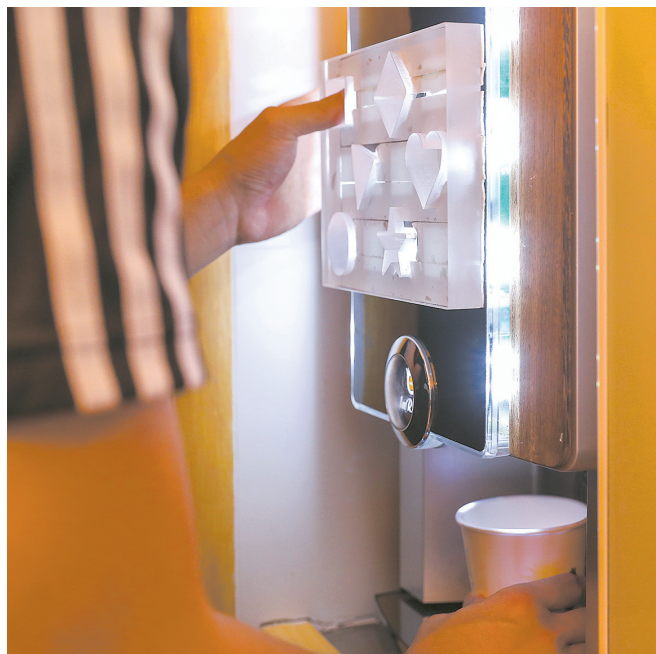


A latte, please! Planting the seeds of inspiration for visually impaired



The interior of the kiosk has been specifically designed for Tianbao's disability. — Photos by Jiang Xiaowei

Lu Feiran

Barista Yin Tianbao has never actually seen a cup of coffee. Born visually impaired, he can't discern colors or textures, but he can make an awesome latte or Americano.

Tianbao has now become the first visually impaired person to operate a coffee kiosk under the Hinichijou coffee chain, which has hitherto focused mainly on helping people with hearing loss.

His new café, called Seed of Inspiration, is located at Times Square in Shanghai's financial district of Lujiazui on the eastern shore of the Huangpu River.

Tianbao, 23, is the barista, manager and 10 percent shareholder. In several weeks, his twin brother Yin Tianyou, who was also born visually impaired, is going to join him.

"I feel a bit conflicted," said Tianbao. "I received so much help, including training and investment from Hinichijou, so I want the business to succeed, but, on the other hand, I'm worried whether I can handle large customer flows well."

The kiosk looks commonplace from the outside. It doesn't follow the usual Hinichijou style of serving drinks with a "bear claw" through a hole in the wall. Rather, customers will come face-to-face with Tianbao.

The interior of the kiosk has been specifically designed for Tianbao's disability. Its working area is a bit smaller than usual so that both front and back counters are within his easy reach.

The counters are divided into six areas with different materials on the edges. For example, there's a stainless-steel segment with a groove in the cashier area. An area with a wooden edge identifies the location of the coffee machine and milk frother. An

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I believe that you can only find a future after you take the first step. Now I just think about what I can do with the café. Ask me again in a month, and I might have something new to tell.

Yin Tianbao
Barista

area with a rubber edge and no grooves is where coffee beans are kept.

"I have very strong sense of what's what here," Tianbao said, "so I don't get confused even during busy times."

The automated coffee machine from Italian brand Rhea has a special board over the control panel, with different hole shapes indicating different buttons. Tianbao has only to feel the holes to find the right buttons — a square for espresso, a circle for double espresso, a triangle for hot Americano, a diamond for Americano at room temperature, a star for hot water and a heart for water at room temperature.

"Most of machines used in coffee shops are semiautomatic because the coffee they make is better," said Wang Tian, co-founder of Hinichijou. "But a semiautomatic machine would be a hazard for Tianbao because he can't see if a mug is full and might burn his fingers. Fortunately, Rhea makes a machine that balances both taste and barrier-free needs."

Rhea, whose product line includes coffee machines for the disabled, told Shanghai Daily that this is the first time the company has manufactured a machine for a visually impaired barista.

"The principle is the same: always think of the user," said Claudio Valdetara, marketing director of Rhea Vendors Group. "In this specific case, it's the blind

barista. We considered this at the beginning and in the middle of the design process, and then went back and decided which technological solutions could be applied."

He added: "What brought us to the creation of our machine for Tianbao was putting ourselves in his shoes. The process of design involved special attention to the user experience, followed by the selection of an easy-to-use technology — in this case a special panel."

Before starting his training with Hinichijou last November, Tianbao worked as a spice taster. He was initially educated to become a masseur — a common trade for the blind and visually impaired in China. The chance to become a barista opened a whole new life for him.

According to Wang, it's a first of sorts.

"There was no precedent of visually impaired baristas in the country," said Wang. "So we set up a simulation workshop and covered our own eyes to see if and how it might work. As our trials improved, we invited Tianbao to become a trainee."

The most difficult part of the training was the latte art.

"Latte is very tricky because I would never know if I got it right or not," Tianbao said. "My adviser had to stay with me all the time during training, until I developed the right hand movements. To some extent the training was