been suitably filtered, or is soft, to reduce limescale, without this, you are likely to require frequent maintenance (including descaling) and run into problems (not covered by warranty) fairly quickly.

Inside the Dalla Corte Mini

The Dalla Corte Mini features quality components and good build quality. The machine is not overly complex, although modern electronics replace some of the older style technologies often seen in other machines. This should bring increased reliability and offset any extra costs when replacing components that may be more expensive. Internal build quality is good, with great attention to detail; all cables are well away from hot spots and comprehensively tied to avoid movement. I particularly liked:

- Stainless Steel Steam Boiler
- The construction and design of the brewgroup/brewboiler
- The clever and compact design
- Very simple control system

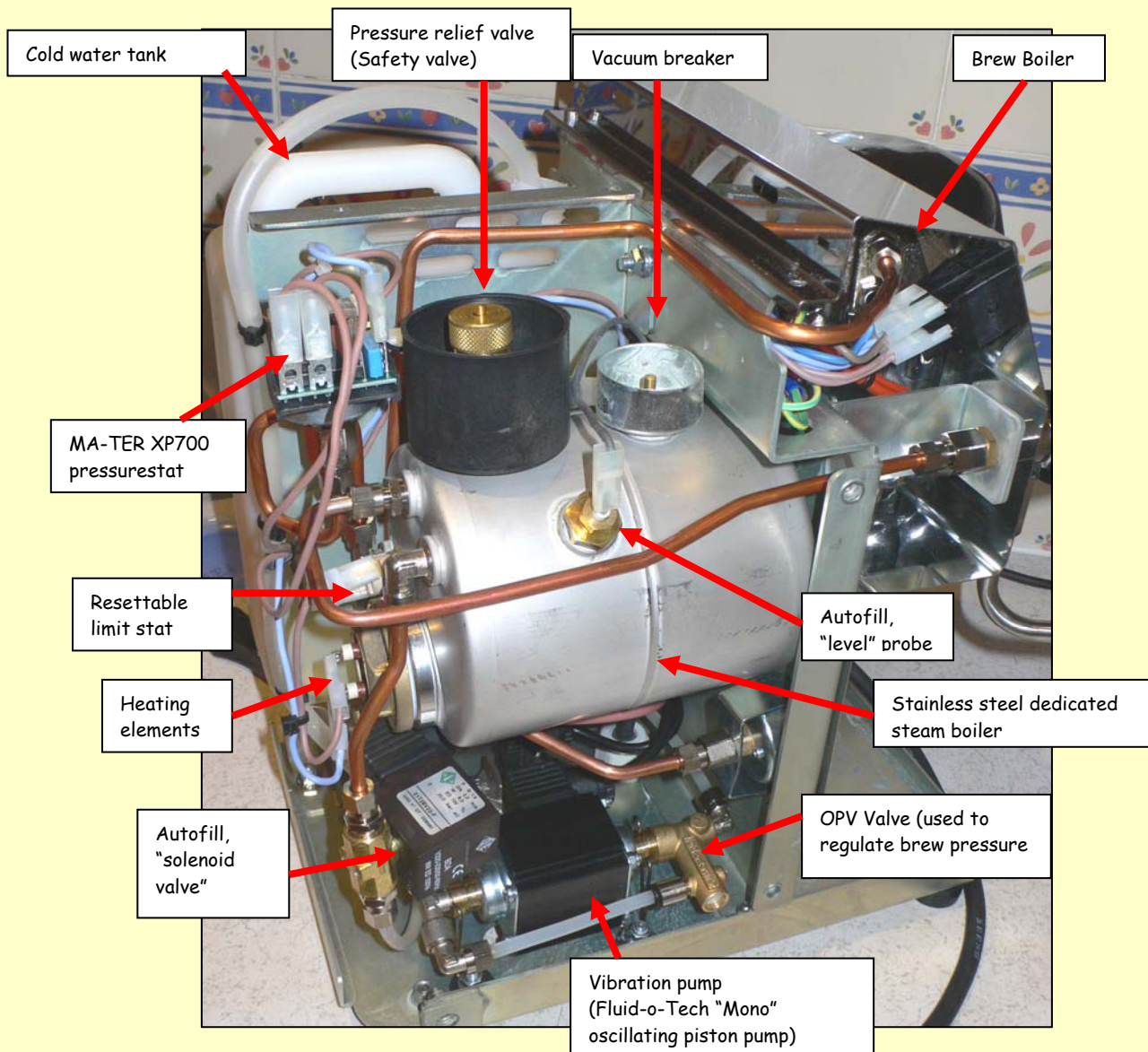


Removal of the cup-warming tray and unscrewing the top plate, gives access to some components, 3 screws about 20 seconds

The case is equally quick to remove/refit with 6 screws and takes about a minute. Giving access to most major components



Inside the Mini MK II – A detailed tour



The picture above identifies the major components of the machine, once the case is removed accessibility for maintenance is good. removal/refitting of the case is a very quick process. Replacing the pump on this machine would probably only take 10 minutes and that would include removing the case!

This machine would be a joy to work on for most of the major components that would require replacement over time.



The Glemme control board is hidden under an access cover, behind the water tank. 2 screws and it hinges open.

The positioning keeps this important component cool and protected

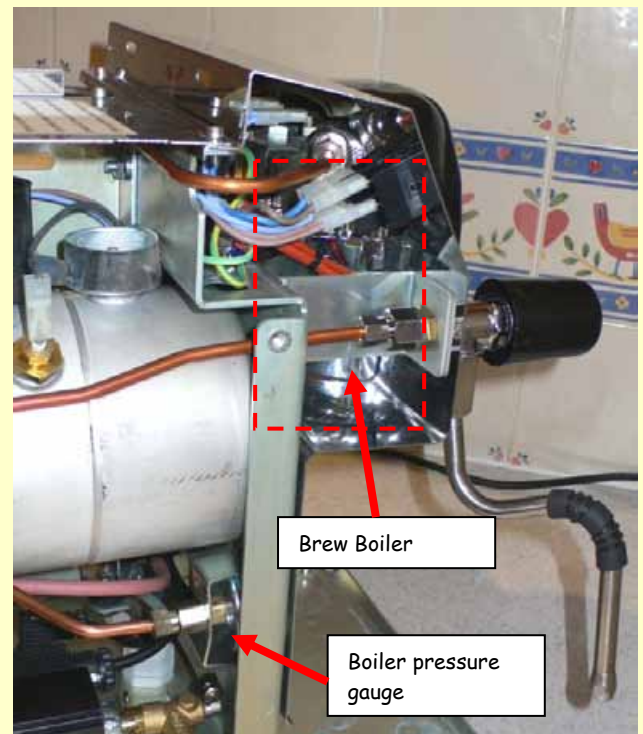
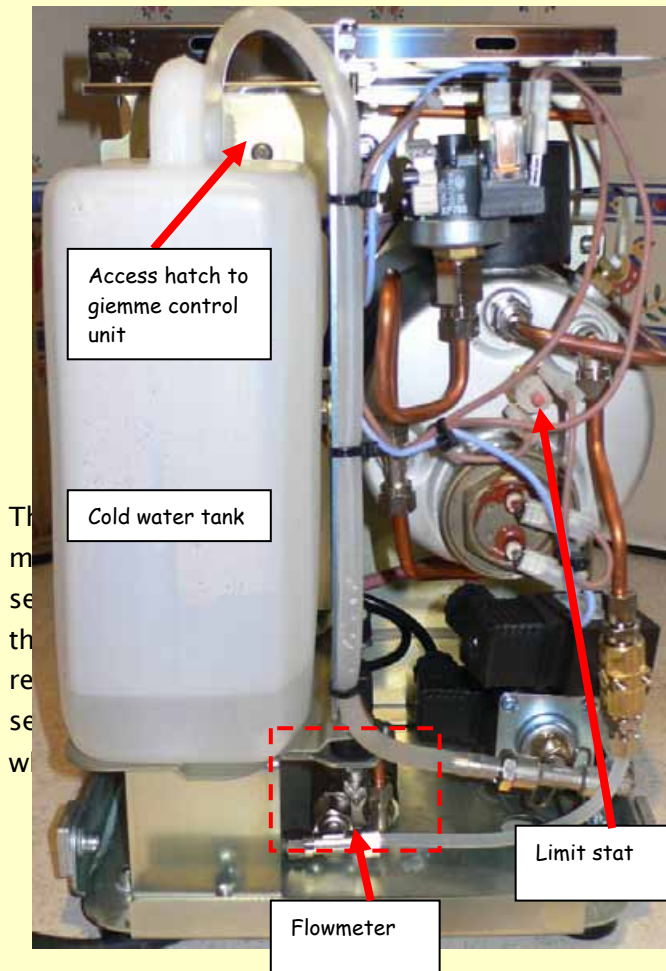
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Inside the Mini MK II – A detailed tour (cont.)

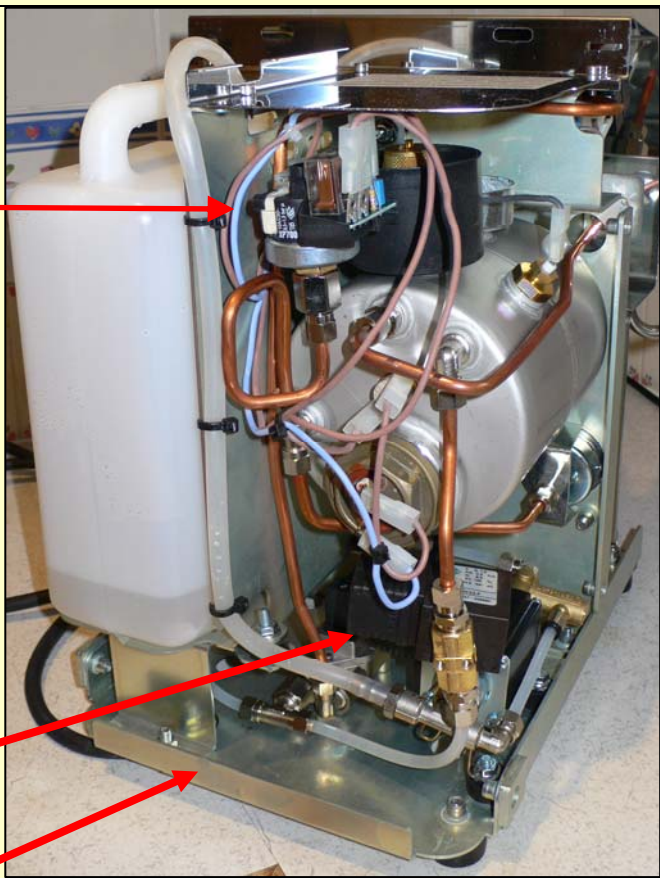





Access to the brew boiler involves removal of front panel screw, steam pipe and a number of different electrical connectors. I did not have time to do this for the review.

The task is moderately time consuming and would give access to components such as the control pad & CPU, brew boiler and would be required if the brew boiler heating element ever needed replacement.

Key features

- **Fabulous brew boiler/Brew Group design...giving unrivalled temperature stability**
- **Programmable Pre-Infusion function**
- Very compact machine
- No cooling flush required
- Ability to change brew temperature with the twist of a knob
- Ball Joint steam arm, with (professional quality) no compression valve
- Good placement of internal components
- Very powerful steamer with 3 hole (commercial style) tip
- Good quality **very heavy portafilters**
- On board fault diagnostics

Item/Description	Picture & Comments
The steel case is vibration free. Access to most interior parts of the machine is quick and easy. The only moderately time consuming access would be to the brew boiler and control pad electronics	
Reliable and accurate thermostat used for brew boiler, MA-TER XP700 pressurestat used for steam boiler	
Weld/braising quality on tank, nice and neat, reasonably sized 1.5 litre (steel?) Steam boiler. Nickel plated brass 0.45 litre brew boiler	
High quality internal components	
All components are very accessible. This makes servicing quick and easy once the case is off.	
Neat routing of internal cables and pipes, avoiding hot spots and areas of vibration scuffing. Protective sleeves used where necessary. All wiring connectors neatly done and well protected. The wiring for the pump, solenoids and other components uses a screw in plug connector for extra security	
Thick stainless steel internal. Very rigid and internal partitions protect sensitive components from the heat of the steam boiler	<p>The ability to turn off the Steam boiler would have been a nice feature. It would save energy; the machine would run cooler and extend internal component life. The steam boiler (1.5l) would heat up in 5 min and for those making only the occasional milk drink, it would not be an inconvenience to turn the steam boiler on when required.</p> <p>This would be a simple thing for Dalla Corte to do by simply adding a second pin switch (plus some simple wiring) on the front panel.</p>
The steam boiler cannot not be turned off independently of the brew unit. If I owned this machine, I would probably make the required modifications myself.	

Nice quality screws	Seems a strange thing to notice, but even the bolts holding the case on were heavy large and nice quality steel
Brew temperature adjustable at the twist of a knob. It is easy, it works and it is purely functional.	 <p>From a personal point of view, I think I would have sourced something a little more attractive. Yes, it works, but on a machine of this price, I would expect something a little classier.</p>
Reasonable size cup warming tray, you can get what you need on there, again in keeping with the compact nature of the machine. Plenty of room under standard height cabinets as well.	
<p>The drip tray holds 1 litre maximum, but realistically you would want to empty it at 800-900ml. I must admit that I did not think it would hold as much as it does! It's compact dimensions help keep the footprint of the machine small.</p> <p>The drip tray is plastic, admittedly a shiny plastic, but the whole drip tray area lacks the solidity of the rest of the machine.</p>	 <p>The drip tray is an area of the machine where I would have expected more and I would have liked to see a stainless steel drip tray.</p>

The Mini is a very powerful steamer indeed, due to the 1.5 litre dedicated steam boiler. It's 3 hole tip foamed large quantities of milk with ease. It took some practice to microfoam smaller quantities of milk, to the texture I like (aprox 100-120ml) and would certainly be easier with a single hole tip or one with smaller holes.

Professional quality no compression steam valve and ball joint steam wand. It was also long enough to reach to the bottom of all my smaller pitchers.



Steam tips have a few types of fitting. The one on the left is the Dallacorte Mini 3 hole steam tip fitting and on the right the Expobar steam tip, which fits many machines including the Izzo machines.

The vacuum breaker fitted to the Mini looks to be identical to the Andreja and now Vivi and Alex machines. This is a nice vacuum breaker, however, the extra space between the boiler water and the Vacuum breaker on the Mini may give better and more reliable long term operation of this valve.



The vacuum breaker is surrounded by a nice large "splash" cup.

The equipment supplied with the Mini included a spare shower screen, 2 tools for removing it and a spare group gasket. **The group head brush was a nice touch** and of course the usual useless plastic tamper



I would have rather liked a rubber disk for backflushing the machine, this is not an omission, unbelievably they don't supply one (certainly 2 shower screen removal tools must be a mistake). The UK userguide I had sent from Italy, implies 1 portafilter, although the review machine had 2 (very heavy, good quality ones with single and double baskets).



I actually had to make a backflush disk so I could backflush the machine before returning it. Again on a machine of this price I would expect one to be supplied as standard.

<p>The portafilters were great, heavier than any others I have come across before. They look to be 53mm, and the portafilter baskets are easy to remove.</p>	 <p>No complaints here, these are class items</p>
<p>The group itself being 53mm (I think) also had a design where the gaps were quite small, a bit hard to get into and clean and seemed to hold coffee grounds more than an E61.</p> <p>It was easy though to remove the shower screen and brass dispersion screen for cleaning, but it does need to be done regularly</p>	  <p>A little more “needy” than an E61 group to keep clean.</p>
<p>There was no hot water wand</p>	<p>For me not a major problem as you can steam a mug of water hot enough for an americano, or cup of tea in around 20 seconds. I also don't like using expensive espresso machines as kettles.</p> <p>It would be tempting to say, that they could have easily added one, but in this case I don't believe there was room, without making the machine larger.</p>
<p>The cold water tank held a full 3 litres, but to fill it you really needed a funnel (whether you removed it from the machine or not).</p> <p>It's a dual boiler machine, so big cooling flushes are not required and 3 litres of water actually lasts a very long time.</p> <p>When I first saw it I decided that I wouldn't like it....but it's actually quite OK</p> <p>It's also nice to see an inline filter</p>	  <p>The Dalla Corte website (at the time of writing) states <i>alarm signal (sounds when tank-filling is required)</i>. This is actually not true. The 3 LEDs on the front of the machine simply flash in sequence and no further operation of the machine is possible until it's filled.</p>

<p>The machine comes equipped with a 2 pin and not a 3 pin plug. This is NOT a Schuko plug, so if by any chance you have a shuko plug adaptor (clip over type). DO NOT USE IT, THIS PLUG WILL NOT FIT PROPERLY & THE MACHINE WILL NOT BE PROPERLY EARTHED (IT IS NOT A SHUCKO PLUG)</p>	<div data-bbox="703 286 1069 591" data-label="Image"> </div> <div data-bbox="1192 286 1412 624" data-label="Image"> </div> <p>For the money, I would expect a 3 pin plug</p>
<p>The all important rating plate, visible once the drip tray is removed.</p>	<div data-bbox="703 674 1264 1084" data-label="Image"> </div>
<p>Programmable pre-infusion was a nice touch and something generally only found on some commercial machines. It would be programmed for a 4 sec, 2sec or off.</p> <p>It was extremely easy to program.</p>	<p>Pre-infusion is a wetting of the puck with low pressure water. It is believed to give a better extraction and reduce the chance of “Channeling”.</p> <p>It works by introducing a delay between the electrovalve opening and the pump switching on. Water passively flows from the brew boiler to the puck, then the pump kicks in after the programmed delay.</p>
<p>Brew boiler design and stability. One of the nicest parts of the machine was hidden under a piece of imitation carbon fibre. It's really heavy about 0.45l and it's positioning above the group is just about ideal. It effectively gives a one piece boiler and group (effectively a “saturated group”). It would be difficult to get better temperature stability by design.</p>	<p>It produced great espresso shots and I liked the group design. I think the imitation carbon fibre cover would have much better if it had been chromed steel and hopefully Dallacorte may decide to introduce this one day (with the obligatory “Hot, do not touch” sticker).</p>
<p>The keypad, I won't say touchpad because it's not, had a really nice feel to it. Often these things feel flimsy or rubbery, this one didn't feel like that at all. The best way to describe it is the best of the late 70s control switches (I think they were much better then and are made much more cheaply now)....a good thing</p>	<div data-bbox="726 1709 909 1926" data-label="Image"> </div> <p>Great feel, and very easy indeed to use</p>

<p>The label is actually quite nice, but in a domestic machine...why on earth would it be on the back?</p> <p>You may have noticed, there is no label or name on the front.</p>		<p>Call me picky...but if it's going to be stuck there, at least get it centred.</p>
<p>Small rubber feet</p>	<p>I don't believe they are intended to be height adjustable</p>	
<p>Last but not least, a few words about the brew group. Dalla Corte have an expression DTCS direct temperature control system. In a nutshell, this gives unrivalled temperature stability for espresso brew water. The group design is about as good as you can get. The construction is heavy weight and the placement of the boiler just above the group, gives in effect a “saturated” brew group.</p>		<p>One of the brew units on the commercial machines...this is what is under that imitation carbon fibre cover of this machine and what makes up a large part of the cost!</p>

Using the Dalla Corte Mini

The Dalla Corte Mini is a twin boiler machine, so the usual adjustments and cooling flushes required with an HX machine are unnecessary. The Mini maintains the brew boiler at the optimum temperature (whatever you decide to set) for espresso extraction. I did not find any kind of flushing to be necessary even the physicist in me does not see the necessity of a flush.

Espresso

So really it is a matter of setting up the shot volume (dose) for singles and doubles (which is easy), filling the portafilter, tamping and pressing the correct button.....the machine does the rest. The Mini makes consistently good espressos and easily maintains the temperature during the pour. I was surprised not to always see the heating lights come on straight after a shot, but when examining the machine internally, it was clear that the brew boiler, although small at 0.45l has a large thermal mass. Domestic volumes of espresso one after another will be absolutely no problem with this machine.

Pressure Settings

You can alter the steam boilers pressure and temperature if required, although I found the factory settings to be perfect.

Steam Production

The Mini has very powerful steam performance and you will not run out of steam, to steam that 500ml of milk will not take long! In fact, it takes a little while to get used to steaming, especially with smaller quantities of milk. What worked for me was to be careful not to open the steam valve too far with these smaller quantities.

53mm vs. 58mm

Most machines I review have an E61 group or E61 style bottom and 58mm portafilter. Dalla Corte use a 53mm group and portafilter (I believe they were involved in the design of La Spaziale groups many years ago). The portafilter baskets are deeper than 58mm ones and I have seen claims that there is less possibility of channelling and possibly a better extraction. I certainly did not experience any problems in this area and adapted to the changed group size quite quickly. However, I cannot say for sure, which is better? I did fit a 53mm base to my Reg Barber tamper though!

..filling the portafilter, tamping and pressing the correct button.....the machine does the rest

Brew Temperature – some thoughts!

On the internet, there are discussions about ideal brew temperatures for espresso and varying them for different coffees. Some machines costing many thousands of pounds can (apparently) control absolute brew temperatures down to fractions of a degree. I am sure they must be very good, but of course, there is usually the law of diminishing returns to consider and the cost of parts for very specialist machines made in very small quantities.

I do not know what difference fractions of a degree make in the cup...when there are so other many variables, roast, grind, extraction speed, water quality, etc. **The Dalla Corte Mini has the capability to control brew temperature incrementally** and up to now I have not really made very much of this. I have also not talked about specific brew temperatures. This is because for me the actual, specific brew temperature is not that important. I simply want to make it hotter or cooler to suit my palate. The control system looks a bit basic, but it actually works well.



I do care about some specific things with regard to brew temperature:

- Can I adjust the machine to work in the entire range of; slightly too hot, or too cold for any coffee
- Will the machine maintain a stable brew temperature during the shot
- Is the recovery time OK
- Is it repeatable (assuming grind tamp and dose are the same)

The Dalla Corte Mini had no problem fulfilling these requirements and was very stable during the shot (with my measuring equipment). The true test is in the cup, if the taste is good then it is OK, too bitter or too sour, reduce or raise the temperature and try it again. The next time you roast a batch of the same coffee, or buy it ready roasted, the same temperature may not give the same results. I think that focussing too much on absolute temperatures and worrying about 10ths of a degree to fine tune brew temperature is doing the machine a disservice and missing the point. To make great coffee you need a good machine, but you also need, good quality (correctly roasted) fresh beans, a clean machine, decent water and a good grinder.

You will probably not adjust the temperature very much, but you can when you need to. There is plenty of adjustment within (and outside) the range considered acceptable for making espresso. **The brew group design is superb,** temperature stability is outstanding during the shot and there is plenty of thermal mass to ensure this happens.

With the Dalla Corte Mini, your concerns should not be getting the right brew temperature or stability during the shot. Do not worry about repeatability; grind and tamp the same way each time and it produces consistent results. The Dalla Corte designers have taken care of all this for you, so you can worry about important things, like the coffee and the grinder.

It is important that a machine is easy to use, works quietly and competently, day after day. I am interested in drinking great coffee, not playing around with a machine I liked the Dalla Corte Minibecause I did not have to think about it!

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There are a few uncertain areas in your review?

Yes, because unfortunately, there is not much information on the web and some of it is incorrect. I have tried as much as possible to correct inaccuracies and give correct information where possible.

Some of these inaccuracies/omissions on various web sites) were.

Web	What I believe
Steam Boiler Material stated as Copper	Steel
Brew Boiler Size not given	0.45l
Brew boiler Construction, not stated	Heavy grade nickel plated Brass
Group Size Not stated	53mm
Pump type not stated	(Fluid-o-Tech “Mono” oscillating piston pump) 55W
Low Water Audible Alarm	Only Visual Alarm

Bella Barista may well offer parts with the machine over and above those I received with the review machine e.g. a rubber backflush disk, possibly a 53mm tamper etc. Therefore, you should check the current equipment that comes with the machine when you purchase.

I have also been asked before why I do not use manufacturers stock photos in the reviews. The answer is simple, you want to know what it's really going to look like in your kitchen. Not how it looks in some professional photographers studio shot

Final Thoughts – so what is the bottom line!

I had heard almost nothing about this machine, before and there was very little information on the Internet (a lot of it wrong).

It is heavy, and very compact than most (if not all) the usual prosumer machines such as the Vivi or Andreja. I keep saying this is surprising, because again, it is a twin boiler machine in such a compact package and I know this will be important to some people.

I initially did not like its looks very much, but it actually looks OK in the Kitchen and my wife liked it. If size and location are important considerations (in a problematic kitchen) and you want the quality of a twin boiler system, then this may just fit the bill.

The Dalla Corte Mini is a competent performer and very convenient to use. It is not as quiet as a Vivi, but no noiser than the usual Vibe pump machines and the mountings are certainly better than those I usually see usually.

So are you selling your Alex for the Mini?

No, I cannot afford to change machine now, but I do like dual boiler machines....a lot

Although expensive, twin boiler machines of this calibre have superb engineering and make great coffee!

The price differential over other prosumer HX machines is quite high and it is quite an expensive machine. BUT, it is specifically built for the domestic market, a lot of thought has gone into producing something for the home user. Internally it is clear that there is an emphasis on reliability and low cost of ownership. ***Do not underestimate the Dalla Corte Mini it's well built, with high quality components that produces fabulous coffee!***

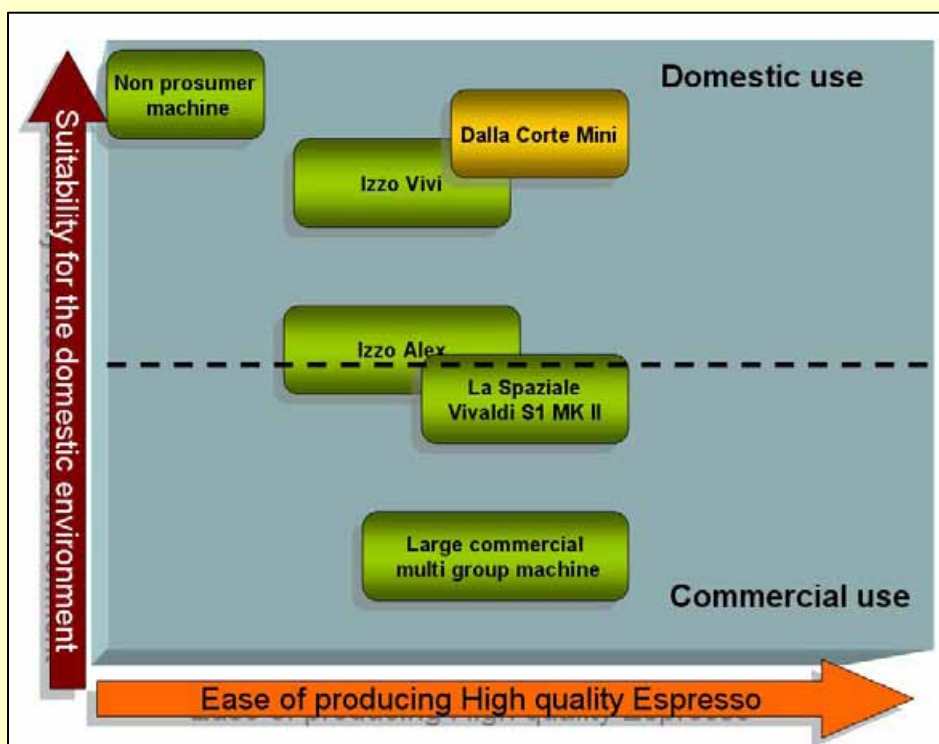
Where does it fit in the scheme of things?

An excellent question, I have tried to put together a picture that reflects my own personal view of this and helps answer the question.

Ease of producing high quality espresso reflects repeatability, stability and the ability to fine tune the shot temperature....difficult to do with an HX machine

Suitability for the domestic environment, is a function of size, ease of use, ease of installation maintenance etc.

As you can see the Mini sits in an unusual position, whilst still being capable of making the best espresso...but you do have to pay for this!



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Gallery – A few more pictures of the Dalla Corte Mini



Side View



Showerscreens and group gasket



Side View



*Easy to operate, tactile pushbuttons
Control and stability with integrated fault
diagnostics*

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