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A Specialty Coffee Association White Paper

# The Value of Specialty Coffee Cuppers:

Perspectives, Roles, and Professional Competencies



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# About This White Paper

## Purpose

In a complex industry where consumers' enjoyment and the product's value largely depends on sensory attributes, sensory assessment is a key activity for decision making along the chain. Designed first for simplicity and ease of use, cupping is a way to experience a coffee, recognize its sensory and physical attributes, and use that information to drive purchasing and other decisions. It is performed by multiple actors within coffee's value chain<sup>1</sup> to meet a variety of needs at different points along a coffee's journey.

In the past, cupping was sometimes seen as such a specialized skill that only one or two people in a business might cup coffee regularly, and trained cuppers were sometimes seen in the coffee trade as having an enhanced ability to perceive coffee and adjudicate quality.<sup>2</sup> In recent years, this has changed as our understanding of coffee sensory science has advanced. In parallel, cupping has become a more inclusive practice, offering a way to spread understanding of a coffee and its value throughout an organization, or along a supply chain.

This white paper describes the various roles cuppers currently hold within coffee's value chain, the value of these roles, and the competencies required to successfully operate as a cupper in each context. It is our view that cuppers are highly skilled, not just as "tasters" (although this skill is foundational to the role), but as subject matter experts who may discover, support, ensure, and communicate the quality of coffee while acting as key market linkages within the coffee value chain.<sup>3</sup> By calling attention to the wide range of roles cuppers currently occupy—and the vast range of relevant supplemental or complementary competencies currently required to fulfill them—our goal is to offer a clear path of professional development for those seeking to work in the specialty coffee sector.

## Relationship to the Specialty Coffee Association's Long-term Projects

Since it was created in the early 2000s, the existing Specialty Coffee Association (SCA) cupping system (the cupping and grading protocol and accompanying form) has become a globally recognized industry standard used by many stakeholders across the world. These tools are critically important to coffee producers, traders, and roasters, as well as other skilled professionals who work within coffee's value system, and they exist to be used by the community to improve coffee quality, support producers, and establish a common language between buyers and sellers.

1 Although this white paper uses the more commonly recognized term "coffee value chain," this terminology belies the complicated nature of coffee's "complex value-generating system," as shown in the SCA's [\*Coffee Systems Map\*](#).

2 Dr. Mario R. Fernández Alduenda and Peter Giuliano. In [\*Coffee Sensory and Cupping Handbook, Edition No. 1\*](#). Specialty Coffee Association, 2021.

3 [\*Understanding and Evolving the SCA Coffee Value Assessment System: Results of the 2020-2021 Cupping Protocol User Perception Study and Proposed Evolution\*](#). SCA, August 2022. / [\*Comprendiendo y evolucionando el Sistema de evaluación de valor del café de la SCA: resultados del estudio de percepción del usuario del protocolo de cata 2020-2021 y mejora propuesta\*](#). SCA, October 2022.

Specialty coffee cuppers and graders perform vitally important work in identifying, improving, and reporting the quality of specialty coffee with the assistance of these tools. For the past three years, the SCA has been engaged in a project to gather community input and integrate scientific research into an evolved cupping and evaluation protocol, which will be eventually expanded into a full coffee value assessment system.<sup>4</sup> This new system will align with a more modern, global understanding of specialty coffee and provide a more transparent tool to assess green coffee and discover its value.

4 Specialty Coffee Association. ["Cupping: A Coffee Value Assessment System."](#) SCA, accessed February 10, 2023.

In order to improve market access and create greater equity in specialty coffee supply chains, the SCA is working to produce a collective mindset shift around the understanding of "specialty coffee" in the coffee sector. In 2021, the association published an interpretation of the term that includes not only taste quality, but other attributes that differentiate specialty coffees, including sustainable growing practices. The specialty coffee cuppers and graders who work to discover, improve, and sometimes ensure the presence of these attributes provide an important service to the entire value chain; articulating and rewarding those skills and services will be fundamental to the long-term viability of the coffee value assessment system.

On October 6, 2022, the SCA announced the appointment of a task force comprised of cuppers, institutional partners, and leaders in the coffee community to help build a robust system for specialty coffee cuppers and graders.<sup>5</sup> Between volunteering individuals and invited organizations, the task force comprised of more than 40 members (see list of contributors, page 2); their first contribution was this white paper.

5 Specialty Coffee Association. ["SCA to Appoint Task Force to Support Coffee Cuppers and Graders."](#) SCA News, published October 6, 2022.

# Glossary of Terms

*The terms "cupper" and "cupping" are not defined succinctly here, as this publication calls for an expanded understanding of these concepts, particularly in relation to the role of the "specialty coffee cupper."*

**Attribute(s).** A property that is characteristic of something; a product (or coffee) can be thought of as a collection of attributes. Well-defined attributes can be identified and quantified using a variety of methods.

**Competency.** Knowledge, behaviors, attitudes, and skills that allow someone to do something successfully or efficiently.

**Flavor.** A prized sensory attribute of coffee, described as the combined perception of basic tastes (sweet, sour, salty, bitter, and umami) and aromatic qualities, perceived retro-nasally. Generally, complexity of flavors (measured by the number of attributes a taster may perceive) adds value to a coffee.

**Extrinsic Attribute.** Attributes that pertain to information about a coffee, which might include place of origin, certifications, botanical variety, etc.

**Intrinsic Attribute.** Attributes that are a material part of a coffee itself, including sensory attributes, bean size, absence of defects, etc.

**Sensory Attributes.** Intrinsic attributes of a coffee perceived sensorially (i.e., through smell, taste, sight, and touch) by the drinker, including fragrance/aroma, flavor, aftertaste, acidity, sweetness, and mouthfeel. They can be assessed using three different kinds of sensory tests: discriminative, descriptive, and affective tests.

**Skill.** Learned and applied knowledge used in a specific context in order to perform a task effectively and to a high standard.

**Specialty Coffee.** A coffee or coffee experience which is recognized for its distinctive attributes, and because of these attributes, has significant extra value in the marketplace.<sup>6</sup>

6 Specialty Coffee Association. *Towards a Definition of Specialty Coffee: Building an Understanding Based on Attributes – An SCA White Paper*. SCA, published October 2021. / *Hacia una definición de café de especialidad: Construyendo una comprensión basada en atributos – Un Documento SCA*. SCA, published October 2021. / 스페셜티 커피 정의에 대하여 : 속성에 기반한 이해 SCA 백서, published December 2021.

# Introduction

The tradition of coffee cupping, a systematic evaluation of a coffee's sensory attributes, predates the foundation of sensory science as a discipline, but the incorporation of sensory science tools in cupping practice has helped the coffee industry to both improve and understand it. In the meantime, the number of coffee cuppers has expanded, while their role and skills have diversified. If 50 years ago there were only a handful of cuppers, revered as "golden tongues,"<sup>7</sup> who were the ultimate arbiters of coffee quality, today we have thousands of full-time coffee cuppers and many more "coffee professionals who cup." This growth reflects an increase in curiosity about coffee tasting at all stages of the value chain and offers many opportunities for greater alignment and, ultimately, greater enjoyment of coffee's sensory attributes.

7 Dr. Mario R. Fernández Alduenda and Peter Giuliano. *Coffee Sensory and Cupping Handbook*, Edition No. 1 (2021).

It is the Specialty Coffee Association's (SCA's) view that specialty coffee cuppers are professional coffee tasters who demonstrate the ability to identify and communicate the attributes that different coffees exhibit to stakeholders across the value chain, recognize and can differentiate based on the preferences of different market actors, and create value by matching buyers and sellers.

## The Practice of Cupping

In complex food products such as coffee, sensory attributes like flavor (and their surrounding experience, in general) are arguably the most important intrinsic attributes impacting consumers' enjoyment and perceived quality. That is why many decisions in the coffee industry cannot be made without considering their potential impact on a coffee's sensory attributes. From the farm to the coffee shop, millions of coffee professionals rely on information about sensory attributes to make day-to-day decisions as they strive to add value: what variety to plant, what post-harvest process to perform, what roasting curve to follow, and what brewing parameters to use are all decisions which are more and more informed by an expected sensory outcome. Though traditional sensory tests may be applied to learn about a coffee's sensory attributes, industry actors are most familiar with the "cupping" procedure.

Cupping, however, was a technique designed for the unique needs of the "green," or unroasted, coffee trade. It is a system for coffee evaluation designed to help the evaluator to experience a coffee, recognize its sensory and physical attributes, and use that information to make decisions. Although many traditions have accrued to the process over time, some of which are highly ritualized and symbolic, the roots of the cupping process are practical: it is about performing a rapid and accurate assessment of a green coffee.

## The Role of Cupping in Coffee's Value Chain

Because cupping was designed for the green coffee trade to evaluate coffee, cupping is predominately practiced by many who work in producing, buying, or selling green coffee. When performed by specific actors within specific contexts, the sensory evaluation of coffee through cupping can be used to achieve different goals: discovery, quality screening, flavor assessment for lot creation, grading, pre-shipment sampling, arrival sampling, or purchase sampling.

In the trade process, the act of cupping performs a vital role connecting coffee producers to coffee consumers, but this role is not as simple as matching "supply" with "demand."<sup>8</sup> Instead, the act of cupping can translate and communicate important needs among parties and provide a record of sensory and quality attributes which can be shared throughout the system. When applied in a trade context, this information can be used by a producer (who seeks a buyer for their coffee) or a buyer (who seeks a coffee to fit their needs). It might be used by a commodity system to ensure interchangeability or "sameness" among coffees, or by a specialty system to identify distinctive attributes or "specialness."<sup>9</sup> As consumer preferences constantly change and vary greatly by market, cuppers do not define an objective, singular idea of "quality," but collectively and continuously identify "quality" across markets and over time.<sup>10</sup>

Sometimes, the practice of cupping—although specifically designed to evaluate coffee's raw material—is used in other contexts: quality control, product development, sales, or even consumer education.

## A Continuum of Cupping, Cuppers, and Functions

Cuppers occupy a variety of roles at different points along coffee's value chain, which often requires them to cup according to different (and sometimes multiple) perspectives. With so many shared skills and functions across cupper roles within the industry, it may be less helpful to think of these as distinct groups, but rather to imagine a continuum of "types of cupping" performed, based on a cupper's point of view when cupping, from "single perspective" to "multi-perspective." Despite the overlap in function and skills in roles across the continuum, the application of these skills may be very different when applied in a specific cupping context.

- 8 Pierre Bourdieu. *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste*. Taylor & Francis, April 15, 2013 (227).
- 9 Paige West. *From Modern Production to Imagined Primitive: The Social World of Coffee from Papua New Guinea*. Duke University Press, February 10, 2012 (205-206).
- 10 [\*Understanding and Evolving the SCA Coffee Value Assessment System. / Comprendiendo y evolucionando el Sistema de evaluación de valor del café de la SCA.\*](#)

## Multi-Perspective Cupping

A cupper working under a multi-perspective point of view cups coffee while keeping in mind multiple potential markets for coffees and diverse attitudes about cup quality. Often, cuppers who apply a multi-perspective approach work in the center of the supply chain, screening out coffees with universally disliked attributes (defects) and descriptively documenting other sensory attributes. This multi-perspective approach also recognizes that markets have diverse needs, and a person performing this kind of cupping often acts as a matchmaker between coffees and their ideal consumers.

Examples of specific roles which might utilize a multi-perspective approach to cupping include:

**A quality-control cupper in a dry mill.** This cupper's job is to assess large numbers of coffees from producers, screen out defects, and categorize coffees by sensory attributes. This cupper may also be responsible for combining smaller lots into larger ones, balancing attributes, and blending coffees to create larger lots for sale. This cupper is usually also responsible for a lot's compliance with the contract's quality specifications, including number of defects, cupping score, and others.

**A cupper working for an exporter.** Since the job of the exporter is to connect international buyers with coffees, the exporter-cupper must be able to understand a wide variety of preferences. The exporter-cupper should be able to identify buyers' preferences, and geographic quality norms, and match coffees with these criteria.

**A cupper working for an importer.** Like the exporter-cupper, the importer-cupper must be familiar with many styles of coffee. Since the importer-cupper is often tasked with approving arriving coffees against a pre-shipment sample, the importer-cupper must be able to assess widely differing coffee types and match them with the diverse needs of roasters.

**An independent (freelance) cupper.** This cupper usually advises producers and cooperatives on coffee's quality, sensory attributes, and potential markets. Through quality discovery, quality improvement, and market linkages, this cupper helps producers and cooperatives add value to their coffee. This cupper may also support buyers in finding a coffee with required characteristics, and usually participates in educational activities and coffee quality competitions.

## Single-Perspective Cupping

In contrast to multi-perspective cupping, a cupper working under a single perspective (or closer to the single-perspective side of the continuum) applies a distinct point of view and often advocates for a specific vision of coffee quality. Single-perspective cupping usually requires cuppers to have a clear hierarchy of sensory attributes, leading them to favor some sensory attributes and disfavor others. Cuppers applying a single-perspective approach generally develop their own "style" or aesthetic ideal about how coffee should be in their own context. A cupper working in a role that prioritizes a single perspective therefore has a narrower view of coffee quality, and they often become especially sensitive to attributes they see as particularly meaningful.

Examples of roles which might utilize a single-perspective approach to cupping include:

**A gatekeeper (port) cupper.** This cupper assures coffee lots for export at the port of exit are in compliance with a producing country's standards, as set by the local coffee authority.

**A cupper working for a roasting company.** A cupper's role in a roasting company is often to ensure that the coffees being purchased and roasted for a given roasting company are consistent with the company's style and quality criteria. This kind of cupper is closely aligned with others within their supply chain, including consumers.

**A coffee producer who cups.** A coffee producer who cups their own coffee may be very focused on the farm's style, varieties, and processing approach, and they compare the coffees being cupped to a sensory ideal of what the farm could or should be producing. However, in the context of the processing methods boom (the "Processing Revolution"<sup>11,12</sup>), producer-cuppers are increasingly employing a multi-perspective approach, as they seek to adapt coffee producing styles to different markets and produce a "farm portfolio."

**A coffee critic or influencer.** Many people, including consumers and novices in the coffee industry, look to coffee experts to guide them towards "better" coffees. These cuppers embrace a certain point of view, often favoring specific styles or traditions and explaining these norms to others.

Contexts requiring the use of a single-perspective cupping approach tend to be found closer to consumers, and may include consumer research, consumer education, or communication with consumers. Cuppers working in a context requiring a single-perspective approach may be particularly focused on specific consumers or work under the perspective of a target or priority market.

11 Dr. Mario Fernández Alduenda. ["Finding Your Way Around in the Processing Revolution."](#) Presentation delivered at the SCA's Green Coffee Summit, August 26, 2021; published January 21, 2022.

12 Joel Shuler. ["Paradigm Shift: The Post-Harvest Processing Revolution."](#) Presentation delivered at the SCA's Re:co Symposium, April 6, 2022; published October 15, 2022.

## The Function of Cupping and Cuppers

Although their functions differ depending on their specific role and niche in the industry, there are three main functions currently performed by cuppers in the value chain:

**Sensory assessment.** This function is at the core of every cupper's activity. It implies assessing the sensory attributes of coffee using different kinds of tests and techniques, to produce sensory-attribute-based information which informs decision-making in different areas along the chain, including value discovery. A cupper in a role which requires a more single-perspective approach may prioritize their ideal of coffee quality over other criteria.

**Technical advisory.** Some cuppers overlay sensory information with their technical knowledge about factors impacting sensory attributes and quality, to make technical recommendations to producers and processors about how to achieve a specific flavor characteristic or solve a quality issue. Depending on the cupper's role along the chain and area of expertise, this technical advisory may address either farming and processing issues or roasting and brewing issues.

**Market advisory.** Some cuppers use their knowledge about different markets' preferences to recommend a target market or buyer for a given coffee based on the flavors it exhibits. This function can also be performed inversely: a cupper might recommend a specific producer or source to buyers seeking coffees with certain characteristics. This knowledge of preferences may apply to coffee's extrinsic attributes (e.g., certification) as well as intrinsic attributes such as flavor.

# Cupper Competencies

Due to the diversity of functions performed by cuppers along the value chain, the professional competencies and skills held by successful cuppers are very diverse. Very rarely would a cupper acquire all the different skills or display competencies required to perform all functions; however, cuppers who do are recognized as rounded coffee experts and valuable advisors for the industry.

## Core Cupping Competencies and Skills

The most basic competencies cuppers must have include being able to follow industry standards to prepare coffee for different types of common evaluations, with the goal of clearly and accurately describing their sensorial experience within the context of the evaluation being performed.

In other words, skilled cuppers exhibit attention to detail and the ability to communicate their practices and findings to different colleagues and collaborators. They also apply a customer service mentality and their technical knowledge to solve problems identified in their specific context.

At a basic level, all cuppers should be able to perform these **core skills**:

1. Prepare green coffee samples for cupping, including grinding and brewing.
2. Identify if a sample has been correctly prepared according to the mechanics of their chosen technique(s). This requires a basic understanding of the roasting process and its impact on green coffee in preparation for brewing.
3. Understand and apply cupping mechanics of one or various techniques to cup samples alone or with other cuppers. For cuppers whose roles require that results be comparable and translatable across value chains, a standard and widely accepted method, like the SCA Cupping Protocol, should be used.
4. Develop and maintain a mental library of sensory attributes and cupping terms (a sensory/cupping lexicon to communicate coffee attributes).<sup>13</sup> Cuppers should be clear about the difference between descriptive and affective terms when communicating about a particular coffee. Descriptive terminology used by cuppers should be easily understood along the value chain, so cuppers should be familiar with the use of sensory references. Descriptive assessments should be accurate and repeatable by a cupper.
5. Understand and apply cupping criteria, including the library of desirable and undesirable sensory attributes they have developed for the perspective they apply when cupping (single-perspective or multi-perspective). Cuppers should be clear in the difference between sensory defects (universally undesirable flavors) and other "undesirable" flavors which may be accepted in certain markets but rejected in others.

13 See the *Coffee Taster's Flavor Wheel*, a collaboration between the SCA, World Coffee Research, and the University of California Davis Coffee Center.

## Supplemental Cupping Skills

Not all cuppers need to hold all the skills listed below, but any cupper will benefit from having or developing these supplemental skills:

1. Evaluate green coffee, which includes the following tests: green coffee appearance, color and odor, defect count, bean size and shape, moisture content, and water activity. It also includes the application of criteria to grade coffee based on the green coffee tests results.
2. Prepare green coffee samples for cupping, including roasting green coffee samples for cupping according to the mechanics of their chosen technique(s) and testing/adapting the water used for brewing to minimize the impact of chlorination, etc.
3. Sampling, including standard techniques for sampling green coffee lots, parchment coffee, and coffee in other states.
4. Prepare unhulled coffee samples, including the preparation of parchment and dried-cherry samples from producers and processing facilities, which involves hulling the sample and sometimes preparing a type sample manually.
5. Mastery of multiple cupping protocols and techniques. It is valuable for cuppers to master different cupping protocols, such as the official grading protocols of origin countries.
6. Understanding and communicating perspective when quality scoring. Multi-perspective cuppers should be able to align their scores with a target market, supply chain or group. Single-perspective cuppers should be clear that theirs is just one perspective, especially in group-cupping situations.
7. Communication of cupping results. It is valuable for cuppers to tailor the way they communicate about a coffee to the intended audience, including making a clear distinction between the descriptive and the affective/quality aspects of the assessment, as well as being able to translate between locally-relevant sensory descriptors and a more standardized lexicon.

## Supplemental Sensory Analysis Skills

These competencies will improve the value and credibility of any cupper, but they are not core skills.

1. Ability to minimize bias and error. This implies that cuppers are aware of the different sources of bias and error during sensory assessment and take actions to minimize them. Cuppers must be aware of the value of blind testing.
2. Experimental design. This means cuppers are able to design an experiment and use the sensory results as dependent variables. As an example, a cupper may use cupping results to assess the effect of fermentation time by using two levels of fermentation time and a control with no fermentation.
3. Statistical analysis. It is very valuable for cuppers to be able to use sensory statistics software and be able to interpret results. Specifically, panel performance analysis, product profiling, and check-all-that-apply (CATA) analysis are very useful for coffee sensory work.

# Complementary Advisory Competencies

As cuppers assess the sensory attributes of coffees during evaluation, all cuppers report their sensory experience. When a cupper holds additional subject matter expertise, they may choose to relate their sensory experience of a coffee to this area, offering practicable advice.

**Only cuppers with sufficient knowledge and relevant experience in the given subject area should engage in this practice.**

## Technical Advisory Competencies (Farming and Processing)

For cuppers to be able to relate cupping results to quality factors in production and processing, as well as to give technical advice, they must possess additional competencies and types of knowledge. In this capacity, cuppers should be able to:

1. Relate flavor and quality to farming factors. It is valuable for cuppers to be able to connect desirable and undesirable sensory attributes to farming factors that may cause those flavors, as feedback for producers. Classic examples of this are relating insect-damaged beans to pest-control practices, relating immature beans or certain flavor characters to fruit ripeness, etc.
2. Relate flavor and quality to processing factors. In the context of the "processing revolution,"<sup>14</sup> it is more and more important for cuppers to relate coffee's taste attributes to processing factors. Cuppers need to understand there is a continuum of flavors related to fermentation, ranging from fruity to fermented in character, and should be aware that the border between "desirable" and "undesirable" shifts along this continuum depending on the coffee's target market. Cuppers should be able to work hand in hand with processors to fine-tune processing factors and achieve the desired sensory attributes.

The ability of a cupper to communicate key concepts about farming and processing factors is just as important as the knowledge they possess: cuppers should use language that is easily understood by producers and processors, and avoid using obscure cupping language.

14 Dr. Mario Fernández Alduenda. ["Finding Your Way Around in the Processing Revolution."](#) / Joel Shuler. ["Paradigm Shift: The Post-Harvest Processing Revolution."](#)

## Technical Advisory Competencies (Roasting and Brewing)

Although cupping was designed to test green coffee, some elements of cupping sensory tests have been integrated in roasting and brewing contexts (i.e., quality assurance). For cuppers to be able to relate cupping results to quality factors in roasting and brewing, as well as to give technical advice, they must possess additional competencies and types of knowledge. In this capacity, cuppers should be able to:

1. Relate flavor and quality to roasting factors. It is valuable for cuppers to be able to connect desirable and undesirable sensory attributes to roasting factors that may cause those flavors, and understand the influence of roasting factors on the sensory attributes experienced and reported.
2. Relate flavor and quality to brewing factors, specifically in terms of water composition, brew ratio, and potential impact of brewing process on sensory attributes identified during cupping. Water quality will affect the sensory profile of a coffee when cupped, and cuppers should be able to identify heavily chlorinated or mineralized water when used to prepare a sample for evaluation.

## Market Advisory Competencies

Due to their ability to match a coffee's attributes with a corresponding "market home" where said attributes are valued, a cupper may be seen as an interpreter between buyers and sellers, or between the market and producers. When this advisory role is performed successfully, the advice of the cupper increases the potential for value capture by producers and processors. To perform this successfully, cuppers should be able to:

1. Relate a coffee's attributes to markets where they will be appreciated. In today's coffee industry, the same sensory attribute could be rejected as undesirable in one place and be highly prized at another place. This expands the market options for producers and is one of the drivers of the current processing revolution. However, this is also more and more confusing for producers and processors, who feel uncertain about how to prepare their coffee and to whom they should offer it in order to get the best return on their investment. With their knowledge about different markets and the attributes valued in different places, cuppers are perfectly suited to aid producers and processors in finding a "home" for their coffee with a buyer and consumers who will value their coffee's attributes.
2. Assist buyers in sourcing coffee with desired attributes. With the introduction of new varieties and processing methods, the "classical" sensory attributes for which producing countries were known a generation ago (e.g., Sumatra's earthy flavor and thick mouthfeel)

are rapidly shifting. This expands the palette of available sensory attributes, but also makes sourcing consistent descriptive sensory profiles a more challenging task. Cuppers—and particularly those in producing countries who possess knowledge of local producers—are well positioned to help buyers source coffee which matches their desired attributes, be it the “classical” profile from a given region or a coffee with an innovative profile.

3. Create market linkages. Cuppers may aid in the creation of market linkages and develop a direct connection between buyers and sellers. This may take many forms: making introductions (in-person or electronically), facilitating a relationship as a proxy for either party, interpreting needs or language, etc.



# Professional Ethics

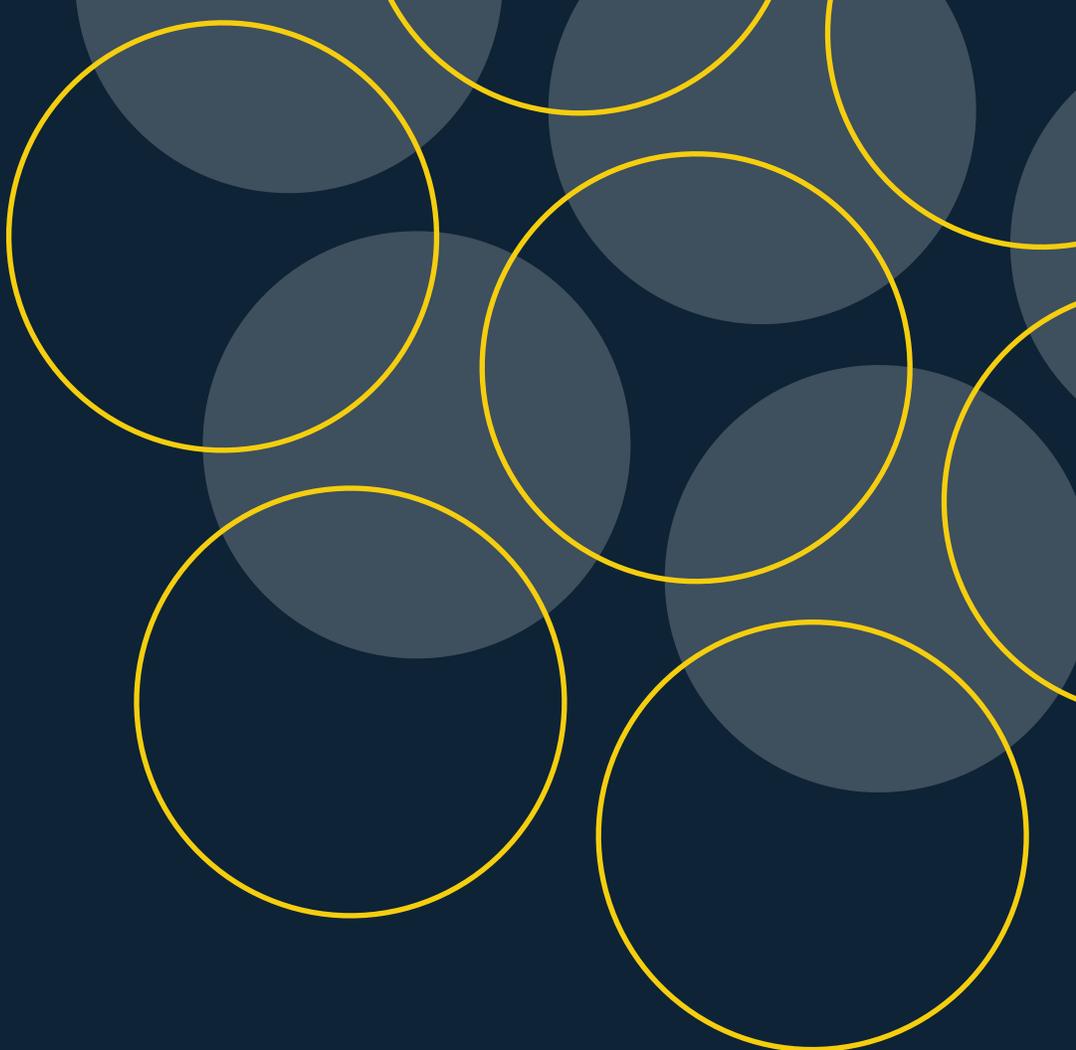
All professions need to rely on ethics. However, as quality assessors who have great influence in value discovery and thus impact the livelihoods of coffee-producing families, cuppers' ethical codes become particularly relevant to the coffee sector. Cuppers should strive to avoid sources of bias and be fair to coffee. They should be clear about the difference between a coffee's objective sensory attributes and their own opinion as cuppers and clarify the said distinction to their own clients; similarly, when cuppers act as interpreters of the market's needs, it should be clear that such interpretation is subject to error. They should be honest about their own capacity and abstain from assessing a coffee whenever their sensory skills are impaired.

Whenever a coffee presents "quality issues" or "undesirable attributes," cuppers should clarify whether those attributes are undesirable universally or only under certain circumstances, and they should strive to guide producers to find the best home for their coffee and/or to fix the issues in the future. In all instances, it is good practice for cuppers to justify their affective scores with descriptive information.

## Revisiting and Expanding Our Understanding of Specialty Coffee Cuppers' Value

Many coffee professionals have learned to cup; the activity of cupping has expanded well beyond its original intent to assess only green coffee. As a result, we risk overlooking the role of the full-time coffee cupper, and particularly those who secure the future of specialty coffee through their work with producers and cooperatives in remote regions. The key functions these cuppers fulfill in this capacity—recognizing farms, methods, and regions with high quality potential; working with producers hand-in-hand to realize that potential; integrating consistent lots from smaller batches of sometimes dozens of different coffee producers; assuring and controlling quality, creating lots (and microlots) that comply with specifications; developing market linkages, helping each coffee to get to a home where it will be best valued—are integral to the current and future specialty coffee industry. The ability to distinguish between two very similar (but closely related) flavors is absolutely a skill, but it is less impactful than the ability to support a coffee producer in achieving that kind of profile (or finding a buyer seeking it). This work requires a commitment to continuous learning about coffee and to ensure their senses are kept sharp.

This paper begins the work of recording the competencies required for this role so that current specialty coffee cuppers and cuppers-to-be may know what skills and competencies they should continue to develop on their career path as professionals. As specialty cuppers increase their intellectual capital as individuals and members of organizations, they will ultimately grow their—and coffee's—value for the specialty coffee industry.



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