

## **ARE WE SACRIFICING THE INDUSTRY'S STANDARDS OF QUALITY?**

Is the specialty coffee industry growing in the wrong direction and are we sacrificing the industry's standards of quality?

It is no secret that the specialty coffee industry has achieved impressive growth in the past few years. The \$45 million per year retail sales of the 1960's seems insignificant to today's actual \$1.6 billion per year, and ridiculous to the year 2000's projected \$5 billion.

This sales growth curve has, so far, been driven by new consumer behaviors, habits, and demands. As a result, today's market has a new look. The current specialty coffee culture is dominated by exceptional flavor profiles and subjective personal as well as emotional coffee experiences.

The totality, personal diversity, and high quality standards literally own the hearts, minds, and palates of today's specialty coffee consumers. This new focus on higher quality standards provides an exciting opportunity for those who are passionate, conscientious, and educated coffee professionals. In addition, these opportunities can be fun-filled, interesting, and provide a prosperous lifestyle. The key words that have a direct effect on the realization of said lifestyle within the specialty coffee industry are "passionate, conscientious, and educated coffee professionals."

It is in fact my strong belief that any industry that is capable of promising such potential has within it tremendous and disastrous self destructive mechanisms ready to negate unjustified success. These are the mechanisms that, when married with non-passionate, non-educated, and non-professional individuals/entities, are armed to give strength to inflated economic growth. This growth is primarily based on goals that include exponential and speculative growth, specifically driven by the infamous return on investment and "economic bottom line philosophies." The fear is that the rapid return on investment growth will turn quickly and spark the beginning of the dilution of the coffee culture along with its desired and expected qualities. The new coffee culture and quality standards play an important role in the industry's sound and controllable growth that we have all enjoyed thus far, through our loyal and educated consumers.

My fears of losing "our standards of quality of a specialty coffee culture" have been accentuated by feedback from some retail consumers, who have recently claimed disappointing coffee experiences. These experiences are both qualitative and emotional, while temporarily tainting the consumer's loyal daily following to their favorite specialty coffee shop.

At this juncture, the fundamental question that we must all investigate and attempt to answer is the following: Is the growth of the specialty coffee industry starting to show us signs of quality dilution in the "Total Coffee Experience?" If in fact the answer is affirmative, we must focus on discovering how and where this culture of dilution and destruction lives. We must immediately work on integrating educational training systems at all levels of the specialty coffee industry, including the coffee producers, importers, brokers, buyers, roasters, industrial sales and training staff, retailers and consumers. The driving force for these changes should be knowledge and professionalism and not

economic greed. In doing so, we will deliver a continued evolution of the coffee culture. In turn, we will naturally create improving economic well being, with great return on investments and bottom lines. These results will last, and grow, within the cultural coffee trends and habits desired by all educated and appreciative coffee aficionados.

What are the areas of danger in our industry, and what can we as concerned specialty coffee professionals do to prevent such a possible scenario?

The areas of danger are many of course, and will differ for each unique situation and the relative unique competitive environment and market trend. However, we may want to pay particular attention to the following operations.

Let us all become better importers, brokers, and specialty buyers of green coffees. Let us focus on what really defines a specialty coffee, and let's choose coffees by strict blind cupping methods. It is the aroma, the fragrance, the nose, taste, and aftertaste of the particular coffee(s) in question that guides us in choosing to buy or not to buy. We all know that coffee varieties – that have been properly cultivated and attended to by diligent and knowledgeable labor to cure, prune, and protect the trees – are already special. We also know that if the same coffees are also carefully harvested, processed, dried, and stored, they will more than likely deliver the sought after taste profile of a specialty coffee. Thus, our emphasis when purchasing green coffees for a respectable brand must be on quality of taste profiles. Quality taste profiles should be derived from particular processes, not driven by inexpensive prices no matter what the process and the resulting flavor profiles employed.

Coffee roasters and industrial sales representatives must continuously educate the specialty coffee retailer on all of the quality aspects of green coffee botanicals and agriculture processes. Roasters must in turn sell not on bottom prices, but on the qualities of their products that are present (hopefully) for all to enjoy and appreciate. Classes, newsletters, booklets, videotapes, and the like must be part of an academic training curriculum for any roaster, as the roaster's responsibility should go over and beyond the rituals of the sales process. Retailers must also be trained on the roasting and blending philosophies of a given company, and particular attention must be directed towards hands-on classes for extraction techniques to achieve the highest possible standards of quality in both brewed and espresso drinks.

All roasters should concentrate on improving their roasting and blending techniques at all times. The art and the science of roasting is too complex to be left dormant. As the delivery of nature evolves and changes, as roasting equipment is upgraded, and as taste profiles mature, a roaster must conduct continuous research for better and improved methods to improve flavor profiles and consistency of the same.

I also believe marketing and sales gimmicks should be used sparingly by all coffee professionals. Many of these methods would only confuse the specialty coffee industry and would diminish the positive effects of educated minds and palates, which are the building blocks for true and sound growth. The industry upgraded levels of educational programs now existing within many of the fine trade shows is in fact a great tribute to the national growing efforts of focusing on great education while selling.

Proper qualifications and training of the specialty coffee retailer must be upgraded and reviewed frequently. The retailer must be focused on total quality, not sales and profits, as this should be the reward for a job well done.

Aside from the expected basic business requirements, a specialty coffee retailer must be very proficient in all of the knowledge related to specialty coffees. A retailer and the entire staff should in fact be a source of inspiration and education for the consumer. Educational information should include coffee topics such as coffee history, general coffee botanicals and agriculture, coffee descriptions and taste, coffee storage procedures, and coffee extraction procedures for best results at home – just to mention a few. A successful specialty coffee retailer must in fact try to give each retail customer a bit of fun-filled information at each encounter. The retailer must in essence be a specialty coffee authority, who (along with his very own signature of coffee taste profile and a very well trained staff) must offer a unique and personal coffee experience. This experience will only then be a “Total Coffee Experience,” since a particular taste profile is now accompanied by an emotional coffee experience.

The retailer must also fine tune his senses to distinguish and sense what quality, in its totality, may mean to the customer.

What does the consumer expect? Is the customer ready and willing to accept our style of drinks (as compared to past experiences)? Does our complete product (the product, its taste, presentation, appeal, image, and environment of customer service, knowledge, general and unique characteristics, service and price) meet the needs and wants of the customer? What did the customer like about our complete product, and can we leave the customer feeling good, remembering us in a positive way? Lastly, what can we improve for this unique customer at the next encounter?

The retailer must answer these basic questions and more in very few seconds, and in most instances without the luxury of being able to ask inquisitive questions.

Lastly, the retailer must also employ the very finest barista, as it will be this individual that will extract the very best essence from coffees and espresso consistently while under pressure. What makes great a barista, in fact, is not his or her ability to carry on a funny conversation or recite cute rhymes. The educated specialty coffee consumers will appreciate only so many jokes, but will never forget a superb cappuccino, one with all the proper variables, one which is a beautiful culinary presentation, a piece of art that one savors with the eyes first, and with all the other remaining senses a few seconds later. A cappuccino with steamed milk of proper temperature, creamy texture, and mouth feel should fulfill you with complete enjoyment that makes you want to come back – over and over. This trained master barista should also understand water quality for better brewing, the needs of water filtration if applicable, and the general workings of espresso equipment. The basic understanding of water pressure, water temperature, and the importance of water stability is also one of the areas of interest to the barista. Proper grinding of coffee and espresso beans, the water quality as well as the extraction of taste from coffee oils governed by the amount of infusion time of water over coffee grounds will also be part of the curriculum of the trained professional barista.

Now that we have examined the barista’s quality standards in general, let’s take a closer look at the every day details needed for mastery of espresso beverages in today’s growing and competitive environment.

## **Sound Equipment Operation**

The espresso machine is the main engine that drives your business. It is important to have a machine capable of maintaining the water pressure and temperature necessary to achieve a quality extraction for every customer. The following is a list of factors to consider for a sound operation.

### **a. Water Quality**

- Water Quality – The water must be filtered to eliminate particles, high levels of minerals, and odors.
- Particles – Particles cause blockages that result in poor extraction and/or damage the machine. Some minerals are good for proper equipment function and coffee taste.
- Minerals – A high level of minerals can affect the taste of the espresso and cause damaging build-up in the machine.
- Odors- Odors will affect the taste of the espresso. (Taste the water to insure a good tasting product.)

### **b. Espresso Machine Fitness:**

- Pressure and Temperature – Your espresso machine needs to produce 9-10 atmospheres of pressure (131 to 146 psi) and water temperature of 193-197 degrees Fahrenheit.
- Plugged jets – Plugged jets will restrict the flow of water, and increase water pressure.
- Group gasket – If the gasket is worn, it will allow the surface of the water to come too close to the water jets and can cause leakage at the group head during extraction.
- Brass fittings on the portafilter – When the brass fittings become worn, they allow the surface of the coffee to come too close to the water jets and prevent the portafilter from fitting firmly in the proper place.
- Cracks in the basket – Small hairline cracks in the rim of the portafilter basket can cause changes in the water pressure that will prevent a quality extraction.
- Portafilter position – The portafilter handle, when ready to operate, should point slightly to the right.

## **Espresso Equipment Cleanliness**

It is critical that all surfaces that come in contact with the water and the coffee grounds are clean and free of any unwanted particles or residue. Also, restrictions in the flow of water will compromise the balance of time, temperature, and the volume of extraction. Residue will contaminate the quality and flavor of the espresso. Daily back flushing of the espresso machine will prevent unwanted build-up of the oils and residue that will turn rancid and contaminate the product.

Parts to be cleaned include water spreader, screens, portafilter basket, portafilter body, spout, and channel area.

### **The Tools for Proper Extraction**

- Brush – A soft brush can be used to clear loose coffee grounds from many surfaces, including, other hard to reach areas of the grinder.
- Blind Filter – The blind filter is used to block the flow of water to the group head during the flush process.
- Puro Caff – Puro Caff is used to clean any surface that comes in contact with the coffee during the extraction process and for back flushing the espresso machine.
- Screwdriver – You should check the group head of your espresso machine to determine if the center screw holding the screen is a slotted, Philips or allen type screw. A short handled screwdriver is the easiest to work with when removing the screens for cleaning.
- Double Shot Porta fileters – For best results, use the two shot portafilters. The shape of the single shot portafilter prevents an even and complete extraction in the majority of commercial espresso machines.
- Tamper – The tamper must have a flat surface instead of a rounded surface. The rounded tamper creates over extraction on the thick outer rim of the coffee and an under extraction on the thin center of packed coffee.
- Porcelain Espresso Cups – The porcelain shot cup will maintain the thermal stability and should be preheated for maximum enjoyment of the straight shot.

### **The Grinder**

- Grinder Burrs – The recommended grinder should have a burr type blade. Burr blades produce a clean even grind for a consistent product. It is also important to keep the blades as clean as possible.
- Dull Burrs – One way to determine if the grinder blades are too dull to perform properly is to check the grind. Feel the grind as it shoots into the doser. If the ground coffee feels warm to the touch and the grind feels inconsistent in the size of the granules, the burrs need to be replaced. If it is unusually difficult to adjust for a proper grind, the burrs may need to be replaced.
- Changing the Grind – When changing from one coffee/blend to another, the grind should be changed to accommodate different coffees. The adjustment wheel should normally only require movement of one notch.

### **Pre-Extraction Techniques**

- Dosing – The standard dose of ground coffee for espresso extraction is 8 grams for a single shot and 16 grams for a double. The packed coffee should be level with the international standard line in the portafilter basket.
- Preheat Porcelain Cups – Porcelain cups should be pre-heated to maintain the desired drinking temperature of the straight shots.

- Fresh Grind – One should only grind enough coffee for immediate use. Pre-ground coffee will oxidize as it sets. The subsequent shots will run too fast and under extract.
- Tamp Firmly – The recommended tamping pressure for espresso extraction is 50 psi. After the first tamping, there will be loose grounds around the inner edges of the portafilter basket.
- Tap the Portafilter – Tap the side of the portafilter to distribute the loose grounds over the coffee surface.
- Tamp Again – If there are still loose grounds around the edges of the port filter basket, or the coffee surface is not level, repeat the tap and tamp process. Always finish with a light twist to lock coffee in place.
- Speed – This process should be done quickly to maintain a moist basket for optimum pack pressure and coffee grounds back pressure.
- Caution – Using the tamper on the side of the grinder is not recommended. Flat hand tampers are far superior in controlling the proper tamping pressure.

### **Extraction Check Points**

- Timing – The required extraction time for full body, flavor and character is from 25 to 30 seconds from the first drip to the finished  $\frac{3}{4}$  oz. shot of espresso liquid. Extraction under 25 seconds will produce an under extraction, and over 30 seconds will produce an over extraction. If the extraction is too short (under 25 seconds), the grind is too course. If the shot is too long (over 30 seconds) the grind is too fine.
- Volume – The total liquid volume of each shot should be  $\frac{3}{4}$  to 1oz. of espresso to be measured at the top of the crema.
- Crema – A proper shot will have thick, rich caramel colored foam (crema) on the surface of the shot. The crema is emulsified oils that contain much of the flavor of the coffee.

In conclusion, the formula to sound growth and long-lasting success for the specialty coffee industry is encompassed in one single word: “Better.” Mind you, not better sales, but rather better quality of green coffees used by coffee roasters, better educational and training materials with direct channels of availability to the retailers. Also, better and improved roasting and blending methods to reflect an evolution of improving coffee taste profiles. And lastly, better qualified retail operators, and better training of the all important barista.

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