New Approach to Espresso Blends

Something has been bugging me for a long time, something about the way we do things here at Sweet Maria's.

It comes down to this; we hammer on the point over and over that "coffee is a crop, not a can of pop", that it is variable, that each producing region has a peak harvest time, which is variable, that quality is ... you guessed it, ... variable, and that small lots come and go, so it's not like a can of pop on the shelf, always there and unchanging ... availability is variable. Besides being one of the worst run-on sentences ever, you get my point. And we treat each and every lot we approve and offer as a singular moment in this undulating and variable flow of coffee production. So, why have we made one great exception to this approach? Why have we maintained espresso blends that do not vary, that are always on the shelf, modifying their ingredients as the crop cycle rotates along? Good question. Part of it can be chalked up to "received wisdom." Everyone else does it, they always have. It's not a great answer.

To rewind and explain the logic of invariable blend offerings, I do feel that we have taken the best possible approach. If you kept the same blend ingredients year round, if you bought a year's supply of each lot for a blend, the cup quality would suffer. As the coffees age, baggy flavors would emerge. Coffee does not last that long, and we are very sensitive about the age of our green coffee. We know that once we sell it, someone may have it for 6 months, or even a year, before roasting it. If we haven't vacuum packed or "cellared" it here in our Grainpro bags, we make sure we sell it rapidly. So, the alternative is to be consistently changing the blend, using newer arrivals that are good substitutes. That means the blend is never exactly what you intended ... Instead one maintains the "spirit of the blend," its flavor theme, using new coffees to express that spirit. In this way, the blend is the best it can be, and is always high quality.

Still, it is never precisely the blend you intended. And these flavor themes can get old, unexciting, rote to the palate. After a lot of consideration I have decided to take two approaches simultaneously. I decided to change our blend offerings into Standards, blends with the same name we maintain and are consistently offered, and new Espresso Workshop editions. The latter are blends that are only offered for as long as we have the specific lots of coffee we used to design the blend, and then it's gone. It's a coffee-centric idea, and allows for the exploration of newer espresso styles. In a sense, Workshop Espresso editions are pure and uncompromising: specific coffees are found that inspire testing, and a new blend idea is born. Instead of maintaining the blend and making ingredient substitutions down the line, the Workshop editions follow the crop cycle of the coffee; they come and go. And we already have 2 "editions" on the sheet

"Ophiolite Blend?" I have been reading a lot of geology for fun and having trouble remembering the terms. It sure helps to see the word in my day job! And an ophiolite is a good analogy; a remnant of deep sea oceanic crust, from a spreading sea floor center, that was scraped up and placed on the continental crust. Ophiolites located at high altitudes in the Andes or Alps proved to be a thorn in the theoretical side of geologists until plate tectonics came around, showing how a layered series of oceanic rocks could end up in mountain ranges, largely intact. Espresso has layers or strata, physically, but more importantly in terms of flavor, and this particular blend seemed to deserve the name; densely layered, exotic flavors from faraway and unlikely origins, discovered in a new context and providing plenty of stimulating flavors to think about. Digging down through the layers of intense chocolate, bittersweet, thick in texture, you come to ripe fruits (blood orange, Bing cherry) accented by peppery spice and clean tobacco. Superb body, and a wide range of flavors from the basement level to the fruited and spicy high notes, geology seems like a good analogy for this kind of depth and range of flavor.

Auriferous Espresso?

In keeping with the geologically inspired names, Auriferous refers to "gold-bearing" as in the auriferous gravels of the Sierra Nevada which inspired the communal insanity known as the Gold Rush. While in fact many miners actually lost money in the fervor, I think the flavors here are more bankable. One reason is that this is a blend of only wet-process coffees, a first for us at Sweet Maria's, and something that even 5 years ago I didn't believe was possible for espresso. Things have changed, especially in this West Coast style of brighter, livelier espresso that favors high-note accents over body. We recommend FC++ roast here, on a drum roaster a mere 10 seconds into 2nd crack, or even less if the roast tends to "coast" a bit through the cooling process. On air roasters, you can go a bit longer. And, of course, rest is crucial although we consistently pulled nice shots with only 24 hours rest. Espresso always
likes post-roast rest ... and after 6 days this blend just sparkles. That's the best adjective too, referencing our theme here; gold-bearing. The dry fragrance doesn't represent the cup flavors that well; chocolate cookie, some caramel. In the wet aroma after pulling the shot, there is a better indication of what's to come. Sweet floral and citrus blossom over bittering coffee aroma is evident. There is a wonderful relation between flavor and aftertaste; initial citrus brightness, and lemon with hints of zesty rind are followed by a wave of classic espresso bittersweet. Heavily caramelized sugars are a dominant taste of the latter, with a slight vanilla accent. But there is also an initial sweetness delivered with the orange-lemon brightness, momentary and refreshing. The body is light for espresso, which might make you think the shot is over-extracted and thin. But of course the excellent flavors will indicate it is not. I prefer full espresso (not Ristretto) at a standard 24 seconds.

My strategy with the new blends is still the same as always, I try to keep it simple and make sure that I am using each coffee in the blend for a particular purpose. I mean, if you have a blend with 10 coffees in it, can you be sure what your 9th coffee is doing and justify why it has to be in the blend? I think people can make blending more complicated than it needs to be. Notes on how to blend the “retired” blends – Classic Italian and Puro Scuro - yourself appear in the review archive under “Misc & Blends.”


- Tom

A Year's Worth of Coffee?

The beginning of this new year seems like a good time for an overview of what coffee lots are on the horizon. We do have a coffee Production time table posted on the site – http://sweetmarias.com/coffee.prod.timetable.shtml but this is just a very broad view – from one year to the next arrival dates can vary by as much as 2 months.

This time of year the new crops are arriving from many regions in the Southern Hemisphere - Brazil, Colombia, Indonesia. Natural Brazils are the first to arrive – pulped naturals tend to come in later. The Kenya auction cuppings start in late January and continue through June. New crop Hawaii is coming shortly – a bit earlier this year than in previous years. Our selection of Central American coffees starts to thin out – however this year we took the step of placing a number of our Centrals in GrainPro bags so they will stay fresher longer and last us until next crop.

We start to see new crop Central American coffees in say March and April, with the coffees arriving in our place late May or June, then through the summer. Kenyan auction lots start coming in during the spring and keep on coming into the fall. There is generally a one to two month lag between when I first get a pre-shipment Kenya sample and the coffee arrives in the warehouse. Even for nearer origins, 6-10 weeks is a standard time to have a lot milled and transported. While the period from harvesting the cherry though fermentation and drying to exportable 11% moisture content might be a couple weeks, there is a very important and underrated stage after that: reposo, rest. Coffee in parchment (wet-process) or pods (dry-process) must sit for 30 ... 45 ... even 60 days to stabilize after drying. You don't want to rush coffee through this, or else the cup character will fade quickly and baggy flavors will emerge a few months down the line.

Last Tiny Joy we talked the way we have triaged lots as they arrive and "cellared" them to offer later in the season using our new vacuum packing machine or special "gas impermeable" bags made by a non-profit called GrainPro. We had great results arresting the aging process for periods up to 6 months, and this allows us to change our buying habits for a couple origins. Now I can focus solely on "peak of harvest" lots from highest altitudes, despite the fact that they all are prepared and ready to ship at the same time. In the past, this glut of great coffees all at once was overwhelming. Being able to triage lots for later dates helps us manage this, and offer the best lots for a greater part of the year, and with greater confidence about the cup quality. This approach has limited effectiveness, and I don't see it as a cure all. It also will not redefine the variable nature of the coffee crop; I do not believe one can "cellar" coffee like wine. Our tests show green coffee ages in vacuum pack or in our special bags after longer amounts of time. But right now we are rolling out some Costa Rica Micro Mill coffees that arrived in June-July and were immediately cellared, and they are fantastic, as dynamic as the day they arrived!

There's also an ebb and flow to the cupping work here. The early summer is a very hectic time for me because the majority of the Cup of Excellence auctions happen then. There will be one auction a week for five weeks or more – and with 40+ coffees in each auction – that is a lot of cupping! Add to that the new crop samples, and the upstairs cupping lab here at the warehouse is a very, very busy and (I admit) messy place. Again, there has been a lag between the auction itself and the arrival of the coffee – which is unfortunate since there is a certain excitement for the auction, some of which has dissipated by the time the coffee arrives a few months later. Some auctions I do choose not to participate in – e.g. the Brazil CoE that just happened, I scored all the coffees between 82 and 87 (the international jury scored the #1 coffee at 93). They were solid, but nothing outstanding so I spaced out on bidding.

In late summer and early fall there is something of a lull in cupping until the first of the Brazils, Indonesians arrive. Actually that window has been closing, especially with our Colombia Farm Gate Coffee program, which means arrivals of hundreds of samples from farms that produce maybe 1 or 2 bags of coffee a season! It seems the more we drill down to the farm level, the more work it generates for me. Luckily, I like my job a lot!!! – Tom

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