



*the*  
**POINTS**  
**PRINCIPLE**

**TWO PERSPECTIVES  
ON HOW WE  
EVALUATE COFFEE**

THE SPECIALTY COFFEE INDUSTRY is populated with smart, hard-working people—people who are committed to promoting and continually improving coffee quality. But ask them how the industry should go about doing that, and you'll have a lively conversation on your hands. In the following pages, Shawn Steiman and Kenneth Davids engage in one such conversation as they delve into the merits and disadvantages of using the 100-point scale to evaluate coffees.

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PERSPECTIVE 1

# For Coffee Evaluation, Scores Don't Add Up

by  
Shawn Steiman

FOR A GROWING NUMBER of people, drinking coffee is an exercise in deconstructing a complex experience and exploring it on a physical, emotional, social and intellectual level. It is quite challenging, if not impossible, to convey most of those explorations.

There is a problem with how the specialty coffee industry evaluates and rates coffees. Instead of simply describing a coffee, these numbers-based systems call upon the personal preference of the evaluator to assess the coffee. Consequently, a great deal of clarity is lost when communicating about a given coffee; it is very difficult to convey the underlying meaning and structure of "I like this." These systems of evaluation are filled with subjectivity, and the subjectivity diminishes their usefulness. This article discusses this problem. It will seem like a critique. It is. However, my real intent is to start a new dialogue about how we not only dissect a coffee, but also how we talk about it afterward.

## TRANSLATING COFFEE QUALITY

"The classic definition of a connoisseur is someone who can say, 'That's very, very good—and I don't like it,'" coffee consultant Kevin Knox wrote earlier this year in a conversation about natural-processed coffees on [www.jimseven.com](http://www.jimseven.com) (a blog by James Hoffmann, a founder of London's Square Mile Coffee Roasters). Knox alludes to something profound: there are all kinds of coffees available that are notable for different reasons. It is the role of the connoisseur or expert to evaluate those coffees and recognize what makes them valuable. Only then

should the expert explore whether or not that coffee is pleasing to him or her. Experts should be explorers and translators of quality, not the arbiters of quality.

Whether we find something pleasurable or not is very important—and very personal. Our abilities to think and feel uniquely make being human so delightful. However, while we should cherish our own perspectives, we should never forget that no one else will view an experience exactly as we do. Consequently, when we're trying to convey that experience to someone else, we need to remove our subjectivity as much as possible. If we don't, we'll discover that our communication isn't very accurate or efficient.

The crux of the miscommunication is that different people define coffee quality in different ways. For example, not everybody wants acidity in their coffee or fruit descriptors. A high amount of body might be unpleasant for others. So, when an expert who values these traits rates a coffee accordingly, a person with a different definition of quality may be confused and, potentially, in polar disagreement.

We've probably all experienced this miscommunication about coffee. The most poignant examples for me have been the incongruities of preference between coffee-evaluating experts and non-experts. I've engaged with many non-experts (coffee farmers, enthusiasts and average consumers) who don't share the joy, excitement and passion for some 90-plus-rated coffees.

As Nick Cho of Wrecking Ball Coffee Roasters said on that same blog discussion (writing about popular natural processed coffees), "They [consumers] tend to be gracious in their initial feedback, but it's been fairly clear to me that these edgy coffees are perhaps too edgy and that they're as alienating as they are interesting." Experts may rate coffees as being very good, yet consumers might not like them.



The problem doesn't just exist between experts and non-experts, however. Paul Thornton, buyer and roastmaster at Portland, Ore.-based Coffee Bean International, and Shawn Hamilton, roastmaster at Java City Roasters in Sacramento, have evaluated coffees rated as 90-plus by other experts, yet found them unpleasant. In these cases, the communication between experts was broken. The coffees were simplified to a single-number value, which does not have the same meaning for each person.

The wine industry has been facing similar troubles for more than 30 years. In 1978, a wine connoisseur named Robert Parker began publishing 100-point ratings in *The Wine Advocate*. These days, consumers who visit just about any wine shop or warehouse store will encounter what retailers call "shelf talkers": cards posted next to

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bottles to entice customers to buy. These cards are emblazoned with scores from Parker, *Wine Spectator* magazine and many other critics who rate wine.

Lex Alexander—a former executive at Whole Foods and the owner of 3 Cups, a wine, coffee and tea shop in Chapel Hill, N.C.—is critical of the 100-point scale for rating wines. At a wine sampling and discussion at the 2010 Specialty

Coffee Association of America (SCAA) Symposium, Alexander outlined his reservations about wine ratings. He alluded to the 3 Cups September 2007 newsletter, where he wrote, “Telling consumers that a wine is an 86 offers very little information.” While Alexander recognizes the utility of the system, he sees the fallacy all too clearly: “After all, everyone ‘gets’ the 100-point scale,” he notes. “People have different

tastes, but this is lost in the current system.”

## NUMBERS VS. DESCRIPTIONS

Most coffee evaluation and rating is imbued with layers of subjectivity. In other words, the evaluation ends up telling us something of what the evaluator likes or dislikes, not just what the coffee is. Instead, most coffee evaluation should be objective, which leaves it up to the interpreters of that evaluation to decide whether or not they are likely to enjoy the coffee. Coffee evaluation should be about describing the coffee, not the evaluator’s tastes.

There is a place for the subjective evaluation of coffee. It can be useful to know whether an individual personally likes a coffee. In addition, miscommunication about a coffee is less likely to occur when people are calibrated to the evaluator. “If you align yourself with a benchmark coffee that you both like, you are probably safe” or, in other words, calibrated to each other, says Sherri Johns, president of WholeCup Coffee Consulting and a Cup of Excellence judge.

*Coffee Review*, SCAA/Coffee Quality Institute and Cup of Excellence are the three well-recognized coffee evaluation and rating systems in the United States. All are fairly similar in the characteristics they use to define coffee (acidity, body, sweetness, etc.). They all rate these specific characteristics on a numerical scale representing a mixture of intensity and preference (see the evaluating protocols on the respective websites of these organizations to discover wherein lies the subjective assessment). At the end, the numbers are tallied. Coffees with higher numbers are deemed “better.” These “better” coffees are then marketed using these subjective assessments, and miscommunication ensues.

In many ways, the coffee systems have worked well enough. Experts, fairly well calibrated to each other, were the only ones using these systems and interpreting these scores. Thus, miscommunication was minimal. “We

seem to be able to arrive at identifying quality in a variety of subjective, largely aesthetic arenas and embrace those concepts,” wrote SCAA Executive Director Ric Rhinehart, also on Hoffmann’s blog. I imagine that occurrences as described above with Thornton and Hamilton are fairly rare. Still, I expect that these incongruities will increase as more diverse and complex coffees are discovered.

Recently, coffee evaluating, rating and interpreting have left the expert realm. Novices are not only cupping and rating coffees on their own, but they are encouraged to do so by and with roasters. More importantly, experts are using these ratings to market their coffees. Consequently, we have expert ratings (imbued with subjectivity) that are being used to communicate the quality of a coffee with people who are not calibrated to the experts. While *Coffee Review* ratings are the obvious example, Cup of Excellence is no different; winning coffees at Cup of Excellence competitions (which are determined by their total scores) are marketed based on their competition rankings.

Moreover, the novices don’t always appreciate these coffees in the same ways the experts do. Are the consumers wrong because they don’t agree with the experts? Is their preference simply uneducated and misplaced?

No, of course not. One’s experience and preference often will shift over time. This doesn’t make a non-expert’s pleasure any less correct than the expert’s. Thus, for experts to be rating coffees that score high as “better” is misleading and inaccurate. A 93-point coffee is not necessarily better than an 87-point coffee; it is merely different.

So what should be changed? Essentially, all scaling of coffee characteristics should be objective. This means that each characteristic should be measured strictly on its intensity and independent of other characteristics. The lower limit of intensity is “not present” and the upper limit is “very present”—in other words, no coffee is more intense in this characteristic. The best way to think about the objective

evaluation of coffee is to ask, “Given ultimate technical prowess, could a non-human instrument measure this?” Ultimately, the scaling should not include subjective concepts such as “pleasing/displeasing,” “good/bad” or “like/dislike.”

In light of this perspective, let’s examine the flaws in using numbers-based systems to rate specific coffee

characteristics and offer suggestions on how to improve them.

## ACIDITY AND BODY

In the official, published guidelines for assessing these two characteristics, all of the systems mention that measurement

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of these characteristics should include a subjective aspect. Moreover, I suspect most evaluators consider the interaction of these two characteristics when scoring them. That would result in the evaluation of a hybrid sensation that has no known term or concept (may I suggest *bodity*?). If the two characteristics are not evaluated independently, then they aren't being evaluated accurately or meaningfully.

I asked six coffee experts if they agreed with the following statement: "The higher the intensity of 'body' and 'acidity' in a coffee, the better the coffee is." Universally, the answer was "no." I'm sure most, if not all, coffee drinkers would agree with those experts; I certainly do. Yet, all of the rating systems are designed so that high scorings of these characteristics yield a higher single-point rating and, consequently, a "better" coffee. Thus, a coffee with a high body and low acidity (or vice versa) will be penalized.

Acidity and body are important and essential characteristics of a coffee. Their evaluation should be clear and unbiased. Thus, these two characteristics should be evaluated independently of each other. Also, they should be measured only on intensity.

## SWEETNESS

Sweetness is relatively new to coffee evaluation, and it has quickly gained prominence as a characteristic. However, it isn't always afforded the same respect that other characteristics like body and acidity receive; it is sometimes merely marked present/absent. In my opinion, anything like sweetness that is deemed to be a valuable characteristic should be scored on intensity.

I think many consumers struggle with the concept of sweetness in coffee. After all, many of them are used to adding spoonfuls of sweetener to their brews. By discussing sweetness on an intensity scale, coffee evaluators have a great medium by which to help wean consumers off sweeteners.

## AFTERTASTE

I have not met a coffee evaluator who rates aftertaste objectively. This is understandable, as nobody seems to value objective measures of aftertaste, which is

the intensity of coffee-ness or duration of the experience after expectoration/swallowing. Thus, the scoring is always impacted by the evaluator's perception of the characteristic. I encourage using the intensity of coffee-ness when assessing aftertaste. Evaluators can then further dissect the experience of the aftertaste by using specific descriptors.

## BALANCE

I like the concept of balance. It represents the harmony of all the components occurring in a coffee. Unfortunately, the assessment of balance, as far as I can tell, is impossible to measure objectively.



Each evaluator must interpret it using their personal sensory response. How is a person to know if he or she concurs with the evaluator's sense of balance? As with music, one particular combination isn't ideal for every person. Thus, without a means of objectifying it, I encourage its removal from scoring.

## OVERALL

This characteristic is unabashedly and shamelessly subjective. As Kenneth Davids of *Coffee Review* explains, "The juror cannot pretend to hide behind real or pretended objectivity; the juror has to justify his or her position, so in that sense this category is a valuable summing-up indicator in terms of dialogue and commitment." There is value in an evaluator's personal opinion, but only if the interpreter is calibrated to the evaluator. With evaluations occurring by many people of different skill levels at different events for different reasons, it is not possible to

calibrate to a given evaluator or score. In this regard, *Coffee Review* is unique as it uses known evaluators and clearly states that this characteristic is a personal assessment. Interpreters using *Coffee Review* ratings can then easily calibrate to its scale.

## DESCRIPTORS

While the characteristics that are used to define coffee are worthwhile and need to be objectively assessed, they cannot entirely describe any given brew. Most coffees cannot be adequately described without the elucidation of experiences that fall outside the realm of those characteristics. Evaluators are obligated to mention these extra nuances or note their absence. By doing so, some of the important information encoded in subjective responses can be conveyed without biasing the interpreter.

The current coffee scoring systems don't "allow the cupper sufficiently to utilize cupping parameters (flavor attributes) in the analysis of flavor profiles," notes Willem Boot of Boot Coffee Consulting and Training. Boot recognizes the need to describe the coffees more accurately by using descriptors, not just characteristics. Unfortunately, the current scoring systems aren't very well designed to incorporate them. Boot and Davids advocate for scoring sheets that include lists of potential descriptors matched to each characteristic. Instead of rating the descriptors on intensity, they are assessed as present/absent. This permits the evaluator to better describe the coffee without assigning a value judgment.

I like this solution, though evaluators may become restricted to the printed terms on the page and fail to identify terms or experiences not on the sheet. However, given proper instruction and encouragement, evaluators would become capable of using the terms as a guide, instead of a comprehensive list. The inner rings of the coffee flavor wheel would be useful in building such skeleton lists.

Even if a scoring system doesn't explicitly offer lists of descriptors, the system must invite or encourage their use. Each characteristic must have a space for filling in identified descriptors.

As an example, Thornton suggested that "the quality of acidity should be noted as the

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type of acidity”—for example, citric, malic or phosphoric. While this is challenging, even to experts, it has merit. However, just defining the type of acid could be limiting. The acidity, if possible, should be related to a more familiar source (such as lemon, lime or berry) to better describe the experience of the acidity. Alternatively, that acid-related flavor could be listed with the “flavor” characteristic.

If the same strategy is applied to aftertaste, then we can combine an

objective measure of aftertaste with a description of it, marking the presence or absence of various components. All of a sudden, aftertaste is not just the intensity of the coffee-ness but a complex amalgamation of experiences, all neatly listed.

The difficulty with putting so much focus on descriptors is that they are more difficult to teach to evaluators; you can’t teach every possible organoleptic sensation. Moreover, it doesn’t take much cultural difference for experiences and vocabulary to differ. Lastly, how would one deal with situations where some evaluators detect a descriptor and others do not?

The solution has two parts. First, include a descriptor in a rating only if a pre-determined percentage of evaluators have listed it. Second, create and use lists of similar terms considered to be identical. For example, I’ve seen dark-roasted coffees described as dark, burnt, char, toasted, woody and charcoal. For the most part, these words all address the same concept and could all be represented (arbitrarily)

by “char.” Pick a term to stand as the master equivalent and score it each time an allowable synonym appears.

## GENERAL OBSERVATIONS

Many evaluators recognize the failure of some numbers-based systems to fairly evaluate certain coffees. Davids says, “The current Cup of Excellence and SCAA forms are built around a single style of coffee: pure of taints, high-grown and acidic. The desirable Sumatra type and fruity naturals with their taint-driven ambiguities are very hard to score with clarity and consistency.” By moving away from scoring and toward more objective analysis, this problem is eliminated. No coffee, no matter what its origin or process, would be penalized. Instead, the coffee would be accurately described and the interpreters will have to decide whether they like it or not.

An additional step could be to forgo the idea of a single, all-purpose rating

form. Many companies and individuals already modify current evaluation sheets or create novel ones. Hamilton of Java City suggests that several forms should be designed by the coffee industry to enhance the utility and efficiency of coffee evaluation. He suggests different evaluation forms for green coffee, production roasts and competitions. Having multiple standardized forms could minimize disparity between evaluators and improve communication within the industry. In addition, a new set of standardized forms could help promote the elimination of subjectivity from coffee evaluation.

There is great beauty in the single-point rating system. It is elegant and simple to calculate a number on a 100-point scale that conveys a sense of a coffee and then share it with others. But, by removing the subjectivity from a scoring system and the final determination that one coffee is inherently better than another, a 100-point scale

loses meaning. By looking at each coffee objectively, one could not simply add up the intensities, scale it to 100, and derive meaningful information.

Eliminating the 100-point system would also necessitate replacing the 80-point cut-off for non-specialty/specialty coffees. An objective system can handle this by separating coffees based on what is present or absent. For instance, coffees exhibiting the descriptor “week-old gym socks” could be considered non-specialty. I suspect it wouldn’t be too difficult to establish a short list of criteria that separate commercial from specialty coffees.

Idealistically, I’d like to think we could do without a scorecard for evaluating coffee. But realistically, this is impossible at this stage in the game. One can’t have a competition without a winner, and you can’t devote half a label to detailing every last characteristic and descriptor of the coffee.

I don’t profess to have all the answers. Many people feel that the current scoring systems are lacking in their ability to

convey important information about a coffee effectively and accurately. Scoring and ratings systems are just tools. We design them to help us record, analyze and transfer information. It is time to revisit our methodology and redesign our tools so that coffee experts transfer accurate and practical information to both experts and non-experts. As our industry changes, we should adapt our tools appropriately, as needed.

**SHAWN STEIMAN**, Ph.D., is a coffee scientist and the owner of Coffea Consulting. He also wrote *The Hawai'i Coffee Book: A Gourmet's Guide from Kona to Kaua'i*. He welcomes discussion about this article and other topics at [steiman@coffeaconsulting.com](mailto:steiman@coffeaconsulting.com).

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PERSPECTIVE 2

The 100-Point Rating Paradox  
by Kenneth Davids

**FOURTEEN YEARS AGO** *Coffee Review* started reviewing coffees for consumers and the trade using a 100-point scale. Such ratings were widely in use at the time for wines and cigars, but no one had used them before for coffee. At first we took some flak from insiders, but not much. The industry seemed ready for the idea, even enthusiastic about it, and today 100-point ratings saturate specialty coffee communication, particularly within the trade, where they play a role everywhere from green coffee competitions to green dealer reports.

Nevertheless, I harbored some misgivings about the 100-point system from the day I first used it, and I still harbor some. But ultimately I think 100-point-rating systems have exerted a tremendously positive influence on the coffee industry.

NUMBERS AS LANGUAGE

The drawback of 100-point systems, of course, is that they use a language we associate with objective measurement—numbers—to embody judgments that clearly are neither objective nor universal, but are deeply influenced by all the characteristics that make us human and hence both the same and different from one another—our culture, our personal histories, our sensory associations, our training, our own peculiar body chemistries, even the number of bumps on our tongues.

There is no such thing as an objective sensory reading, by the way. What the more scientific among us are looking for are reliable, repeatable sensory readings, readings that are reasonably the same time after time given the same set of sensory stimuli. But the associative structure that generates those readings can never be considered objective. I don't want to go there, but even machines are not objective, since they only measure what humans want them to measure, and the only meanings they generate are the meanings humans assign to their measurements.

Contrasted to the language of numbers, the language of the written word makes much less pretense to objectivity. When cuppers use text to elaborate and support ratings, I suspect readers understand that they are reading relative judgments that issue from actual human beings rather than from machines. Text also allows judgments to be nuanced, giving at least a little culture, flesh and history back to the naked numbers of a rating.

Nevertheless, the number remains, towering over the fine print, tyrannical in its pretense to certainty, dominating first impressions. And in many other contexts—green coffee competitions, for example—there may be no fine print at all to nuance ratings: we get nothing but names and numbers, monumental and unassailable.

THE EXPEDIENT ARGUMENT FOR 100-POINT RATINGS

How do we reconcile the pretense to universality and objectivity implied by a ratings number with its obvious origin in human relativity and subjectivity?

I think there is a sound philosophical basis on which to reconcile this apparent contradiction; more on that later. But first we might ask: Why bother with 100-point ratings for coffee in the first place? From an expedient perspective, what is their usefulness?

Very broadly, they are simpler and more dramatic than words.

In our culture, a ratings system dignifies fine coffee. A ratings system says to consumers that coffee is not just a matter of regular vs. decaf, but a hundred degrees in between. Read the fine print for the details, perhaps, but the number makes the main point—that there are subtle but important differences, worthy of careful scrutiny, that separate one “regular” coffee from another.

Producers in particular have benefited from the discriminations introduced by

ratings systems. Certainly competitions, reviews and the Q-system have played a crucial role in calling attention to individual producers or producer groups who consistently produce outstanding coffees. And when coffees from heretofore obscure origins soar with consistently high ratings, their success focuses awareness on entire regions or countries that may have been overlooked by the traditional hierarchies and menus of specialty coffee.

In other words, ratings and the blind tastings that generate them are a means through which quality and distinction can be recognized on the basis of merit rather than on the strength of tradition, public relations firms, or the sheer luck of attracting the attention of journalists more interested in the drama of a story than in the distinction of a beverage.

Ratings also introduce the tension and drama of competition into the coffee arena, and competition, like it or not, is a prime driver of engagement and respect in contemporary American culture—not to mention a valuable prod to excellence.

Ratings can suddenly change the entire specialty coffee game. Think of the way unprecedented high ratings (and subsequent high prices) for the Esmeralda geisha electrified the industry by decisively proving that, despite the assumptions of many agronomists and commodity coffee people, cultivar *does* count in creating sensory distinction and value; in fact, cultivar can be an overwhelmingly significant difference-maker in the cup and in the market. The geisha breakthrough has

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set off a worldwide scramble among producers and researchers to determine whether other hidden gems exist among the world's coffee stock and fundamentally changed the way we look at the high end of the coffee industry. And this game-changer was not owing to the work of researchers or agronomists; rather it was the work of a smart, observant grower who was offered an opportunity for recognition by an impartial panel of experts reporting their findings using a 100-point scale.

A ratings number also is a way to synthesize responses of a larger group of people—like a green coffee jury—while testing the consistency and reliability of those responses. At the same time it is a way of provoking dialogue and exchange within the responding group. If it is just a question of your response vs. mine, no problem, we nod and move on. But if we both need to settle on a collective judgment embodied as starkly as it is in a number, we may find ourselves usefully testing one another's perceptions and conclusions.

Finally, and I need to tread gingerly with this one, I think ratings help consumers with a short attention span find their way through the rich but confusing maze of names and claims spawned by the specialty coffee industry. True, ratings are only a starting point on what is hopefully a journey of discovery on the part of consumers, but many consumers who care about our beverage find it a very valuable starting point.

### A WAY OUT OF THE SUBJECTIVITY/OBJECTIVITY BIND

These are all justifications for 100-point ratings system based on expediency, you may object. They are not soundly based on "science." They're not even based on astral charts or I-Ching

diagrams. Just a bunch of opinionated dudes and dudettes slurping, spitting and proclaiming.

As I suggested earlier, I think there is a way out of the subjectivity/objectivity dilemma that is philosophically honorable yet opens the way to legitimate evaluation of coffee. A couple of decades ago in the world of literary theory, a scholar named Stanley Fish popularized the following set of ideas, translated here into my own understanding. (Be patient with this; I believe it's an argument worth following.) Fish starts with the contention that everyone reads a piece of literature differently; in fact, there are as many different versions of Mark Twain's famous novel *Huckleberry Finn*, for example, as there are people who have read



the book. Not only that, but there is a *new* version of *Huckleberry Finn* created every instance the same individual reads the book again. Extending that point, there are as many different versions of the Beatles' song "Let It Be" as there are people who have listened to it and moments when they listened to it, since different occasions always change our perception. The version we listened to half-drunk at a party will be different from the version we listen to when sober doing

the dishes two weeks later, even if the artist and the recording are exactly the same. Our emotions, focus, body chemistry, and a lot of other things were different at the party than while doing the dishes.

Applying this idea to coffee, one could therefore argue that there are as many versions of a given coffee as there are people who have tasted it and moments when they have tasted it. All is relative, from person to person and even from moment to moment.

Nevertheless, Fish's argument continues, there exist in societies "interpretive communities" that together use similar language and make similar assumptions about phenomena their communities define as related or the same. Literary critics, for example, are all members of a similar interpretative community, and although

their specific interpretations of *Huckleberry Finn* may be different, sometimes quite different, they all operate inside a broad set of basic assumptions that are accepted as "true" by all of them. Hence when they read *Huckleberry Finn* their experiences of the book overlap sufficiently so they can argue about it as though they really were all actually reading the same book at the same moment in the same state of mind.

### A GLOBAL INTERPRETIVE COMMUNITY

Similarly, a dominant global community of interpretation exists around coffee, and it is this dominant global community of interpretation and its shared assumptions that could lead us to accept the validity of a 100-point rating of a given batch of coffee as a legitimate act of evaluation and communication. Other communities of interpretation for coffee exist that make somewhat different assumptions about coffee using somewhat different languages (those who buy rio-y coffees for blends in the Middle East and Central Europe, for example, or Europeans who enjoy espresso blends based on fermented natural robustas). However, these communities don't make much fuss about their assumptions and tend to keep their heads down, busy producing coffees the consumer members of their communities enjoy while not rocking the boat of the dominant group of coffee experts. (The dominant community of coffee experts I am describing is of course a global community, including coffee professionals from all over the world, with a particularly rich representation from Latin American coffee-producing countries.)

What are the criteria for excellence applied by this community of expert tasters?

- Acidity is fundamentally good, so long as it is not harsh, overbearing or excessively astringent.

- Smoothly viscous or lightly syrupy/silky mouthfeel is better than thin, watery or silty mouthfeel.
- Aromatic and flavor notes that are complex and intense are better than those that are simple or faded.
- Given that coffee is an inherently bitter beverage, natural sweetness is good, whereas too much bitterness is bad.
- Aromas and flavors that develop naturally from the coffee bean itself, like flowers, fruit, citrus, honey, molasses and chocolate are better than flavors that come from mistakes made during fruit removal and drying, like fermented fruit, mustiness or moldiness, or rotten or medicinal flavors.
- A long, sweet, flavor-saturated aftertaste is better than a short, fast-fading, astringent or aromatically empty aftertaste.

This set of assumptions and the interpretive community around them existed long before anyone proposed 100-point ratings systems. The recent development of training/credentialing programs referencing the 100-point system, like the Coffee Quality Institute's Q-cupper program, simply institutionalize and promulgate broad assumptions long shared by the dominant interpretive coffee community.

### THE INTERPRETIVE COMMUNITY AND CONSUMERS

A crucial question arises next: To what degree do consumers share the assumptions of this interpretive community?

In large part, *Coffee Review's* mission is educating consumers about fine coffee, and a major component of that education, to put it bluntly, is getting consumers to taste coffees in the same way the expert members of the coffee interpretive community do; in other words, encouraging them to appreciate and apply the criteria for coffee excellence listed earlier. I would argue, based

*continued on page 34*

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on feedback at consumer presentations, formal consumer studies and conversations with coffee enthusiasts, that consumers share most of these “expert” criteria, though with a couple of significant divergences.

The first and often most obvious divergence of preference between the expert community and many consumers is the issue of acidity. Some consumers not only do not like highly acidic coffees, but their bodies don't like them either. The second area of divergence has to do with the greater degree of tolerance among some consumers for the flavor impact of certain taints. The current fad for big-fruit, sweetly fermented naturals is not the result of a plot by wild-eyed third-wavers to undermine the integrity of the international expert community. In fact, a lot of consumers like big-fruit naturals; they like them very much.

### THE INTERPRETIVE COMMUNITY AND SENSORY EXCEPTIONS

Interestingly, both of these exceptions to the “rules for fine coffee” listed earlier are also in play within the larger coffee interpretive community and are the subject of often unacknowledged internal wrestling. For example, when a big-fruit, sweetly fermenty natural hits the finals at an international green coffee competition, a struggle typically ensues between those who categorically reject any coffee embodying even a hint of ferment and those cautiously sympathetic to the sensory excitement of the type. The acidity issue could be seen as reflected in the struggle between those who refuse to take robusta coffees seriously and those few who understand that the low-acid, subtle nut-and-cocoa character of a fine washed robusta potentially has major appeal to many consumers.

Here a component of the institutionalized wing of the expert community has acknowledged the issue, albeit in the context of supporting economic opportunity for robusta producers. Ted Lingle, CQI's executive director, recently led an effort that concluded in the development of a cupping form specifically designed to evaluate fine robustas and differentiate them from their not-so-fine brethren as a first step in building a differentiated market for this heretofore disregarded segment of the industry.

### THE PROMISE AND DANGERS OF DISCIPLINE

The effort to create a new path to market for premium coffees by instituting the Q-cupping training and scoring system is to me an extraordinary and visionary undertaking. And certainly one can hardly imagine this undertaking without the simple, dramatic and universally understood language of 100-point ratings.

The Q-system comes, however, with an inherent danger. If on one hand training and the use of a universal form and numerical language brings much-needed discipline to the premium segment of the green coffee marketplace by tightening loyalty to the values

of the interpretive community and sharpening the sensory skills needed to apply those values, the same discipline can lead to a tyranny of certain privileged evaluative criteria and a stifling of variety and innovation.

We should not forget that the specialty industry was built on two pillars: quality and differentiation. From the very beginning, specialty offered the consumer not only better quality coffee, but more kinds of better quality coffee: a variety of sensory styles, types and profiles that engage the consumer as connoisseur as well as simple coffee drinker.

The attribute format of the dominant CQI/SCAA form and the elements of the expert community that specialize in using generally tend to favor conventional, high-grown, wet-processed coffees, despite evidence that significant numbers of consumers (together with many cuppers and roasters) enjoy certain alternatives: earthy-fruity Sumatras, big-fruit naturals, clean robustas. I feel that we should be working to define the particular styles of excellence of such popular alternative coffees and fine-tune criteria that will encourage that excellence. From my work as a reviewer, I certainly can assure readers that, although many big-fruit naturals may be astringent-finishing and some even rotten tasting, there are others that are as elegant and clean in their lush brandyish richness as a fine Cognac. If such differences exist, should it not be one of our missions to sharpen our discriminations in a way that will encourage excellence rather than prevent even considering its possibility? The same appeal can be made for some of the extraordinary new wet-hulled Sumatras that take the old musty-fruity Sumatra type and raise it into a sensory dimension of extraordinary refinement.

### DISCIPLINED BUT OPEN

How did I get here from my initial defense of 100-point systems? Simply as a way of contending that cupping forms and the ratings they generate should be seen as a way of testing and exploring the consensus of the expert community in a disciplined, ongoing process of communal definition and discovery rather than as the detached application of an eternally fixed set of objective judgments. For me, cupping forms and associated 100-point ratings systems should not only promote a disciplined, world-wide system of evaluation, but also, and perhaps more importantly, provide an orderly and deliberate context for ongoing criticism and refinement of that system.

*A section of this article incorporates material appearing in KENNETH DAVIDS' contribution to the anthology Coffee & Philosophy, edited by Scott F. Parker and Professor Michael W. Austin, tentatively scheduled for publication in 2011 by Wiley-Blackwell, Malden, Mass. One of Kenneth Davids' three books on coffee was recently published in Japanese by Inaho Shobo, Tokyo, and in addition to his work as coffee writer, reviewer and consultant, he is Professor of Critical Studies at the California College of the Arts, where he teaches a class on critical theory.*



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