

Niche Zero vs DF64– A subjective 6-week review

This is a head-to-head comparing these two popular grinders. There are already lots of other reviews with more objective measures e.g. retention/extraction. This review will therefore be subjective. Comparing the taste of grinders is also extremely difficult and is something that will almost certainly be mostly influenced by one's personal preferences.

TLDR (see main body of review for more info)

Both taste good and seem well built. The Niche is easier to use, more consistent, retains less with less effort, and is overall more enjoyable. I definitely prefer the Niche but the DF64 is good too.

The DF64 is both cheaper and more available as well as having the option to add SSP burrs. The DF64 tastes different to the Niche but is harder to dial in, retains more, and is more work to use such that currently, I just do not feel compelled to use the DF64 when I have both options available. The DF64 may also improve over time with additional burr seasoning and future accessories.

The DF64 is no 'Niche Killer' but provides competition with comparable benefits and gives all of us consumers more option so it is absolutely a win for us.

Disclaimer: I have no financial (nor any other) affiliations with any players in the coffee industry including the companies who produce and distribute these products.

Who am I? I go by u/blingboyduck on Reddit + Discord. I am not and have never been a coffee professional. In my own words, I am simply a home coffee/espresso enthusiast

Why write this review? Both grinders are popular *single-dosing, all-purpose* grinders (see table 1) that have received lots of attention recently (see more below). I own both. I am writing this to collate my own thoughts and to answer any questions that people may have when deliberating between these two options.

Grinder use case for the review: My housemate and I have been using each of these grinders for about 6 weeks. We have mostly used them for our daily brews.

We use a very wide range of coffees (albeit *predominantly* lighter roasted single origins). We also use a very wide range of brew methods i.e {V60, Clever Dripper, Fellow Stagg, Hario Switch, French Press, Aeropress, Delter Press, Ibrik/Cezve, and many different types of espresso shots with and without milk or oat milk}. My espresso machine is a Breville/Sage Dual Boiler with the Slayer mod.

Grinder Background

The Niche Zero: The (*original?*), single dosing, all purpose, grinder that was built with the home user in mind that did not cost more than £1000. It was a Kickstarter project in 2017 from a completely unknown source. Since then it has gained immense popularity in the community, partially due to the overwhelmingly positive reviews from many prominent members of the community. It uses 64 mm conical Mazzer burrs. It has also had very limited competition (until now) so it was truly one of a kind for a few years.

DF64/ Iota/ Solo Grinder: A new to the market grinder from a Chinese manufacturer that is sold by a range of distributors under a range of names. It uses 63 mm flat burrs which means it also compatible with SSP burrs. It is no doubt inspired by the success of the Niche. It is only a good thing for the consumer to have more options like this.

N.B I am only using the standard DF64 burrs (for now) so cannot comment on any improvements the SSP burrs will make.

The Review

As mentioned previously, this is not meant to be a technical review. Tech specs can be found elsewhere (sorry) This is just the culmination of our experience with the grinders after 6 weeks of using them both.

<i>Grinder</i>	<i>Burrs</i>	<i>Age (to me)</i>	<i>Price I paid</i>	<i>Where I bought it from</i>	<i>Availability</i>
Niche Zero (white)	63 mm conical (Mazzer)	~ 18 months	£500	Niche Indiegogo page (back when it was available instantly)	Every month or so pre orders go out. Demand is high, availability is low
DF64 (carbon fibre finish)	64 mm flat (not SSP)	~ 6 weeks (so burrs will not be fully seasoned)	£400	Bella Barista (UK)	Generally good, from multiple vendors

Appearance (Draw)

To get it out of the way, the appearance of these grinders is entirely subjective in terms of which one you prefer.

The Niche certainly looks more unique to me. I think it fits well on any kitchen counters. There are also several aftermarket accessories and mods that I have seen online. I personally just rubbed some seasoning oil onto the wood elements which makes them feel and look a bit nicer. There is also a little red light that stays on when the machine is plugged in.

My carbon finish DF64 looks like Darth Vader's grinder. The black finish with the white power button lights do look quite sleek at times – although the design is still very basic and industrial.

Build Quality (Draw)

The Niche feels well made and generally very solid with the exception of the plastic lid which feels cheaper but still works very well. Changing grind size and flicking the power switch feel satisfying. The power cable is short and fitted on a coil that tucks it into the grinder – this mechanism works incredibly well.

The DF64 is noticeably heavier but this does not necessarily make it feel better built, just more of an industrial build. Changing grind size is less pleasant (the dial is harder to turn than on the Niche). The power button is a bit annoying to press due to its placement where it always be underneath whatever you are grinding into. The grinder does however automatically stop after 45 seconds of grinding which is a nice touch even though I do wish it were close to 30 seconds, or even better, controllable with a dial.

Accessories (Niche – Just)

The DF64 comes with a plastic dosing cup that fits nicely into the portafilter forks and works well. It includes bellows which are extremely necessary to blow the last bits of coffee out of the grinder. There is also a grinder lid which is necessary to stop beans jumping out of the grinder (the popcorning is real). The

Niche has a nice and very premium-feeling metal dosing cup (there is now a newer version than the one I have) as well as a cleaning brush and screwdriver to remove the bolt for cleaning. There are also spare springs for the grind adjustment inside the base. All Niche Zeros now come with the NFC (Niche flow control disk). This slows the feed of the beans into the burrs which seems to improve grind quality and almost completely removes popcorning such that the lid is no longer even necessary.

Noise, Grind Speed (Slight edge to the DF64)

Sorry for not including quantitative results but, in terms of grind sound. The Niche is louder without beans in the grinder. DF64 is louder when actively grinding but is extremely quiet without beans which is nice for when you walk away and let the grinder turn itself off after the 45 seconds is up

The peak grind speed of the DF64 is much faster and is especially noticeable when grinding for filter coffee. The DF64 suffers from lots of popcorning however so the total grind time is not so dissimilar. The peak grind speed for espresso is closer but the Niche has completely solved its popcorning issue using the NFC disk so the Niche will normally be done grinding first.

Workflow (Niche by a long way – for now)

The workflow with the Niche is absurdly simple – put beans in grinder, turn the grinder on, let the beans grind, turn off. No other work is needed to minimise retention. There is some static that can be reduced with WDT but this is not necessary for retention and I found it just gums up the inside of the grinder with moisture over time.

The DF64 absolutely needs WDT as well as use of the bellows for minimal retention. The workflow is otherwise like the Niche in theory but popcorning and coffee getting stuck in the chute is a real issue especially when grinding for espresso. I have heard that there is a similar solution to the NFC disk on the Niche in the works. For now, I often need to turn the grinder on and off a few times to let the last few beans fall through. Sometimes grounds also get stuck at the top of the chute and require several puffs of the bellows to dislodge.

The dial on the Niche is also easier to turn with one hand and feels smoother with less resistance. The button placement of the DF64 is a common complaint but does not really bother me.

The DF64 has portafilter forks but my Breville Portafilters don't fit perfectly so I need to hold them in place anyway. This is however a plus for the DF64
The DF64 may improve with time and better accessories but for now the Niche is clear winner here.

Retention, Dose/Grind consistency (Niche clear winner)

So, with zero additional effort, apart from tapping the lid a few times to get the last grind out of the chute, the dosing on the Niche is consistently within 0.1 - 0.2 g. Almost every time I have measured it, the difference is 0.1 g or less. Occasionally when I move from espresso up to filter coffee grind settings or vice versa, the difference is about 0.2-0.25 g but this is not always the case.

I can easily go back and forth between grind settings with near perfect consistency. E.g if I have espresso dialled in at setting 18, if I brew some filter at setting 40 then go back to 18, my espresso will still be dialed in and I will not need to purge. Yes, there are some differences, but this is well within human error with regards to puck prep.

The DF64 performs extremely well with dose consistency IF I put in the work and IF I am not changing grind size. Within this regime, the dose is consistently about ± 0.2 g. I consider this difference negligible. The caveat here is that it requires more work than the Niche. RDT technique is essential otherwise the retention is much larger – sometimes up to 0.5 – 0.8 g or so. It is also necessary to give a few puffs of the bellows – on top of dealing with the popcorning. This is not a huge deal but, in the mornings, I naturally find myself tending towards the Niche – it's just less fussy.

When it comes to changing grind size, the dose consistency is much worse. If I change from espresso to filter, I have lost up to 1 g of grinds in the grinder. If I change from filter to espresso, I often get up to 1 g more than I put in. Also, when dialling in, I find a small purge is beneficial to get the new grind size to 'stick'.

Espresso Puck Prep and Dialling in (Niche wins)

This is likely another subjective topic and keep in mind that I have much more experience with the Niche. I personally use this method to grind for espresso with the Niche (grind straight into the portafilter and then use a WDT tool to rake the top of the puck);

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kJbQuGwNGMM>

I find the dosing cup to be a bit of a faff but this method works perfectly to me. Over 90 percent of my shots come out looking perfect on the bottomless portafilter, regardless of what type of shot I am pulling. Yes, I do have to hold the portafilter while I grind into it but the results are great with little fuss. There are also after market portafilter stands for the Niche such as the one sold by Decent Espresso.

The DF64 has proved to be much fussier for me – I find that full, thorough WDT is best and even then, I find it hard to be as consistent. The portafilter forks are however a clear advantage here.

When it comes to dialling in shots, the Niche is more forgiving and has a larger sweet spot. I believe this is a property of conicals vs flats. The best shots on both are fantastic but I find it easier to get something good (not necessarily fantastic) on the Niche. This is likely also due to the fact that I have much more experience with the Niche.

Flavour (Both are Winners here!)

Whilst this may seem like the most important aspect of a grinder, I do not have that much to say about it here. Taste is extremely subjective and extremely difficult to compare. Even when doing side by sides, how do I know whether what I am tasting is the grinder or my own brewing inconsistencies / inability to dial in properly.

Yes there are general differences between conicals and flatts but every burr set is unique so I think that the generalisations are a bit over stated at times. *My DF64 is also not fully seasoned, and I have much less practice with it. The SSP burrs may also make a significant improvement when I get them.*

Both grinders can produce excellent coffee for both filter and espresso.

If I had to make some general observations between the two it would be the following;

- Overall, the Niche tastes a bit more balanced and sweeter
- The best shots and filter coffee from the DF64 do have bit more clarity + flavour seperation but it is hard to achieve the same overall level of flavour as the Niche.
- I think there is still more I can get out of the DF64 (seasoning / practice / SSP burrs) but it currently offers some noticeable differences to the Niche
- Neither one tastes objectively better but I think the coffee from the Niche perhaps has more all-around appeal as of now.

This is all I really have to say on the topic even after 6 weeks. I would not be unhappy with either of these grinders taste-wise for any brew method if I only had to choose one.

Conclusion (The consumer is the winner!)

Yes, I prefer the Niche (perhaps I am biased) but my housemate had much the same conclusions that I did.

I really thought that the qualities of the Niche would be easy to replicate but perhaps I gave them too little credit for the amount of work they put into their design. The Niche is overall much more pleasant to use and simply does what it says on the tin extremely well!

I was honestly expecting the DF64 to feel the same, but it just doesn't. This is not a criticism but rather a taming of my expectations. It still performs well in its own right. It also has different burr options to the whilst being cheaper and more available.

I think the Niche likely fits better for most people who want a fuss-free, all-purpose, single doser. The DF64 does however provide us all with more options and it is certainly a good one.

- Only you can decide yourself which one would be best for you
- I would certainly be happy with either option
- I don't feel like having one necessarily means you are missing out on the other

