Choosing Coffees

“What coffee should I choose?” Sweet Maria's offers over 70 different kinds of coffee, so we get this question a lot. The answer, of course, depends (or should depend) on what you like.

For beginning home roasters, I always think it is best to start with a sampler. These are listed at the bottom of the Green Coffee Offerings page. The sampler gives you a range of origins and processing methods so you can start to hone in on what you like. While the type of roast you use will greatly influence the flavor (all coffees come with roast recommendations on the label), origin flavor sets the parameters for the flavors in the cup.

While coffees produced around the world can have an incredible variety of flavors, there are some general characteristics to different regions that can be helpful to keep in mind. This is part of the reason why we organize our coffee offerings by country, not some other factor. If you know you like mild coffees, you may want to focus on Central American or Island coffees. If you drink mostly espresso, then try an espresso blend or use Brazil as single origin espresso; you can also use the drop down menu on the top of listings on the Green Coffee Page to look for coffees recommended for espresso. If you know you like darker roasts and coffees with a lot of body, you may want to check out Indonesian or Brazilian coffees; these tend to have more body, less acidity and take a dark roast well. If you like bright, flavorful coffees, then try Kenyan coffees which can tend to be more acidic, more citrus, or Ethiopian coffees which can be fruitier or taste of bittersweet chocolate. [These are only generalizations and cannot be taken as true in all cases, especially if it's a slightly unusual processing method or varietal!]

Another big question is what to do when your favorite coffee is unavailable. This happens all the time – mostly because we are dealing with small, specific lots of coffee. We carry not just coffee from a specific farm, but very often a specific cultivar (i.e. Bourbon, Pacamara, etc) or picking or processing method. These are very limited lots of coffee, sometimes just a few bags, and often very unique, so we can sell out within two months or less.

It can be somewhat heartbreaking to finally find a coffee you really like and have it run out. I think the analogy that comes to my mind is produce; Michigan peaches or NW Indiana blueberries are awesome in July or August, but don’t expect to get them in February at least not fresh and at their peak. Now, coffee is a lot more stable than fresh produce, so it is not a perfect analogy, but you get the idea.

The best thing to do when your favorite coffee is out is to look for a coffee from the same region or a nearby region as the cultivar and climate is most likely similar, and the flavors in the cup should be similar. Then consider the processing method this will greatly impact the flavor. A dry processed Ethiopian coffee will taste more like a dry processed Yemen than a wet processed Ethiopian.

We do have all the coffee reviews archived so you can compare the out-of-stock coffee with coffees we currently have in stock. Please read through the descriptions of both coffees, not just the cupping scores. Overall score will tell you how exceptional a coffee is but not much else. Here is the list of factors to consider when searching for a comparable coffee, in order of importance: 1. Origin 2. Varietal 3. Processing 4. Region 5. Prime Attributes/Spider Graph 6. Score. Also check out Tom's "Compare to" notes at the bottom of the review. The archives can also be helpful when comparing the coffee of the same origin to past years' offerings. The archives are organized alphabetically by origin name; if it is a coffee older than the past few years, you can look it up by the year/date that we had it in stock.

From one year to the next, it would be great if we could count on the same coffee origin to be available, and be the same stellar cup. Unfortunately, it is more complicated than that. Whether or not we will have a coffee from the exact same origin next year depends on variables such as weather, processing, shipping, and competition. Since we strive to provide the best green coffee available, if there is a more amazing coffee one year from a newer farm, we will try to get it. Tried and true coffees from origins or estates we have had year in and year out, can be good but not at the expense of ignoring quality and new flavors that are out
In coffee producing areas with very stable and well-run farms/estates, we can sometimes count on having a particular coffee every year; if the farm and mill is of very high quality, they will likely be able to deliver the same quality again. These tend to be producers who are really striving to increase quality and shifting production methods to reflect tastes in the market, such as special preparations or special pickings. In these cases, if all goes well, we will get the coffee around the same time that we got it the year before so consult the review in the archive and look for the Arrival Date under the "Crop" heading. We also see year-to-year consistency in the offerings that are not farm or co-op specific, but represent a pooled coffee produced by a certain mill. This is the case often times in Sumatra or Sulawesi with coffees sold under the Lake Tawar, Toraja, or Mandheling name. Kona is also an origin where we see more consistency since we are working with specific farmers. We find that with more haphazard agricultural practices, picking, handling and processing, consistent results will likely be elusive.

In some very large coffee production areas, like Ethiopia or Kenya, with a huge number of individual co-operatives, or in Costa Rica with so many individual farmers, it is less likely that we will get the same coffee from one year to the next. In countries that have an auction process in place, like Kenya and Ethiopia, that throws another variable into the equation; we are not sure in advance if we will be successful in the auction. The same holds true for coffees that come through Cup of Excellence or other specialty coffee auctions. These auctions are very often highly competitive.

Most farmers never drink coffee here ... in fact many don't know exactly what coffee is used for. Because it is ground into powder, and because the government long ago would trade coffee for guns when they lacked money to pay for it, some farmers actually believe coffee is ground and made into gunpowder! I really hope the coffee from the co-op we visited pans out, and we can elevate the quality as well as introduce small lot, farmer-specific Uganda coffee in this next harvest season.

Kenya was amazing again - there is no other coffee origin with a system like this, including the Nairobi Coffee Auction that markets small lots based on cup quality, where the best coffees get the best price. Add to that the recent reforms that guarantee 80% of the sale price minus costs gets into the hands of the farmer, and you have a fantastic system to help buyers discover the best qualities and reward farmers as well.

The last destination on our 3-part journey was focused on visiting cooperatives (Unions) in Yirga Cheffe and Sidamo. This was a harvest trip, not a cupping trip, a time of the crop cycle to see the picking of cherry and processing, whereas if you come in April it's great for cupping stocklots from the warehouse, but there is no coffee production going on. Of course getting stuck in the mud after a downpour on a distant road near Hache was not in the plans, nor was the missing airplane that was supposed to get us to Addis from Kenya in the first place, but it just adds a bit of spice to any coffee sourcing trip.

All the photos can be found from this page: [http://www.sweetmarias.com/articles.php#travels](http://www.sweetmarias.com/articles.php#travels)