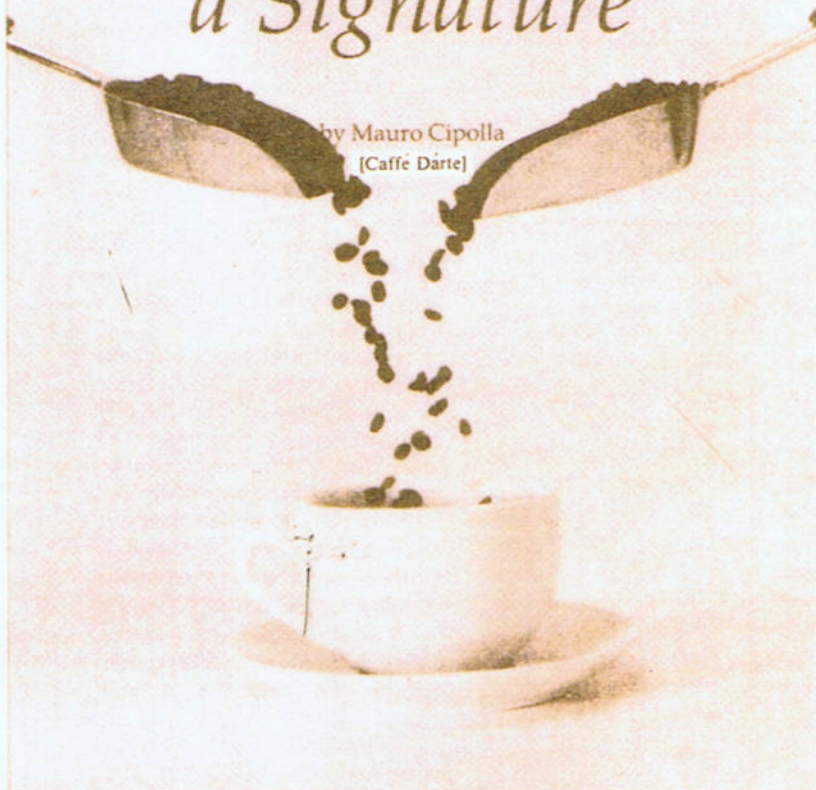


Blending Coffee: *Creating a Signature*

by Mauro Cipolla
[Caffé Darte]



Coffees grown in different regions of the world have many different qualities. Each is present in each coffee, and the differing balance of the traits in any coffee is what gives each its distinct character.

When a coffee buyer samples different coffees, he or she is looking for certain characteristics that customers enjoy.

The idea is to give people what they like in coffee — richness, flavor, strength, aroma, body, mild acidity, pleasant aftertaste. At the same time, the goal is to reduce the negative characteristics — bitterness, bad aftertaste, extreme acidity, flatness.

It is a rare variety of coffee that, by itself, possesses the right balance to be enjoyed by consumers. This is where the coffee blender comes in. A blender will mix different proportions of different varieties of coffee together to enhance the best characteristics while reducing the negative ones.

There are two philosophies in bringing green coffee to the marketplace. One philosophy puts the emphasis on roasting coffee, while the other puts the emphasis on blending coffee. In Italy, with its centuries of coffee tradition, the emphasis is on blending. Each of Italy's more than 2,500 have created their own unique blends.

The key to blending is being able to maintain consistency in the final result — in the cup — even though the crop you're working with varies from bag to bag.

The blend, the combination of specific coffees to achieve a unique re-

sult, is a "recipe." The individual varieties that go into the blend are the ingredients. The blender takes great care in ensuring that just the right amount of each ingredient is properly roasted and present in the blend.

The blender can be compared to a chef in the restaurant business. While many restaurants offer sirloin steak or chicken cordon bleu, how these dishes ultimately taste depends on the skill of the chef, the origin of the ingredients used, and the way they are combined.

Certainly, how long our steak or chicken cordon bleu cooks is important in the process. But the cooking is only one part of a multifaceted equation.

At one level, the skill of the blender is in selecting just the right varieties of coffee which, when combined, accentuate each other's good qualities. Some varieties may have positive characteristics that get lost when combined with certain other beans. It's not a simple matter of adding more beans with good

characteristics, but finding just the right combination of beans that enhance each other.

Because you're dealing with nature, your beans will vary from field to field depending on many agricultural variables. They will be different from country to country, region to region, and producer to producer within a region. Climatic conditions, as well, vary from place to place and growing season to growing season.

The conditions that create the variables are many. Soil conditions, species of bean, altitude of the field, kinds of fertilizers used, means of harvesting, process of

drying, and method of sizing all have an effect on coffee beans and, therefore, how consistent they are one field to the next or year to year.

So, once a "recipe" is achieved, it is not a simple matter of tossing in a pound of this and two pounds of that. It can be consistent only by being diligent in adjusting the recipe to compensate for the changes nature presents.

A chef will create dishes that reflect his or her personality. This becomes a "signature," and no matter if the dish is beef or chicken, it will always have some trait exclusive to the chef.

Coffee blenders also have "signatures," the presence of certain qualities in each of their blends that are characteristic of all of their blends. The signature reflects their skill, taste, and richness of the traditions they follow. Ω

Mauro Cipolla is owner of [Caffé Darte], a Seattle coffee-roasting company.