

Specialty-Grade

There are two commercially-grown species of coffee: Arabica and Canephora (a.k.a. Robusta). Arabica accounts for 75 to 80 percent of all coffee production and 100 percent of all specialty-grade coffee. Robusta accounts for about 20 percent of coffee production. These two species can be sub-divided into many sub-species known as cultivars or varieties. (See http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_coffee_varieties for further information.)



Production-grade coffee is generally grown in full sun, amped up with fertilizer to maximize production. It is then mechanically or hand strip-harvested (over-ripe fruit along with ripe and green fruit), again with maximum production in mind. It is then, generally, mixed with other production-grade coffees from all over the world for economic reasons. The result is an inferior product that is less expensive, but often bitter and bland; a caffeinate for the masses.

Specialty-grade coffee, on the other hand, is generally shade-grown so that it develops more slowly, allowing for sweeter and more flavorful fruit (with the added bonus of more tree canopies for birds). It is harvested by hand, picking only the ripe fruit and leaving the unripe fruit to ripen for later harvest. It is sorted for defects, and the sub-standard cherries are either discarded or sold as production-grade.



Specialty-grade coffee accounts for only 5 to 10 percent of the world's production. (See <http://www.scaa.org/?page=resources&d=what-is-specialty-coffee>) for a better explanation.)

For more information about specialty-grade coffee, please see the article by Don Holly of the Specialty Coffee Association of America (SCAA) reprinted below:

“Definition of Specialty Coffee”

The Definition of Specialty Coffee

by Don Holly, Administrative Director, SCAA

*My understanding of the origin of the term “specialty coffee” is that it was first coined by Erna Knutsen, of Knutsen Coffee Ltd., in a speech to the delegates of an international coffee conference in Montreuil, France, in 1978. In essence, the concept was quite simple: special geographic microclimates produce beans with unique flavor profiles, which she referred to as “specialty coffees.” Underlying this idea of coffee appellations, was the fundamental premise that **specialty coffee beans would always be well prepared, freshly roasted, and properly brewed.** This was the craft of the specialty coffee industry that had been slowly evolving during the twenty-year period preceding her speech. The Specialty Coffee Association of America (SCAA) continues to define specialty in this context. Our job is to continue to promote this definition through the actions of our membership.*

The definition of specialty coffee should begin at the origin of coffee, the planting of a particular varietal into a particular growing region of the world. Some varieties of Arabica are clearly capable of producing specialty coffee. There are others that probably never will. The traditional cultivars of typica and bourbon, and the more recent variety of catuai, and other closely related varieties, are the most obvious producers of specialty coffees. Strains with robusta in their heritage always seem to fall far short in flavor profile. But the definition cannot stop there. A poorly grown, harvested or processed typica or bourbon can still be awful in the cup. The concept of specialty must include the care given to the plant through harvest and preparation for export. Likewise, there are regions that have proven their ability to grow great coffees due to altitude, latitude, soil and other attributes. Other regions have not demonstrated such ability.

The Green Coffee Classification Chart produced by SCAA Executive Director, Ted Lingle, years ago clearly defines specialty coffee in the green bean phase: a coffee that has no defects and has a distinctive character in the cup. The grade just below specialty, labeled as “premium,” helps to clarify the issue even further. The premium grade also has no primary defects, but does not necessarily evidence distinctive character. This clarification, more than any other, helps start the definition for specialty on the right note. It is

not only that the coffee doesn't taste bad; to be considered specialty it must be notably good.

The next phase is roasting, and here is where there is a lot of opportunity in our industry to continually define specialty. The SCAA Roast Color Classification System developed with noted industry scientist Carl Staub gave us a valuable measure for controlling roast development. Still, every coffee in combination with every roaster has a potential to express itself in a way that will be most satisfying for every customer. Bringing out a coffee's distinctive character is the roaster's challenge and if they come close to succeeding then it is still specialty if it started out in the green form as specialty. A roaster cannot take a coffee beyond the potential it contained when it came off the tree and was processed; but they can certainly fail to bring it close.

In roasted coffee, most agree freshness is part of the definition for specialty. The consensus breaks down in attempting to develop guidelines for freshness. At SCAA, we are concerned that there are no established technical standards for evaluating this facet of coffee quality. While our Retail Roaster members focus on the issue of time-maintaining a 3 to 7 day window is optimum for best results-many of our Wholesale Roaster members contend that today's packaging technology greatly expands this period of time into weeks or even months. Beyond the issue of "who is right" in this debate lies the more compelling question of "how do we decide." In order to find consensus on the first question, we have to reach agreement on the second. It is true that good coffee, well-roasted, and packaged in conditions that prevent oxidation, will brew up a flavorful cup of coffee. The scientific question is whether the packaging can retain the aromatic properties of the coffee that helped make it "special". My experience as a Retail Roaster suggests that "while the tongue may tell, only the nose knows for certain." Therefore, if the coffee is not highly aromatic then it no longer deserves to be called "specialty." The important job for SCAA is to quantify this aspect of quality into a good technical standard. This won't be an easy task.

Then there is the brewing phase. There are many ways in which you can extract the most flavorful soluble materials of roasted coffee into water, and they are best-organized into methods of how the water moves. Steeping methods like the French Press give a different flavor of beverage than drip methods or espresso, even when you use the same coffee. All are capable of brewing beverages that can qualify as specialty coffee, but only if done correctly. The right recipe of coffee to water, the right grind suited to the method and the coffee's physical characteristics, the proper water temperature and contact time, a good preparation of the coffee "bed" or "cake" are all fundamentals that must be satisfied to produce a specialty cup of coffee. For example, I believe that it takes at least 100 hours, or the preparation of at least 1,000 shots of espresso, under demanding tutelage, before anyone should consider themselves anything more than a trainee-barista. It takes several hours of trial and testing before any combination of

brewer and grinder is fit to brew a Golden Cup. Unfortunately, many coffee companies do not allocate enough investment in training and quality control to meet the standards for brewing specialty coffee.

There are some great stories and marvelous promotions out there in our industry from people claiming that they have the "best" coffee, and that they work hard to produce specialty coffee. It does take a lot of work to produce specialty, and it is not always tangibly clear (especially to the managing accountants and financial investors) that the customers can tell the difference. There is sometimes a tendency to rely more upon telling a good story and creating a good promotion than putting out all of the effort that is required to offer specialty coffee consistently. But, it is my opinion that those who will succeed in the long term, building a loyal clientele and generating a healthy and sustainable return on investment for their company, are going to be the ones who are spending more attention and resources on training and quality control than they are on marketing. Check the financial statements. If expenditures on advertising and marketing are greater than on training and quality control, what is being sold? I would suggest that it is probably not specialty coffee.

Specialty coffee is, in the end, defined in the cup. It takes many steps to deliver that cup into the customers' hands. Each of those steps can uphold the classification of specialty if quality has been maintained throughout all the preceding steps. Given all of the effort that it takes to produce specialty coffee, and given how pleasurable such a cup can be, we should all jealously guard our definition for it, protect its meaning and credibility, and only use the word specialty when it is worth it.

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