

Coffee Roasting Workshop



Guide to Cupping Coffee

Cupping, or cup-testing, was developed as a means of consistently and impartially evaluating a coffee. The process, while it involves several distinct steps, is simple, especially if you take the time to acquaint yourself with the vocabulary required to describe the flavour and aromatic sensations of coffee.

Learning how to cup will enable you to develop your own repertoire of great coffees, and to find the best coffee for your dollar. It is also necessary in order to discover the major characteristics of certain regions or plantations, so you can create and analyze blends.

- 1. Organize yourself.* Line up 4 sets of 4 cups, one set per taster, within close proximity of a sink. Access to a sink is important because tasting requires the spitting out of the coffee and the frequent rinsing of your spoon. Even the most avid coffee addict will flame out in a mass of caffeine-laden smoke and dust if a pittoon, or at least a kitchen sink, is not employed.
- 2. Measure and grind* a tablespoon of beans for each person tasting, and finely grind them to the coarseness of cornmeal. Then take a teaspoon of the ground coffee and place it in the bottom of a cup. Repeat for each coffee you are tasting, making sure to wipe the grinder clean after each one. Note on a card which coffee is being tasted, and place it beneath your cups. (To be truly professional about your tastings you should weight the coffee rather than measuring it, as different coffees have different densities and therefore will take up more or less volume. If you choose to invest in a scale you should measure out 7.25 grams - the weight of a dime and a nickel - of whole-bean coffee.)
- 3. Boil the water.* The water should be cold and allowed to run for a few seconds before filling the kettle, since water coming from the hot water tap or the water that comes immediately from the spout is sure to be unaerated. The water should also be free of foreign odours and tastes.

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4. *Fill each cup* with the boiling water, in the order you will be tasting, just below the rim. On a notepad write down the names of the coffees in the order in which they are poured.
5. *Breaking the crust.* After allowing the coffees to cool for a minute or two, place your nose close to the cup, and, with the edge of the spoon, gently break the crust of grounds that has formed on the surface. (It's better to get a little coffee on your nose than to miss anything at this point) "Breaking the crust" is considered one of the most important steps of tasting coffee, as it is your first impression of the coffee's full aroma

Concentrate on keeping your impressions limited to the first couple of sniffs, since smelling for longer amounts of time will overwhelm your olfactory senses and make it impossible to get an accurate impression. Record your aromatic impressions, keeping the terms as precise as possible. After noting the characteristic aroma of each cup, giving the spoon a rinse after each, you may return to one you particularly liked, but at this point refrain from stirring, since the grounds are in the process of settling, and each cup should be brewed at the same strength.

6. *Slurp and spray.* When the coffees have cooled to a point at which they can be tasted without scalding the tongue, or slightly hotter than lukewarm, taste the coffee by dipping your spoon in it and slurping the coffee from the spoon's edge. When you make this noise you should be spraying the inside of your mouth with the coffee. The purpose of this is twofold: you are covering the entire tongue with the liquid so that each part can assess the tastes, and you are reaching the back of the mouth, which allows the nasal passages to assess the aroma again.

Different parts of the tongue will bring you different taste sensations: the back of the tongue tells you about the bitterness or acidity of the coffee; the sides of the tongue are sensitive to any staleness; and the tip of the tongue will note any specific flavours. The true taste analysis will come with the second slurping of the coffee, as the first generally clears your palate of the flavour of the previous coffee.

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Acidity, Flavour and Body

You should be paying close attention to these three qualities: acidity, flavour and body.

Acidity is, in fine coffee, a pleasant sharpness. It is what adds life to the cup, accenting the characteristic flavour of a particular coffee. While a coffee low in acidity can result in a pleasant-tasting "mellow", or "soft" cup of coffee, the complete lack of acidity will leave the coffee tasting flat, or "dead", and will produce a lifeless cup.

Flavour is the perception of the aromatic elements once the coffee is in the mouth, but in some cases it is also used to convey any specific taste that is present in the coffee, such as "nutty", "spicy" or "musty."

Body is the impression of weight and texture that coffee leaves in the mouth, which leads it to be described in terms such as "rough" or "watery." Body is easiest to analyze in a full-strength brew, and should be assessed by working the coffee tactilely through the mouth.

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The Discipline of Coffee

Certain characteristics are easy to distinguish even for the beginning taster, such as the difference between natural and washed coffees, and between high-grown and low-grown coffees. You will notice after directly comparing coffees that relatively small differences will be brought out in the cup. However, in order to fully utilize the cupping experience, and to even approach your own definition of the perfect cup of coffee, you need a vocabulary that describes these differences. It is therefore essential that you acquaint yourself with a standard glossary of terms before setting out to cup.

FLAVOUR

The experience of aromatics once the coffee is in the mouth.

<i>Aroma</i>	The sensation of the gases released from brewed coffee; may be described as ranging from fruity to herby.
<i>Bouquet</i>	The total aromatic profile, resulting from compounds in the fragrance, aroma, and aftertaste.
<i>Caramelly</i>	A common aromatic sensation; reminiscent of candy or syrup
<i>Carbony</i>	A common aromatic sensation in dark-roasted coffees, reminiscent of a burnt substance.
<i>Chocolaty</i>	A common aromatic sensation in a brew's aftertaste, reminiscent of unsweetened chocolate or vanilla
<i>Dirty</i>	An unclean smell or taste that can be specific, such as sourness or mustiness, or a more generalized taint reminiscent of dirt.
<i>Fruity</i>	An aromatic sensation reminiscent of citrus fruits or berries.

The Discipline of Coffee (Continued)

A C I D I T Y

A measure of the acid content of the liquid; in fine coffees acidity results in a pleasant sharpness. Not to be associated with the genuinely sour taste of inferior coffees.

<i>Aftertaste</i>	The sensation of brewed coffee vapours released after swallowing. Characteristics will range from carbony to chocolaty, spicy to turpeny.
<i>Bitter</i>	Perceived by the back of the tongue and characterized by solutions of quinine, caffeine, and other alkaloids; usually caused by over-roasting.
<i>Sour</i>	Related to over-acidity; a sharp, biting flavour, often from under-ripe beans.
<i>Grassy</i>	Used to describe an odour and/or taste in some coffees that is reminiscent of a freshly mown lawn, with an accompanying astringency like that of green grass.
<i>Wild</i>	A gamey flavour often associated with Ethiopian coffees
<i>Winey</i>	Reminiscent of a well-matured red wine; characterized by a full bodied, smooth coffee. Often found in Kenyan and Yemeni coffees.

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The Discipline of Coffee (Continued)

B O D Y

Associated with mouthfeel and texture, this should be a strong, full, pleasant characteristic.

Muddy

A dull indistinct, and thickish flavour that can be caused by the grounds being agitated.

Rioy

A somewhat grainy or starchy taste, like potato soup in texture.

Thin

Related to under-brewing, resulting in a coffee lacking in any acidity; also referred to as lifeless.

Watery

Caused by the wrong water-to-coffee ratio, which results in the low level of oils in the coffee.