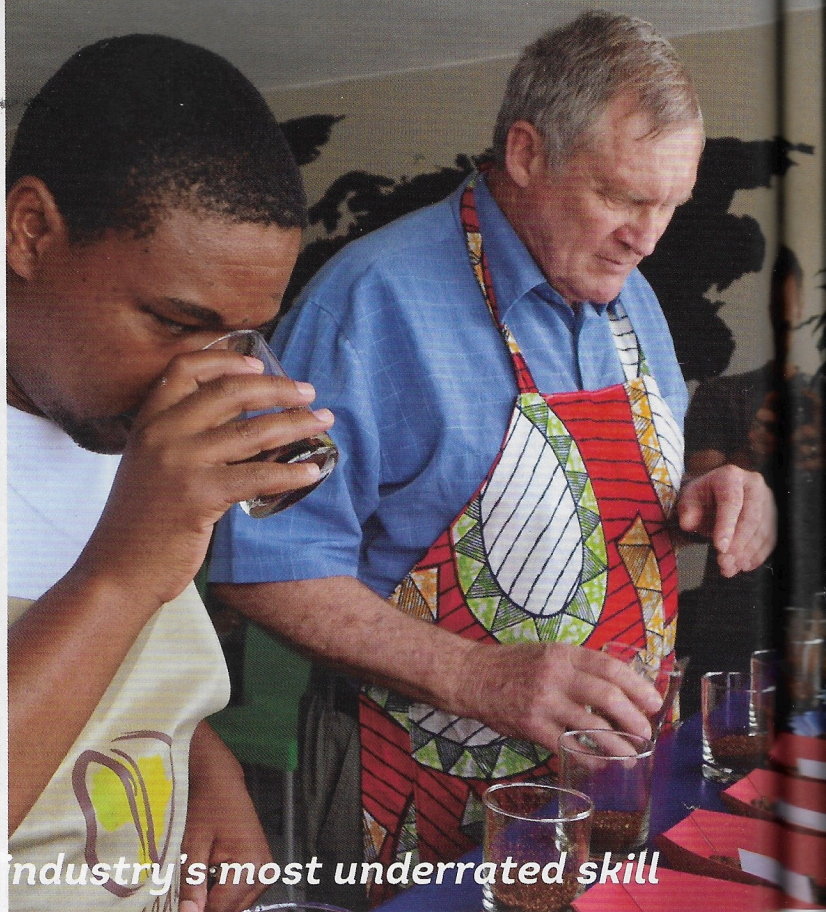


[Discover]

COFFEE CUPPING 101

Words by Charles Denison

Unlocking the Flavour using the industry's most underrated skill



At some point in your coffee journey, you'll come across people describing their coffee as having "blueberry sweetness with grapefruit-like acidity and hints of toffee". While you might quietly agree, you're really thinking it tastes a lot like.....coffee. Besides highlighting the perils of coffee-snobbery, these taste descriptors form part of what, I believe, to be one of the most important skills anyone can develop within the coffee industry. But coffee cupping is not just for coffee professionals; everyone from the beginner coffee aficionada to the green bean trading expert can gain a great deal from the experience of cupping. I am convinced that a good roaster cups every roast, or at least every new profile/bean. There is no better way to understand and explore the unique tastes of coffee than to examine them side-by-side, looking for differences between the coffees.

Coffee cupping is basically a fancy way of saying "tasting", and is the practice of detecting and recording the various tastes and aromas of brewed coffee. Just as a wine sommelier tastes and scores a wine, a coffee cupper does the same.....don't tell the wine-people, but coffee has nearly three times as many identified flavour and aroma compounds than wine! The cupping procedure involves intensely

sniffing the coffee, then loudly slurping the coffee. The taster measures aspects of the coffee's taste, specifically:

- Fragrance – aromatic aspects of dry coffee ground
- Aroma – aromatic aspects of coffee when infused with water
- Flavour – the taste and aroma, flavour notes from chocolate through to lemony
- Aftertaste – what the coffee leaves in your mouth
- Acidity – brightness, liveliness, and/or sourness of coffee – positive or negative
- Body – mouthfeel, heaviness and richness of the coffee
- Sweetness – does the coffee have a subtle pleasant sweetness
- Balance – balance of flavours and attributes
- Clean cup – transparency in the cup
- Uniformity – between the same cups

The greatest thing about coffee cupping is that you can use the most basic equipment, whether you are in New York City or thick in the rural coffee-lands of Ethiopia, and still can achieve the same results. I completed my Q-graders (a professional coffee cupping certification) in 2010 in Zambia. While trading coffee in Kenya and Tanzania, I would cup up to 200 coffees per day! This leaves ones taste-buds overwhelmed, and tasters-

fatigue sets in by the end of the day. Even after eight years at the cupping table, I still have a child-like excitement as each mysterious cup is sniffed and slurped transporting one around the world to a new coffee plantation. Over time, a cupper becomes skilled at honing in on those tastes and sensations that are most central to the coffee attributes.

Cupping has been standard industry practice since the first wave of coffee (circa late 19th century), and is a systematic evaluation tool used for three main objectives:

1. Cupping for defects – when purchasing, ensuring the coffee doesn't contain any taints or process defects such as mould, stinkers, potato-defect, or bad acids, which take away the positive flavours of the coffee. It is essentially the only tool that one has to determine whether a particular lot of coffee is worth purchasing.
2. Cupping for flavour – discovering the coffees strengths and weaknesses as well as characteristics.
3. Cupping for blend purposes – finding which coffees contain the characteristics required for the blend.

In grading and scoring your coffees, one uses a cupping form. The Specialty Coffee Association of America (SCAA) cupping form



Jeremy Wakeford and John Mokobodi smell the dry fragrance before smelling the wet aroma as part of the cupping ritual.



Deep scooping spoons are needed to slurp the coffee, atomizing the particles across the palate. The more noise the better!

remains the long-reigning standard. But there are plenty of alternative cupping forms in recent years, many a lot simpler to use. Most forms use a 100-point scale, but at the very least be sure to record your taste notes, and perceptions of body, acidity, and sweetness. For free cupping forms, cupping apps, cupping wheels and more info: www.cultivar.co.za/cupping.html

Equipment Required: ESSENTIAL:

- Cupping Table
- Cupping vessel – tempered glass or ceramic (uniform size – recommend 200-250ml)
- Cupping spoons (deep soup-like spoons – often silver plated)
- Grinder
- Scale
- Filtered Water @ $\pm 93^{\circ}\text{C}$
- Stop-watch
- Cupping forms and pen

ADDITIONAL:

- Sample Roaster
- Thermometer
- Agtron / Colour Analyser / Colour disks
- Full spectrum light
- Blue coffee trays
- Spittoon

Although tasting coffee is subjective, the cupping procedure aims to reduce the number of variables, and make the process as systematic and scientific as possible.

The Process:

1. Roast the coffee, or have the coffee roasted to a medium light roast (I recommend not darker than Agtron 55, and prefer to roast all my samples to a light roast, as this allows the delicacies AND the faults to stand out not be hidden by roasty tastes).
2. Allow the coffee to rest for a minimum of eight hours. I recommend 12-24 hours.
3. Set up coffee cupping table in a well-lit, quiet room. I prefer a round table that can rotate. While five cups per sample is recommended for professional cupping, two cups per sample should be fine for most other circumstances. Include a sample of the green beans, and the roasted coffee, as well as a few cups of clean water. I only cup blind, to prevent “eye-cupping” and bias. Label the coffee name/origin underneath the cup.
4. Measure the coffee beans out, for a standard 250ml cup, I use 15g. I prefer to weigh the ground coffee in the cup as most grinders retain too much coffee. Grind the beans to a setting slightly courser than plunger grind (no more than 15 minutes before adding water). Between each grind, make sure to completely empty the grind chamber, and “flush” with a sample of the new beans.
5. Boil your fresh, filtered water and get it to a point just below boiling point, waiting around 30 seconds (in an ideal world, 93°C). As the kettle boils, you can sniff your coffee and evaluate the fragrance.
6. Begin your stop-watch, pouring water on your coffee in the order you ground them, pouring slowly and saturating all grounds.
7. Wait 3-4 minutes, I prefer a four minute steep time. Now its time to get stuck in with what we call “breaking the crust”. In the four minutes, a thick crust of coffee has formed on top of the cup. Get your nose just above this crust, and with your spoon starting at the closest lip of the cup, break the crust and push the grounds away from you, while inhaling the aromas that escape. I like to push this crust back four times, which serves the dual purpose of agitating the coffee. Record the aromas you smell. Clean your spoon between each cup to avoid cross-contamination
8. Skim off all the coffee grounds at the top of the cup using two spoons, scooping

them out and discarding them.

9. I like to let the coffee cool at this point for a few more moments, if you burn your tongue now, your tasting is done for the day. However, the coffee needs to be tasted at various temperatures, as different characteristics come out. Flavour and aftertaste are best observed in the first cupping as the heat enhances their attributes. Acidity, body, and balance are rated next, and sweetness, uniformity, and cleanliness last.
10. Begin tasting the coffee by taking a spoonful and slurping it loudly into your mouth, while inhaling. This coats your mouth, tongue and taste-buds, allowing you to taste the aromatic elements. Most coffee cuppers, due to the amount of coffees cupped, prefer to spit out the coffee into a spittoon once flavours are recorded, but you should also swallow some of the tastings to evaluate the aftertaste.
11. Move around the table, tasting and scoring all the coffees, making sure to clean your spoon between each cup. Then go back and forth to each coffee several times as the coffees cool and note any changes.

While the SCAA Statistics & Standards Committee outline an exact set of specifications for cupping, the most important thing is consistency and standardisation between your cups, ensuring the only variable is the coffee itself. The table below shows the SCAA specifications:

While all these rules and specifications are important, I cup using three main rules:

1. Cup blind (to avoid bias and pre-conceived ideas about the coffees)
2. Cup consistent (if you prefer 16g per 250ml cup that's fine, but make sure all cups have the same coffee, and no other differing variables)
3. Cup quiet (its best to keep silent until everyone has finished cupping, as the mind is incredibly susceptible to suggestion. Once complete, you can compare, argue, and discuss your cupping notes. Calibrating with colleagues is important in a lab environment.

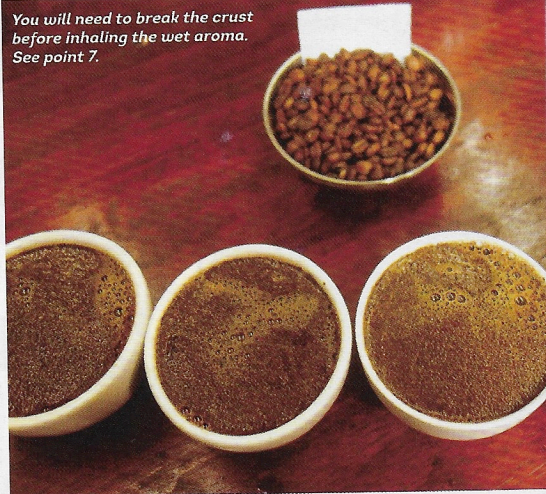
Now you have all the tools you need to try this at home! So if you want to expand your experience in coffee why not organise a cupping with a couple friends and prepare for your taste buds to be thrilled with the amazing flavours from across the coffee growing world. ☺

SPECIFICATION	SCAA STANDARD
Cupping Vessel	Tempered Glass/Ceramic. 207 ml to 266 ml, with a top diameter of between (76 - 89 mm)
Roast Level	Gourmet:63 Commerical:48 (Agtron level)
Roast Time	Min 8minutes, Max 12 minutes
Roast Rest time	Roasted within 24 hours, cupped after minimum of 8 hours
Water Amount	8.25g /150ml water
Water TDS	100-250 TDS
Water Temp	93 ° c
Grind Size	Slightly coarser than drip brewing, with 70% to 75% of the particles passing through a U.S. Standard size 20 mesh sieve.
Steep Time	3-5minutes

Quality Scale			
6.00 - Good	7.00 - Very Good	8.00 - Excellent	9.00 - Outstanding
6.25	7.25	8.25	9.25
6.5	7.5	8.5	9.5
6.75	7.75	8.75	9.75

Total Score Quality Classification		
90 - 100	Outstanding	Speciality
85 - 89.99	Excellent	
80 - 84.99	Very Good	
< 80.0	Below Speciality Quality	Not Speciality

You will need to break the crust before inhaling the wet aroma. See point 7.



The Pinnacle of Coffee Cupping: Terms to know

Q-Graders:

Professional coffee cuppers, known as Q-graders, have completed the Coffee Quality Institutes set of 22 exams, making them one of 3500 Q-Graders around the world. The qualification allows one to identify and officially score quality coffees and brings them to market through a credible and verifiable system. The Q-system includes both a Q-Arabica and Q-Robusta certification, which is valid for 36 months before recalibration is required.

Cup of Excellence:

Cup of Excellence (COE), run by the Alliance for Coffee Excellence, is the most prestigious competition and award for high quality coffees. This programme runs in ten coffee producing countries, with the top awarded coffees being cupped over 120 times by certified Q-Graders. Coffees must score above 85 to qualify for the online auction, with farmers receiving record prices for their coffees. Up to 900 coffees are cupped by a national jury before only 2-3% make it through to the international panel. When the coffee makes that auction, it means that the farmer will be rewarded financially, promoting quality above all. The price paid at the is auction is many times higher than any other avenue the farmer has access too. Cup of Excellence is the best of the best for that year from that country. It is also a tool to reward the hard work of the farmer by paying a much higher price.