First Time Roaster Mistakes

There are some common mistakes that first time roasters seem to make, almost regardless of method used. These are:

1) **Scorching.** This can happen easily in a stovetop or oven roast, but is possible in an air roaster or popper too if you overload the device. Even if you roast dark, and the beans eventually become more uniformly colored, you can taste the scorching in the final cup as less body, less complexity, burned, skunky or biscuit notes, and some grassy astringent flavor. Really good green coffees can still cup pretty well with mis-roasting, but you’re not getting all you can out of the cup.

2) **Over-roasting,** that is, roasting too dark. Coffee right out of the roaster will not look the same as coffee that you will buy in a store or shop; the appearance of the roast changes significantly as the beans sit post-roasting. The color can darken and oils migrate to the surface. So if you home roast to a dark oily appearance, you have really charred the coffee. More importantly is a general notion people have that "strong coffee" means dark roasting. Coffee is strong because you use more ground coffee when you brew, or because the coffee has well-defined flavor characteristics. Unique flavors which originate in the cultivar, the climate, the process method of the coffee are actually more intense at lighter roast levels! Dark roast flavor makes most coffees taste about the same, tangy, carbony, pungent flavors, but most people want to home roast to taste the fantastic differences in coffee, from origin to origin, lot to lot.

3) **Flash-roasting:** Roasting too fast. This can happen in air poppers of the "wrong" design, ones that shoot hot hair upward from screen in the bottom of the popper chamber, from stovetop roasting on high heat, or from roasting small batches of green coffee.

We have some images that illustrate the problems cited above: Tom started a thread on the new Sweet Maria’s Home Coffee Roasting Forum titled "Stovetop roasting - is it really a good idea???” and brought up many of these issues. There are photos of roast development in a stovetop popper and you can see scorching and uneven development. We are wondering if we should even continue to recommend stovetop and oven roast methods, but we feel air popcorn poppers are still a great way to start roasting on the cheap. We will do some roast exchanges so we can cup test the quality of coffees people are getting by this method.

Website Changes

We have made a number of changes to our website over the past few months. Some changes are obvious – like the side bar or a new format for reviews; some are less obvious – like creating a database for the coffee reviews so our list of current coffees can be viewed in a number of ways. Some folks have written that they like the changes; some folks do not like them. I thought I would try to explain a bit of my rationale in making these changes.

As you can probably expect, we generate a lot of material. We don’t just sell green coffee and send it out to customers; we write about selecting, roasting, and brewing the coffee, visiting the places where it comes from, the people who grew and processed it, and on and on. Being the sort of people that we are (i.e. former art students, not business people), we started generating all this information without a way to organize or manage it. So, like scraps of paper on a desk or books on a bookshelf, over time one layer was piled onto another, and 11 years later....you've got a mess on your hands. The Sweet Maria’s website has a lot of information, but even I am not sure exactly what everything is or how to find it. I realized that we needed to both manage the information and make it easier to access.

So, first step was creating a database for the coffee
reviews. Both the big green coffee list and the origin pages are dynamically generated now with the names, reviews and prices of currently in stock coffees. It means too that the archives of coffee reviews can be generated the same way – instead of big static html pages.

We then added a side bar to the site so that it was easier to navigate from one page to the next. We reformatted the coffee reviews too. With the information now in a database, changing how that information appears is fairly easy. The biggest change, besides removing that lovely purple color that I had come to loathe, was a shift in emphasis to the written description and a "de-emphasis" on the scores. I still believe that descriptors are more important than numbers, and especially more important than the dreaded "total" score for each coffee. After all, would you buy a banana if someone told you it achieved a 94.7 score in "Banana Review" magazine ... but you hate bananas? Okay, silly example, but it has been difficult to get the numbers to accurately communicate the essential and meaningful qualities of the coffee they purport to describe.

Along the way we developed a totally new feature – the Sweet Maria’s Coffee Glossary, which pulls together the coffee knowledge of me and the SM staff in one location. A lot of this information about cultivars and processing was buried in trip reports or coffee reviews. The Coffee Glossary tries to keep this information easily accessible; we can revise and add entries over time. The Glossary appears in the sidebar, as a pop-up window, increasingly as hyper-links throughout the site. The full glossary is here - http://www.sweetmarias.com/dictionary.php

Another big, big change is that in late May 2009, we instituted a Home Coffee Roasting Forum: http://www.sweetmariascoffee.com/forum/ Our email discussion list that we started years ago, The Homeroast List, has been incredibly popular, to the point of having nearly a hundred messages per day! That's fantastic, but it also makes it a bit intimidating for a would-be member. It also means that a person with a specific question has to sift through a LOT of information in order to find the answer. Our hope in creating a forum is that the added structure and search features will mean that more people can benefit from the discussion, since posts are archived in a structured way. We also answer a lot of emails every day - and thought if we can share that information and open it up for all to read, i.e. respond through the forum, that would be a good thing. A web forum is more accessible and hopefully is more stable, with a better up-time.

Pretty soon, we'll also be changing how we organize articles and travelogues, trying to better connect information from across the site. Say, for instance, you're reading about coffee dried on African-style raised beds; we'd like it if you could easily go from that to a photo of a drying bed from a travelogue if you like.

So what’s with all the changes?
Has Sweet Maria’s sold out? Making the website organized and accessible? What the h___?!

I have had several conversations with computer-savvy Josh about the allure, the charm, and dare I say, the romance of utter chaos. Our site is labyrinthine – and I like it that way! I think of the great used bookstores that have books piled every which way and how you can spend hours browsing and finding new things. A Barnes and Noble just is too aseptic, too un-cluttered to have that sort of attraction for me. Of course, it is great to find what you need, when you need it, so I have relented somewhat and recognize the need to have some organizational structure. Otherwise, a lot of what I write or photos I post may never be seen by anyone, and what’s the point of that?

We will continue to tweak the appearance of the site as we go along, so if you have comments and suggestions, please send them in! We want to make information available but unobtrusive, so you don't have to wander and dig around. Unless you like that sort of thing. And there is nothing wrong with that.