

Cupping: A tasting technique for coffee by Tom Owen, 2008

Cupping has several varied meanings, among them a technique for draining boils using heated glass cups, a painful attack on the male person, and, perhaps most grotesque, a procedure to taste coffee. I am only partly joking; if you have been in a room of 20 to 25 “coffee cuppers” and listened to the sounds they make, you can’t imagine a more cloying, grating, revolting cacophony. The only defense is to join in. By focusing intensely on the aromas and flavors in the cup, you are granted a temporary reprieve from the aural misery of “the cupper’s slurp.” But let’s describe the technique.

Cupping is a three-stage sensory analysis of the positive qualities (or defective aberrations) in a particular coffee. It is the most efficient way to compare many multiple coffee lots to each other, and provides the best method to locate problems in the consistency or quality of a coffee. The reason is because coffee is not brewed in any device; hot water is simply poured over the ground coffee in a cup or small bowl, and the mixture can be evaluated. The standard is to make 4 or 5 cups per sample of roasted coffee: Can you imagine trying to cup 10 lots at one time, with 4 samples of each lot, using any brewing device, such as a French press? 40 French Presses on one table – now that is a lot of work. In a competition setting it is not uncommon to have 4 or 5 flights (tables) of coffee in a day, 10 coffees per table, 4 cups per coffee. That’s 160 to 200 cups to “brew” and evaluate. In short, cupping isn’t just some arcane ritual that attempts to mystify the process, it is the best way to accomplish this task.

Here is the short description (I will expound ad nauseum on each detail later). To cup coffee, a sample is roasted, usually to a fairly light degree of roast. The ground whole bean coffee is dosed into each cup, with 11 grams per cup. Each cup is ground, making sure no coffee is held back in the grinder. The cups are laid out on the table, and each judge evaluates the dry fragrance of the coffee grounds. Initial impressions are noted. After this, hot water at 200 degrees fahrenheit is poured, 5 oz (150 ml) per cup. A good portion of the grinds float to the top of the cup and form a “crust.” The judge evaluates the aroma of the crust, the first part of judging “wet aromatics”. After 4 minutes of steeping, the judge “breaks the crust” with a cupping spoon. The spoon is rotated several times downward through the crust and then upward, which releases volatile aromatics, and starts the settling of the grounds to the bottom of the cup. Breaking the crust completes the wet aromatic evaluation and, depending on the form used, a score is entered. When the cup has cooled enough not to burn the heck out of the judge’s tongue, the evaluation of the cup flavors begins. To do this, the judge carefully lowers the spoon into the top of the cup, careful not to agitate the grinds at the bottom, lifts a spoonful up, and sucks it loudly (and grotesquely) into their mouth. The reason to inhale the coffee as such is to spray it, to aerate it, as much as possible so it can be sensed not only on the tongue, but in the nasal cavities. Ideally, the retro-nasal breathing helps to pull the coffee into the nasal passages even more. The coffee falls down in the palate and can then be circulated around the tongue, and then expectorated (with great flourish, not dribbling down the chin) because heck, you might be tasting another 199 cups that day! This third stage of cupping, the actual tasting, has many scores attached to it, which probably

means the judge will need to return to each cup several times to complete all the scoring categories – more on that later.

Now genteel reader ... all of this matters naught. The hokum of cupping has several purposes. As I mentioned before, it is actually the most efficient way to taste many coffees. Much of the decorum involved serves two purposes: to ensure uniform treatment of all samples, of all cups, and to not interfere in the procedure of another judge. The fact is, cupping is sloppy science, there is no exact empirical measurement we can apply to coffee after all; we judge it with our highly imperfect senses. Nonetheless, all the variables need to be reduced as much as possible, because a cup that has 10 grams, and is poured at 195 degrees, or steeps for 2 minutes only, will taste different. We have to be consistent. We also have to do this “blind”, without knowing which sample is which, or our perceptions would be skewed by farm names we recognize. And we do it with a religious silence so we can focus, and so we don’t interfere with other judges.

But the fact is, I apply the same principles to many coffees I brew. Is there that much difference between the cupping procedure than brewing in a drip machine, vacuum brewer, or other device? In my Technivorm drip brewer, I always smell the dry grounds before I place the filter in the brewer. I always back up the water into the brew chamber, then remove the top and smell the “crust”. Then I use a spoon to stir the grounds to ensure good brewing, and of course I smell as I stir (just watch out for hot parts on that brewer!). Then I taste. I use a small rounded cup and suck up the coffee (rude, but effective) much the way a cupper sucks the coffee off the spoon. In fact, our little Sorrento model espresso cups are as effective for aerating coffee on the palate as most cupping spoons. So cupping is simply another word for tasting, but this is opposed to “drinking coffee.” If you just drink coffee, you pour a cup and slog it down. That’s fine, but it really pays off to take note of your coffee. The simplest way is this: instead of sucking in the coffee (not good in the office or board room), try taking a moderate sip, holding it on your palate, and pretend to “chew” twice, as if you had a solid food in your mouth. This will circulate the coffee around your tongue, to your upper palate, from the front to back of your jaw, and you WILL taste much more!