Essentials: Top 6 Things in Home Roasting to Pay Attention To

When it comes to wine or beer, I prefer to play dumb. I just follow my senses, and see where I end up. I am not one of those homebrewers who reference gravity charts, plot the IBUs of every hop, and use software to track batches. I don't measure gravity; I just go. And because I have corrected a few bad habits over the years (and said "no way" to bottling), I get some good results. Occasionally I brew something truly fantastic!

With coffee, it's the opposite. I tend to approach it with much more rigor, monitoring roast and brewing with different instruments if not every time then often enough to be sure I am on target.

As with many bodies of knowledge, the more you learn the less you know. But there can be these contrary moments: I only really get a good gauge on all I truly DO know about coffee when I talk with someone who (I think) has vast experience, and I find out they are a little, er, wrong about things. Not that I get all big-headed about it, no, not me!

But there are different levels that you chose to engage in any pursuit, and I have always found those who seem over-engaged with everything (the coffee person who can tell you about the grape harvest in Chile, the best taco truck in San Francisco, how to properly fluff Cous Cous, etc. etc.) to be a big bore. I mean, c'mon, you can't do it all, and why should you?

I thought I would write a brief summary directed to the homebrewer or home wine maker, who DOES chart IBU's and specific gravity, etc, of what they need to know about home coffee roasting in order to get consistently good results, sometimes an incredible result, and avoid all the hair-splitting drama. Even for the dedicated home roaster - I think it is helpful to be reminded of the essentials.

1) Don't over-order; buy small amounts and a range of coffee. You need to start with great coffee in order to end up with great coffee. No matter how you roast, no matter how you brew, if you do not start off with a good green coffee that is still fresh (not years old), you will never get great results.

I recently was poking around YouTube and saw a video posted by a home roaster where they demonstrated roasting some Tanzania Ruvuma. The coffee looked terrible! I know it was nothing I sold because it just looked awful to begin with and then was probably a few years old. You cannot get good results when you start with bad, old coffee.

Even when you find a favorite coffee, don't load up the pantry with it, because it will not last. If we try to drive home one particular point about coffee here at Sweet Maria's, it is to think of coffee as produce with a definite shelf life, not a generic commodity; more like fresh peaches than flour.

2) Challenge your palette. Taste- don't drink. The language I use in reviews may seem ridiculous and over-the-top - but try three very different coffees (say, a Sumatra, a Central and an Ethiopian) and the first thing you will say is "wow, these are so different." But how different? In what way? Does the flavor fill your mouth, or not? Is it sweet or sour, salty or bitter? Putting words to flavors is always a challenge but focus on something concrete, like where in your mouth are you tasting a particular coffee. In the front? All over? How does the cup change as it cools?
3) When selecting coffee, pay attention to the processing method. Processing method has a huge impact on flavor. It is not the only thing, but it is huge, especially when done right. So try different origins but notice if it is a wet-processed or dry-processed coffee, pulped natural or wet-hulled. Coffees from different regions processed the same way will taste more like each other than coffees from the same farm processed differently.

4) Familiarize yourself with the roasting process from start to finish. No matter how you are roasting, air or drum, the last thirty seconds - the last five seconds- of the roast are crucial and have the biggest impact on flavor. So many things happen right at the end of a roast, between the City+ and Full City + ranges. Always watch the end of the roast and manually stop at the point you want.

Different origins (and processing methods) will present differently in the roast. A Sumatran coffee starts off a deeper shade of green, so color of the various roast stages can be expected to be a hair different than say a central American coffee. Look for roast problems like scorching or tipping, where the beans are not uniformly brown all over.

5) Get a good light by your roaster! It sounds silly, but in one of my first jobs as a coffee roaster in New Orleans, the biggest improvement I made was to put a good light by the roaster. Get to know the roast stages by color, bean appearance, smell and sound, and be aware that the roast appearance will vary from one origin or processing method to another (as mentioned above). We have some good resources in this area - such as the Pictorial Guide to the Roast Process and micro images of roasted beans. Do a few batches and really look at the finished product. Don't assume that a darker roast is more flavorful - they are not.

As I mentioned above, my approach to beer making is largely intuitive, and while I have a more technical approach to coffee roasting, brewing and tasting, I try to check in with my senses all the time. By that I mean, I ask myself, "The thermoprobe reads 435 degrees - but does everything else say City +? Or is there something about this bean that presents itself a bit differently? How did this coffee roast last time? What might be different?"

Beyond visual cues, one of the best ways I tell degree of roast is to bite a bean and see how firm it is. Darker roasts will crumble in your mouth and taste ashy. Lighter roasts will hold up more. If the beans are under-roasted, the bean will offer too much resistance. This is something you develop a feel for as time goes by.

6) Simplify your brewing method. Coffee cannot be consumed right out of the roaster - not like beer or wine where it goes from cask or bottle to glass. So pay attention to your brew method and try to simplify it as much as possible. The resurgence of filtercone brewing is so welcome because of its simplicity; use a filtercone and water just off the boil, rinse your paper filter, and use the right pouring technique for your filtercone. With a direct method like this it is easy to isolate variables such as dose or grind or infusion time. Especially when you have an off result, try to eliminate as many variables as you can.

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