

Coffee Cupping Basics from Coffee Reserve

Coffee Reserve's own Coffee Guru, John Gozbekian, put his 33 years of industry experience to work recently at the Specialty Coffee Association's 22nd annual exposition in Anaheim, CA, leading a sold-out cupping workshop. John has been designated as a "Super Taster" by the association, and is a Certified "Q" Cupper. Cupping plays a huge role at Coffee Reserve Brands, allowing the company to expertly evaluate the finest coffees from around the world.

So, what is cupping? Is it an art, a science, or both? In a nutshell, cupping is a technique used to evaluate the quality of coffee including aroma and flavor.

The cupping table consists of a sample sets of 3-10 glass or porcelain cups containing freshly ground coffee, a cup containing the cupping spoons, and a cups of hot rinse water. Cupping sessions are set up with samples made from freshly roasted and ground coffee, ground at a drip coffee size. The coffee is roasted lightly, because flavors and aromas are burned off in the darker roasting process. All of the coffees being evaluated are roasted similarly for even comparison. Each cup contains an exact weight of beans, not grounds. This allows for the one "bad" bean to stand out, like a bad apple in the barrel. Each cup of beans is then ground individually.

Initially, the dry ground coffee is smelled to evaluate the fragrance. Then, near boiling filtered water is added to the grounds and to the cup containing the spoons so the spoons are the same temperature as the coffee cups. At this point, the wet grounds, or aroma, are evaluated by sniffing the crust or cap of wet grounds. Next, the aroma of the wet grounds are evaluated while "breaking" the crust by pushing a special cupping spoon into the grounds and then gently stirring the coffee and sniffing, all at the same time. Moving from cup to cup and sample to sample, rinsing the spoon in between each evaluation. The floating grounds and foam are skimmed and cleaned from the surface.

Next comes the actual tasting of the coffee samples by "slurping" or aspirating the coffee in a very animated and loud fashion. Slurping sprays all of the palate, covering taste buds that perceive sweet, salt, acid, bitter and "umami" a savory note. Most importantly about slurping is that air that mixes with the coffee is forced "retro-nasally" into the olfactory bulb of the nose where we perceive nuances of all food and drink. Taste elements that are evaluated include body, flavor, acidity, sweetness, aftertaste, and also consistency within the sample. Coffee is spit out to avoid being over caffeinated. The samples are cupped as they cool because taste changes at different temperatures.

By performing side-by-side evaluations in a cupping lab, it's possible to determine subtle differences in coffees from different growers or regions. Experienced cuppers like John build a knowledge base of various elements of taste that become the foundation against which they can evaluate new coffees.

If you are just starting out with cupping, try first to determine differences between growing regions - how does a Guatemalan coffee differ from Ethiopian? What are the characteristics that are consistent among all Nicaraguan coffees? The more coffees you taste, the more you will experience the subtle differences between different origins and eventually, different growers. If you can attend a cupping with experienced cuppers, by all means, do! The skill of cupping centers on developing your individual palate while learning from the others in the group.

About the Author

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