

IZZO ALEX MK II – A CLOSER LOOK (REVISITED)



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Overview

It is great to have another chance to review the Alex in its MK II incarnation, the review machine is the mains plumbed/tanked (switchable variant), there is also tanked only version. The Alex arrives well packed (Izzo have improved the packaging and Bella Barista also double box the machines). The build quality is excellent with high quality (industry standard) components and a lot of care has been taken with assembly. Constructed using heavy gauge mirror finish stainless steel, outside and inside, unlike some machines which use cheaper materials for the inner frame. The Alex comprises excellent value for money.

This type of heat Exchanger (HX) machine internally, is slightly more complex than cheaper non HX machines, but actually much simpler to operate. There are fewer controls and no need to do anything special (apart from filling the water tank occasionally) to draw steam, hot water or espresso at any time. The Alex automatically maintains the water level in the boiler as required and if run low on water in the tank the Alex has a low water alarm in addition to switching itself off as a safety precaution.

“An all stainless steel E61, prosumer espresso machine with a Rotary Pump that does not have to be plumbed into the mains”

The warmer tray is large and although a large machine, fits comfortably under standard height kitchen cabinets. The Alex compares favourably with other more expensive rotary pumped machines. At the time of writing, I am unaware of any manufacturer producing an all stainless steel E61, prosumer espresso machine (able to be used in a light commercial environment) with a Rotary Pump; that does NOT need to be plumbed into the mains. The Alex has a 2 litre boiler (unusual in

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prosumer espresso machines). The choice is really be down to size, it's not a small machine, but if your happy to have it in your kitchen (and mine isn't a large kitchen), It's good value for money.

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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Overview –cont.

Many coffee lovers go to the trouble of buying a second hand commercial machine to have the large boilers and rotary pumps. The Alex allows you to move a sensible distance towards the full commercial (and very large machine), without the aggravation of plumbing it into the mains and 2-4kw heating elements in 5 litre or larger boilers! In summary; The Alex is, unique and an excellent machine both for the customer to use and the reseller to support. It will provide years of reliable service with the minimum of maintenance. The money saved on replacing Vibration pumps alone over a 10 year period more than saves the extra cost.

“Comprehensive documentation covering all aspects of operation, routine maintenance and production of espresso based drinks”

Once in position on the counter the machine looks nice and does not dominate on standard sized work surface. The height of the machine is very convenient and gives room under standard height kitchen cupboards. Even though large, it's still small enough to be positioned in a corner, ideal, especially when located near a sink.



Very well packed inner box, protected by double packing in an air-cell filled outer by Bella Barista

The Alex comes well packed and with comprehensive documentation covering all aspects of operation, routine maintenance and production of espresso based drinks. A valuable addition to the Italian manufacturer's written User guide that comes free with the 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 Alex is easy to keep clean, a quick wipe with a damp cloth and a buff with a micro fibre cloth is all that's required to keep it looking great. The more complex tasks such as backflushing and descaling are actually very easy to do and the supplied Bella Barista user guide explains how to do them in detail.



Positioned in the corner of my kitchen

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Inside the Alex – more of the same?

It's easy to dismiss the Alex MKII as having just a few cosmetic differences and the manufacturer could be forgiven for only making the changes you as a consumer see. A close inspection of the Alex actually revealed that all the feedback given on the MK1 after reviewing has been incorporated as improvements in the MKII, plus many other nice changes

Internal build quality is extremely high, with great attention to detail. Components are well positioned, neatly assembled; all cables are well away from hot spots and comprehensively tied to avoid movement.

Some internal shots below; with all the quality names, Sirai, MA-TER, Gicar, and a nice view of the Rotary pump, shoe-horned into the base (wow!)



Brazed joints nice and neat and superb wiring



Improved Vacuum breaker



The rotary pump and powerhouse of a motor



Additional OPV, will release pressure at around 12 bar, an extra safety feature should the Rotary pumps pressure regulation fail

Key features – also what’s different from the MK I?

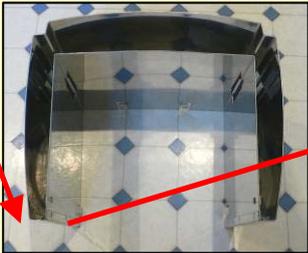
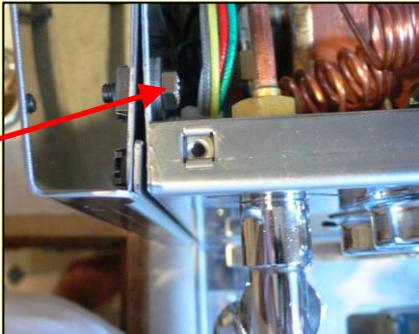
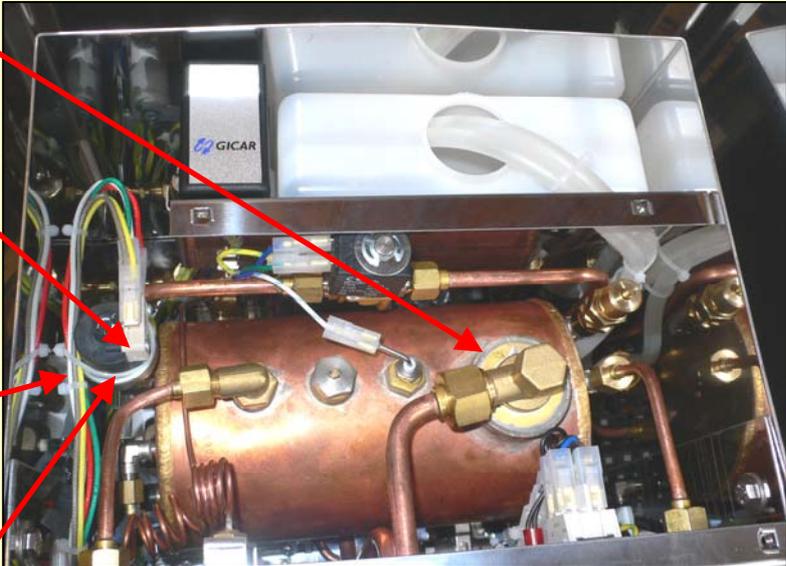
There are many subtle changes over the old MK I

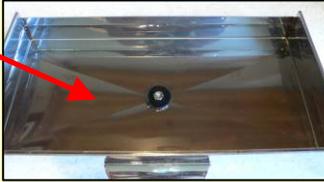
- Much neater brazing (really neat)
- Improved Vacuum Breaker Valve
- Rubber mounted pump motor
- Redesigned outer case to eliminate vibration
- Addition of brew pressure gauge
- Ball Joint steam and water arms
- Redesigned drip tray and cup rack
- Redesigned cup warmer tray
- Better quality internal water tank
- Mains/tank switchable variant available
- Improved ventilation for internal components
- Larger Knobs for steam and water valves
- Improved steam wand tip

Many of these subtle changes are invisible to the customer, so why make them? The answer is simple, Izzo unlike many companies, do care about what people say and take the feedback on their products seriously. Many things fed back to them during the review of the MK I (more as observations, rather than a need to change) have been considered, together with, end user modifications and Izzos own continuous improvement process.

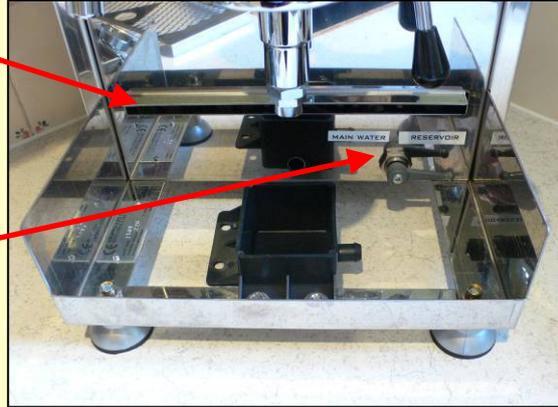
All this and they still come with 2 portafilter holders and 2 filter baskets as standard!

Key features

Item/Description	Picture	Comments
The double skinned external case, giving cool walls. The machine takes a bit longer to strip down now because of the addition of steel retaining bolts at the top of the case...giving a more secure fit and eliminating a point of vibration on the old MK I. (these should only be tight enough to spring the case and frame together, not too tight as you will deform the metal)		
Excellent routing of internal cables and pipes, avoiding hot spots and areas of vibration scuffing. I've come to expect this on Izzo machines		
Weld/brazing quality on tank, nice and neat (huge improvement over MK I)		
Nice large copper tank with substantial brass endplates. All screwed fittings on brass holders either brazed to tank or on brass endplates		
High quality internal components		
All components very accessible. This makes servicing quick and easy		
Wiring all braided and high quality		
Steel braided high pressure pipe		
Very accessible pressurestat that is not too sensitive to adjust. This makes pressure adjustment extremely easy and can be adjusted without removing case.		

<p>Rotary pump so replacement shouldn't be necessary in the Domestic environment. If the pump is ever fails, it can be rebuilt.</p>		
<p>Rotary pump is now rubber mounted, which reduces vibration..</p>	<p>The cup warming tray still buzzes sometimes, so the addition of a few felt dots is advisable</p>	
<p>Nice large cup warming tray. You can get plenty of cups on there, definitely no lack of space.</p>		<p>There are no finger holes as on the MK I, cup tray. This should be addressed by Izzo with the addition of a couple of lifting "knobs" placed at either side of the tray as used on the Vivi.</p>
<p>The temperature (pressure stability), the Alex maintained the boiler pressure within 0.05 bar of the selected level. This was an impressive level of temperature stability, partly due to having a very large 2 litre boiler.</p>	<p>This is what you would expect from far more expensive commercial machines.</p>	
<p>The Alex is heavy, at least 30 kg. If you will need to pull it our from under any kitchen cupboards to fill it, it can be hard with those grippy rubber feet. The feet are height adjustable!</p>		<p>Problem solved for a few pounds. Stick 4 of these little felt pads on the feet and it slides about with one hand! Alternatively use Teflon "glide pads" and you can slide it around with 1 finder!</p>
<p>The drip tray has been increased in size and holds a respectable 1.7 litres or more). Better still the tray can now be removed simply by sliding out from under the cup rack. One slight irritation was the nut (blanking off the drain hole) poking out of the bottom of the drip tray would catch on things as the tray was withdrawn. This meant that the tray had to be angled upwards slightly when removing at two points, once over the drainage trap and again over the front of the frame. This was solved in a few minutes by reversing the fitting so the nut poked up on the "inside" of the drip tray and using a rubber washer instead (cost 10p)</p>	  	<p>This really should be resolved at the factory. I think there are a few points here.</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. The tray should not have any projections from the bottom; they should all be on the inside. 2. I would like to see a rubber washer used rather than the semi rigid plastic one they currently use. <p>I used a tap washer, which seemed ideally suited to the purpose)</p>

The Motor is also now protected with a splash plate, this coupled with the tray sliding is a much better solution



The ability to flip a switch to move mains to tanked operation is great.

Also unlike many machines, the mains water hose can be detached from the base of the machine if it's not plumbed in, to keep things tidy.

An improved steam tip design. It took some practice to microfoam smaller quantities of milk with MK I steam wand tip as it had larger holes. This tip on the MK II is very similar to the "Gold pro" tips and works very well to make smooth microfoam for even small quantities of milk.



I still think the single hole steam tip also works well, but now can be purchased and considered an accessory, rather than a necessity.

New (left) and old steam tips



The new improved vacuum breaker valve on the current Alex MK II. On inspection it appears that this is a direct replacement for the old valve and can be fitted on all models of Alex.

I took one apart to have a closer look and as you can see, it's a very simple device. Pressure in the boiler pushes the brass pin with the silicon O ring onto the nylon seating and seals the boiler as it comes up to steam.



The old one was actually OK and was easy to split for cleaning without removing from the boiler. Admittedly this one looks as if it will be less prone to small leaks

I like the balljoint mounted steam and hot water arms

Separate brew pressure and steam boiler pressure gauges are a nice touch. The old MK I only had a boiler pressure gauge, the additional brew pressure gauge facilitates the easy check and adjustment of brew pressure....In the case of a rotary pumped machine, 9 bar

I also like the larger knobs, much more tactile and look good too.



Using the Alex – simple and easy to use!

Pressure Settings

The Alex runs quite hot, which is usual with Heat Exchanger (HX) machines, because of the tight compromise between continuously available steam, and production of brew water for espresso. The pressure in the boiler is directly related to the temperature, a higher pressure gives higher temperatures. Because of the way HX machines work most require a cooling flush prior to drawing the first in a series of espressos, the Alex in common with other machines of this type also requires this “cooling flush”.

The machine came set to around 1.1 bar boiler pressure, perfect for the lower volumes in the domestic environment (pressure setting should be increased for light commercial use).

The Alex has good steam performance (it will steam 400ml of water from 5c to 60c in less than 50 seconds, compared to 70 seconds for an Isomac Millennium). It has an enormous steam capacity and you won't run out of steam with the Alex.

Espresso

As long as a cooling flush is performed, the Alex makes consistently good espressos and easily maintains the temperature during the pour. Domestic and light commercial volumes of espresso one after another will be absolutely no problem with this machine.

The machine does seem to make exceptional espressos, is it the rotary pump? Is it the large 2 litre boiler? Is it me?

I don't know. All logic says that a rotary pump or a Vibe pump shouldn't matter, the volumes of water that a Rotary can move is much higher, but that shouldn't matter. All I can say is that this machine makes really great espressos, consistently and was able to get more crema from some old beans I had, when my Zaffiro couldn't!

I now know quite a few people with the Izzo Alex and again they all seem to think it pulls a better shot....so maybe it does!

Steam Production

The Alex is a strong steamer. The improved steam wand is well designed and the 2 holes are just the right size. The milk swirls easily, warms quickly and you will have no problems producing copious amounts of micro foam.

“It has an enormous steam capacity, you won't run out of steam with the Alex”

Hot Water

It's nice to have plenty of really hot water on tap. The internal boiler is large and has plenty of water available. Although for regular hot water production a kettle is a cheaper and better option in areas where lime scale is a problem and saves having to descale your machine so often.

The E61 Group

The E61 group is an industry standard (as are many of the components in the machine), so parts such as, pumps, gaskets, shower screens, filter holders, filter holder handles etc. are all a standard size and readily available from multiple suppliers. This also means that the pricing of these spares is highly competitive.



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Final Thoughts – so what’s the bottom line!

This was a rare opportunity, the chance to do a second review on a machine that has seen a significant “upgrade” into its MK II guise. I put upgrade in quotes, because we always assume an upgrade is something we will actually see, especially in new bells or whistles. So was it a surprise to see that the Alex didn’t really have many new Bells and whistles and that much of the improvement was “under the skin” and not really obvious? In many ways no, it wasn’t a surprise, because the Alex was a very good machine to start with, in a sense, this is just a machine that’s had those final few touches...and it’s earned them.

The large boiler means plenty of steam and good thermal stability. It’s also definitely a realistic proposition to allow you to lose the kettle completely.

It’s big, of course, but, if you want a machine of this spec with an onboard water tank, I don’t think it could be squeezed into a much smaller package. A commercial 1 group (which would have similar features), would be significantly bigger, heavier and overkill for the home user.

Anything you would change?

As a reviewer, I have the benefit of 20/20 hindsight, this means that after all the hard work has been done by the designers and the engineers....I get to comment (safe in the knowledge that I don’t have to build one). As usual though, there were a few things.

- The water tank is 2.35 litres (the old one is about 2.5 litres on the MK I). I calculated that if they used a tank 32mm taller, it would have fitted and could have held over 2.7 litres
- Handles on the top cup warmer tray, would make life a little easier

But these are small items on a very well sorted machine and do little to detract from its day to day operation

Vibe Vs Rotary

I am always being asked the benefits of one system over the other. The replacement of the standard Vibration pump with a Rotary pump is an outstanding idea, especially as it doesn’t have to be plumbed into the mains (an available option though). The Rotary pump should make the 3–5 year headache of replacing the Vibe pump a thing of the past and will give good performance throughout its life, as opposed to the often diminishing levels of performance from the Vibe pumps as they age. The motor that the rotary pump is attached to is the size of a tin of baked beans and very powerful, you really feel like your getting your moneys worth. If ever the rotary pump fails it’s a surprisingly cheap part and easy to fit.

I personally think it makes a better shot, many might disagree. One thing that no one can disagree with though is: “**rotary pumps sound cool**” ...they do, honest.

Will you upgrade your Alex MK I to a MK II?

No, the Alex MKI was already a great machine and the MK II simply adds a final “polish”. Anyone who has an Alex MKI has little to gain (**unless they wish to plumb the machine in**) by upgrading.

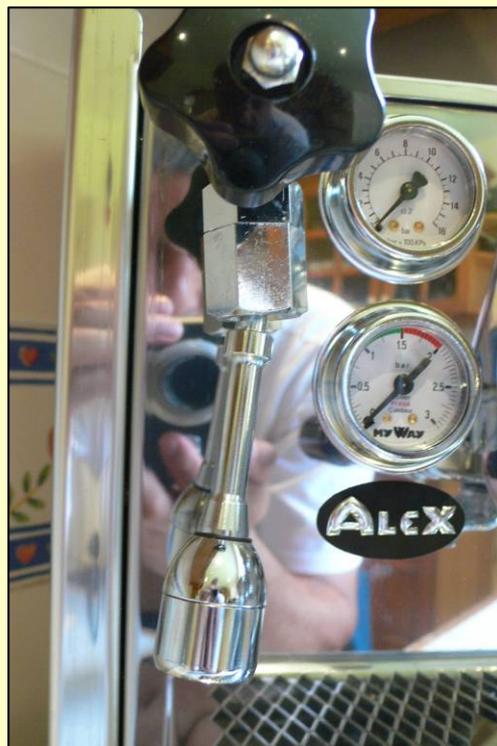
People who already own a MK I have a machine that will last them a very long time indeed with no need to upgrade. Those unlucky enough not to own an Izzo Alex are simply fortunate that they can now buy a MK II version (because they don’t make the MK I any more) and benefit from an even more refined machine **and the same great coffee experience I and other MK I owners already enjoy.**

Of course if they do bring out a Dual Boiler Izzo Alex with digitally controlled brew temperature, then I might upgrade.....

Gallery - A few pictures of the Izzo Alex



At the sharp end of the machine!



All the gauges you could want



A coffee powerhouse



The Rotary pump unit and behind it the RPM motor



The E61 group