A recent email said it best: "Based on your reviews of the roasters, it looks like you do not love any of them." Hmm … there is some truth in that comment. Derek and I field the emails from customers about roaster problems. We know from daily communiqués that roasters can be as much frustration as joy. Maybe we see more of the problems since we troubleshoot for customers all the time. Or maybe Sweet Maria’s is staffed by bitterly pessimistic nay-sayers! No, that’s not true. But we try to offer information in a way we would like to read it if we were customers. We want the downside along with the upside, not just the typical huckster’s sales pitch: buy, buy, buy!

None of the small roasters are perfect. None of them are as reliable or long lasting as your basic toaster. Granted, if your toaster was 40 degrees off, or toasted in 4 minutes instead of 6 minutes, I am not sure if you could taste the difference.

Back 100 years ago home roasting was fairly common, and home roasters were mechanical devices used on a stove or with charcoal or gas. Modern home roasters are fairly new to the market and not mass-produced on the scale of microwaves or toasters, so we find more flaws in both manufacture and design than other gadgets.

Home roasting is a "DIY" venture at its core, and that means home roasting is a hobby that requires some tinkering; experimenting with coffees to get the best roast, trying a new coffee when an old favorite has run out, etc. Fundamentally, people choose to home roast because they cannot find the coffee they like elsewhere. They like the process of choosing different beans, roasting to their liking and trying a variety of different origins. By and large, from our experience and the feedback from hundreds of customers, home roast machines need some fiddling to get the roast right, plus you need some experience with various beans to know, for example, how differently decafs will roast, or how a dry processed coffee will have an uneven appearance.

There is not one way to home roast, and ultimately the arbiter of the flavor is your own palette (no matter what Tom says in his reviews). There is no need to "move up" to a "real" roaster from a hot air popper - not if you are getting good results and the size of the hot air popper works for you. Yes, the more complex machines like the Hearthware iRoast give you more control over the process (or at least ought to). But the fundamental fact that you use good quality coffee, and roast it and drink it within a few days will give you better flavor than what you can generally find either in the supermarket or even most coffee shops.

What if you really love Dunkin Donuts coffee? (There are LOTS of people who do) I would say go to Dunkin Donuts and drink their coffee, and don’t bother with home roasting. But if you are disappointed with the coffee that is commercially available - or if are looking for something different that you can make yourself than do-it-yourself home roasting is probably right up your alley. -Maria

Kenya’s Coming

Cupping the 2006 Main Crop Auction Lots

What a grueling job; cup testing 20 Auction Lot Kenyas every Monday for the Tuesday morning international auctions. If the notion that personal progress is limited to “exchanging one set of problems for what is essentially a better set of problems”, then the task of cupping Kenyas is a pretty fine job! The problems arise in the fact that Kenya is the Pontiac GTO of East Africa in a field of Pintos and Pacers. Okay, that is unfair … all Kenyas are not muscle-rippled coffees, all other East Africans are not wimpy rubber-hand-powered lightweights. To put this in perspective, I remind myself that the 20 lots I cup are screened in Nairobi by the exporting agent, who has only forwarded a hand-picked selection of over 150 lots in the auction for that week. Cupping 150 Kenyas … is that a “better set of problems” or a prelude to palate suicide?!

Any table of Kenyas can potentially result in palate-fatigue sooner than any other coffee producing origin. In particular, the acidity and aftertaste of Kenyas can be so potent that one cup evaluation interferes with the next, and after one pass of the table, you need to take a break. A cupper must “economize” tasting to save the palate; after the break (where we push the floating “crust” of grinds down into the hot water), I wait 2 minutes until the cups cool a tad, then hit each one real quick with the cupping spoon to get a basic flavor impression. Then I sit back and relax for a few minutes, and make another pass to confirm my initial impressions. All Kenyas have positive aroma and flavor attributes, but a great lot will jump out at you even on an above-average table.

I have cupped about 12 weeks of auctions so far this year, and found streaks of brilliance among the average-good tables of coffee. The first arrival, Gaturine Peaberry from the Meru district, is nothing short of phenomenal at a City+ roast. In general, early auctions have been better than anticipated, and there have been some very fine Peaberry lots that do not attract the bidding attention on Tuesday of the AA lots. While Europeans will bid a highly citric, acidic Kenya through the roof, there seems to be consensus among Asian (particularly Japanese) that their market does not go goo-goo for super-bright Kenyas. Good for us, bad for them; a Kenya without acidity is like a car powering that GTO with the Pinto engine … what’s the point? Even among our customers, we have confusion about the positive
aspects of acidity. Those who have read my many articles on the subject already know; acidity in fine coffee is like sparkle in Champagne. This is not the acidity that burns the stomach (remember, Robusta has twice the pH as good arabica). I concede that a Kenya will affect you if you have no food in your stomach, more so than a fine low-acid Arabica like Java Estate. But acidity in Kenya is a flavor element; research finds that it is not only a diverse array of acidity, it is their particular interaction when combined that distinguishes an exemplary Kenya from the ordinary. You might have a higher concentration overall of acetic, chlorogenic, citric, lactic, malic, glutaric, oxalic, quinic, succinic, and tartaric acids (and add to that another 50 or so present in Kenyas!) but quantity tells you little about the cup. It is the particular way these acids combine and interact with each other, our ability to extract these delicate, volatile components in brewing and our ability to sense them. That’s the joy of Kenya; fleeting sensations of volatile acids, as well as the aldehydes, esters, furans, ketones, phenols and other flavor compounds. I know little of these things; just enough to appreciate that what I am sensing in the cup is anchored to a deep and intricate root pattern, a rhizome of chemical constituents that would take another college degree and quite a fancy lab to really understand.

-Tom

Sweet Maria's Coffee
1115 21st Street, Oakland CA 94607
web: www.sweetmarias.com
email: info@sweetmarias.com