What influences cup Flavor – or how did that flavor get there?

There are many things that influence the flavor you taste in the cup – cultivar, altitude, processing, roasting, brewing. Missteps along the way can doom the flavor – anything from picking unripe cherry to storage in bad or tainted burlap, from a container left sitting too long at a tropical port, to too fast or too slow a roast; dirty brewing equipment, low water temperature, the wrong grind, a bad bean or dirt clod… The list of factors that can negatively impact the cup is very long indeed.

I want to focus on two factors that positively influence cup quality here: the cultivar/growing conditions and brewing method. Now these two things are at opposite ends of the process – the former seemingly determines the flavor of the coffee before it is picked, and the latter is the final step before you can enjoy the coffee.

Cultivar and Terroir

Cultivar and growing conditions are linked in terms of how they impact cup quality. There are specific flavor characteristics associated with certain true cultivars – for example, Bourbon is generally considered to deliver high acidity, SL-28, grown widely in Kenya, has high acidity and is mild. These characteristics are produced in specific environmental conditions; the cultivar planted in a different environment can yield coffee of different quality. This is one reason why we find the “transplanted” cultivars so interesting – I mean, if you grow a Java cultivar in Nicaragua, and wet process it – what do you get? We have sold the Blue Mountain cultivar that Rita and Skip Cowell grow on their farm over the years and it is slightly different from the Kona typica they grow on the rest of their farm.

Other cultivars, such as typica, catuara, etc. are hybrids that are crossed for various reasons not necessarily related to cup quality – for example, disease or pest resistance, yield, etc.

So, environmental conditions – “terroir” – combined with cultivar can greatly impact cup quality. These factors include soil, temperature, altitude, the amount of cloud cover, wind, and rainfall, as well as other factors. Beans grown at higher altitudes and in shade, are smaller, denser, and generally have a more pronounced acidity, perhaps because they mature more slowly. These beans also roast somewhat differently.

How a coffee is processed and dried during harvest will greatly affect flavor as well. You could say processing acts as a veil or mask but if that implies that there is a possibility of experiencing coffee without the adornment of processing, then this would be a false conclusion. Coffee has to be processed as much as it has to be roasted and brewed. Ideally the processing compliments the cultivar/terroir – as much as the roasting style and brewing does.

(I referred to Wintgens’ Coffee Growing, Processing, for many of the details included above. It is a surprisingly readable book, albeit very technically oriented.)
suspended in the brew, this method is generally favored for bigger bodied, lower acidity coffees, and darker roasts (which will mask acidity in a coffee). Drip brewing with a filter is very democratic – you can use it to brew any type of coffee. Nothing beats the simple setup and a proper brew is insured since you provide proper hot water from a kettle, not a lukewarm drip machine – you just need to control extraction time.

By May 1st, we will have a new “Coffee Glossary” feature on the website to cover all the terms mentioned in this article (and more!)

3 Countries/ 7 Days
I took a brief cupping trip, or a string of them, to Panama, Costa Rica, and Nicaragua in late March 2009. A full trip report is online but I wanted to touch on some points here.

The main goal of the Panama leg of the trip was to cup coffee with Carlos Franceschi Aguilar at Carmen Estate, and to view the damage from the storms these past months. Rains and winds combined to wash out the bridge to the farm, splinter trees, and strip some coffee trees bare! I also met up with Daniel Peterson to cup some experimental Gesha separations at Hacienda Esmeralda.

Carmen Estate has been badly hurt by the infrastructure damage. The crop is small as well. It seems to be the same story everywhere I have been, the wrong weather at the wrong time; dry when they need rain, rain when the flower is on the tree, knocking off the blossoms, high winds, etc. Luckily, the quality from Carmen is not affected. The samples we cupped were really nice, classic, bright Carmen coffee. We are making further selections to our 1800+ meter separation, and might have some interesting experimental lots as well.

Since micro-mill production has become more widespread and accessible, Costa Rica is a joy to visit. Trips to micro-mills, small individual farms that pick and process coffee from start to finish, with control of quality at every step, is like finding the like-minded double of the micro-roaster at the other end of the coffee chain. There's a similar approach, a kind of handshake of ideas and attitudes.

The next stop was Beneficio Don Esteban in Esteli, Nicaragua. I’ve been happy with the Nicaragua coffees we have received overall, but I am always interested in what more can be done. There are many great initiatives in Nicaragua (Cup of Excellence, the rural cupping program, talented national cuppers, some good cooperatives, many quality small producers) but there is also a large commercial industry that aims to produce the most economical and mediocre arabica coffee possible. Every country has its lower levels of arabica production, but along with Honduras, Nicaragua aims to produce a lot of this. Partly, this is due to the powerful multinationals like Ecom/Atlantic and some big exporters like Mercon which maintain a high demand for lower grades of arabica, which forces small producers to cut every corner possible to produce coffee cheaply. Buying the best quality coffee at the best prices has a positive impact on the zero-sum game of low-end production. Visiting producers, I see the higher prices paid for quality coffee ripple through the economic pool, down to the transient picker who harvests the coffee.

My host Erwin Mierisch mentioned that the crop is small this year, down by 30% or so, and he warned that it seemed to be a down year for Nicaragua in general. There will be great coffees, but they will be few and far between, and cupping separate mill batches will be important, even with proven sources like the Java cultivar from Limoncillo farm. (In fact, I cupped different Java cultivar batches from various plots and various altitudes. The difference in quality was pronounced, although there was a nice, mild sweetness to all the lots; I like this variety of coffee!)

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