Natural Processing Conundrum: Are there origins that ought not to do Dry Processing?- 

There has been some interesting conversation on coffee blogs on the development over the past few years of farms that have traditionally produced washed coffees now doing natural process. The blog post (on James Hoffman’s Square Mile Coffee out of London England) has a lot of good comments by coffee buyers and cuppers, farmers and producers. I thought I would post some of Tom’s comments here as it might interest our home roasting customers:

In the last few years, as coffee consumers have embraced natural or dry processed coffee, farmers in areas that traditionally produce nice washed coffees have shown a desire to experiment with other processes. This irks certain coffee buyers who prefer washed coffees and perhaps think that farmers who produce good wet process coffees ought to stick to that and leave the dry processing to coffee growing areas that 1) lack the water to do wet process coffee and 2) therefore have an incentive and tradition of dry process production. They worry that the fad will change, and hurt farmers who moved in this direction.

My perspective is this: coffee is an export cash crop produced for us, the buyer and consumer, and, thought it seems somewhat imperialistic, we determine what kind of product we want. You vote with your money, which way you want things to trend. Trade is not a meritocracy where the more logical or more well-meaning idea has most say. Our experience in specialty coffee is a sliver of the coffee industry as a whole.

Two particular cuppings shook me from my little coffee hobbit-hole: a day spent cupping the late harvest Harar auction lots as they came in, and a cupping of all the day lots at a coop warehouse in Brazil. In both cases, I had the chance to look at everything brought to market, totally unvetted. If either of those were my permanent coffee job, I would switch to tea ASAP. The amount of mold and rot in these coffees was so foul, it makes an indelible impression, or maybe a kind of “taste memory trauma” to be more exact. But I could have the same experience cupping triage washed coffees (coffees damaged in shipment that are "triaged" to salvage them), and come close to those same vomit flavors (but admittedly not as bad).

I am scared of coffee farmers being too connected to buyers, or more precisely to the whims of any particular buyer. I hope farmers have an ability to be suspicious of the advice of any single buyer, myself included (in fact, myself in particular!) and to acknowledge the fundamental difference between the retail and producer side of the supply chain. In processing coffee for sale, we deal with a homogenized product in fairly straightforward mechanical processes. They deal with plant material and weather and, yes, machines too. But I can make changes to my roaster daily, to my menu weekly, to my list of offerings, to my line of products, my location …and I can do it on a whim. You can’t move a coffee farm, or change your regional climate, and it takes 5 years to harvest new cultivars, etc. When producers start to have web sites, and they produce multiple products from the same material (naturals, PNs, Demucilaged, washed…) they are doing some of the things they can do to market and
connect with buyers. Each of us decides how we feel about this – If you don’t want Panama naturals, don’t buy them. What are we supposed to do, form an action committee and lobby against naturals from traditionally washed areas?

Buyers in the specialty market must project onto producers the standards for the product. It is not determined by the producers because they grow it for US to buy, for our markets, for our customers, the ones we know. We don’t just look to former colonies to produce coffee for us because we want to exploit labor, raw material and land. We do it because only they can grow coffee for the consuming world, and we try to act in concert to communicate ideas of quality in order for them to get the best return on the product. If you want to sell the coffee that they, by default, consume in producing countries, you will either end up with Nescafe or triage coffee in your cafe. Others in this discussion have put in countless hours to bridge the gap between how the buyer understands quality and how the coffee producer or mill manager or resident cupper understands it. We have done it not to further exploit them, but to increase their chances to produce quality coffee and get the best price for it.

Yes, we need to be aware of being paternalistic in these things, but I think those engaged in origin countries with sincere concern are conscious of the pitfalls of such things.

We need to speak about concrete instances where producing naturals is, perhaps in the long term, ill-advised for certain producers. I really don’t think we can address it globally as a topic. I think there are as many issues with bad honey coffees, or people using demucilagers in a bad way, or poor selection of cultivars. Water use, a big issue, and forced demucilage coffees have another benefit besides using mere buckets of water a day; they have democratized the wet mill to some degree, made micro-milling possible when all you have is half a cubic meter of water. Before, you had to own water rights to a stream, which you were most likely polluting as well. Now mills can be everywhere and on very small scales, allowing producers to offer a more finished product to the market instead of selling cherry under whatever local market price condition is in effect.

Water pollution is still a huge problem. On your way to 3 or 4 amazing, efficient, ecologically sensitive mills in Acatenango you pass the massive Finca Chalabal where coffee pulp is dumped directly onto the stream, upriver from the other “clean” mills. It just takes one asshole … and who is there to shut him down? Huehuetenango is filled with murky brown algae-bloom rivers. The clean water promise has not been fulfilled, not yet.

Lastly, I know a number of farmers have a genuine excitement to experiment with process, but some of the experimental process coffees coming out of Panama in particular are really pushing the limit on what is coffee and what is salad dressing. No, there is not going to be a George Howell-led cupping police force out there to decide what is clean and what isn’t, and our industry will not behave in concert to send a clear message to producers on this subject. We’ll decide with what we buy. I for one have been singed by my desire to experiment, like $14k worth of Panama Hartmann Natural that was shipped in sealed mylar bags and cups like moldy strawberry vinegar. We had another blended natural-washed lot from Carmen that worked out very well, because of very favorable conditions in drying. But it’s a crapshoot to dry cherry pods in Panama — hell, it’s a crapshoot to dry washed coffees in Panama lately, and if you don’t ship them out on time the rains come and everything drops a few points.

The whole blog post is a bit much, with as I said buyers and consumers and farmers weighing in with their different perspectives. But for those interested, look at James Hoffman’s blog for Square Mile Coffee, located in London, England.

Sweet Maria’s Coffee
1115 21st Street, Oakland CA 94607
www.sweetmarias.com info@sweetmarias.com