The word quality in coffee is used to reference anything from the seedlings selected by a coffee farmer to the preparation of the final beverage, and everything in between. However, therein lies the challenge for quality as a general term—without defining the intent, the word insinuates that one understands the meaning.

Over the years, I have given many presentations about coffee quality to everyone in my company’s coffee supply chain, from farmer to consumer, and one of the most important lessons I have learned is that the word quality is too vague. Rather than talk about quality in general terms, I try to communicate our intent and definition of quality. For example, I may focus on the specifics of a descriptive analysis, a cupping score or the basic steps needed to pass a coffee quality audit. No matter what aspect of quality is being addressed, my goal is to home in on the specifics, with clear definitions and expectations.

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Licensed Q Graders have the opportunity to evaluate coffees for the Coffee Quality Institute. | courtesy of Equal Exchange
Specialty coffee has a set of basic standards that are understandable but not all encompassing, which allows our businesses to have more flexibility and creativity. However, it is vital to understand the fundamental aspects of quality set forth by the Specialty Coffee Association of America (SCAA) to be able to speak the same language, to build a foundation and to continue to push the movement forward. One way that the specialty coffee industry can do this is through the Q program created and administered by the Coffee Quality Institute, or CQI.

Many who work within the coffee industry think of the Q simply as a group of people who have earned the Q Grader license. However, the Q is a more complex system that reaches beyond Q Graders themselves. Developed in 2004 by the CQI, the Q certification system adopted the standards of the SCAA and created a course to certify coffee professionals as Q Graders. The Q program itself is an organized system of services that independently licenses people (Q Graders) as a means to certify quality coffees.

The Q program started as a two-phase cupping competition and auction program that attempted to replicate the success of the Cup of Excellence (COE), but on a larger scale. The initial competition and auction took place in Guatemala, and respected cuppers were invited to participate as judges. According to Ted Lingle, executive director of the Coffee Quality Institute, one of the primary differences between the Q and the COE was the actual size of green coffee lots. The Q auction samples represented more than 300 bags of green coffee, whereas the COE samples much smaller lots of coffee.

One of the goals of the Q program was to unite buyers and sellers through a common quality-based language—essentially linking coffee producers and exporters who are looking to sell coffee with buyers willing to pay a premium for high-quality coffees.

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One of the goals of the Q program was to unite buyers and sellers through a common quality-based language—essentially linking coffee producers and exporters who are looking to sell their coffee with buyers willing to pay a premium for high-quality coffee. Everyone along the supply chain is looking to buy or sell coffee, and many of us perform both functions. In our day-to-day work, we are looking for ways to connect our businesses through market linkage and we want fantastic coffee. However, those connections don’t always happen through the Q program. In the end, the specialty coffee community was not especially keen on participating in the Q auction system, and the auction system itself was discontinued.

As Lingle explains, “What we learned from this experience was that, except for the marketing of a few bags of coffee (COE style), individuals and groups that provide various types of benefits. Basically, we want market linkage and we want fantastic coffee. However, those connections don’t always happen through the Q program. In the end, the specialty coffee community was not especially keen on participating in the Q auction system, and the auction system itself was discontinued.

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auctions don’t work for the ordinary commerce of coffee, as roaster-buyers are more interested in contracting prices for future deliveries than waiting for the results for an auction to determine prices for current deliveries. Ultimately the Q coffee system morphed into becoming a training and certification of cuppers.”

Today, only a small amount of Q Certified coffee is traded, and the Q program has become more of a professional development program used to train and certify coffee professionals in CQI/SCAA standards for cupping and grading.

Now that we’ve discussed the program’s beginnings, let’s look at some of the fundamentals of the Q program as it exists today: the exam, the role of a Licensed Q Grader and some of the benefits that the program brings to coffee professionals.

What Is the Q Grader Exam?

It was almost three years ago that I walked into the lab at Coffee Solutions in Hopedale, Mass., to take the Q course. With 22 written and sensory tests on my schedule for the next five days, I wasn’t exactly thinking, “This will be a piece of cake,” but I certainly felt confident. For my job as an importer and roaster, I basically live in a coffee laboratory—I sort green coffee, roast, cup and score it using the SCAA form—so I felt prepared for the battery of tests to come.

Boy, was I wrong. Timed tests, red rooms and a constant sense of urgency made it quite a week. I was one of the 95 percent of people who did not pass all of the tests on the first round.

In order to get your Q license, you are required to pass all of the tests. For me, the testing process was a physically and emotionally charged experience. Though some in the coffee industry might imagine the Q course as a training or seminar, the actual course is a well-orchestrated set of exams: it’s like a five-day coffee marathon, from 8 a.m. until 5 p.m., if all goes as planned. Learning the results of each test can be a joy-filled experience or a heartbreaking one, sometimes based on a single decision made by a participant.

There are more than 3,000 licensed Q Graders around the world, and if you know one of those people and have conversed with them about the elements of the Q course, you know that the sense of excitement and urgency can be both invigorating and downright overwhelming, no matter whether you pass a specific test or not. We all have a sense of coffee pride and knowledge. In the Q course, your knowledge definitely comes into play, but the set of exams also reveals your ability to test well and demonstrates your raw talent as a taster.

The Cost

The Q Grader exam is offered through certified SCAA laboratories around the world. Each lab is equipped with all of the necessary materials and conditions for giving the Q exam in the same way, whether it is held in Korea or in the United States. Depending on the lab and the instructor giving the course, the cost of the five-day exam can cost upward of $1,200. The additional tabs for hotels, food, plane tickets and car rental fees may make the course seem a bit steep for a small business, but professionals should weigh the monetary cost with the benefits of completing the exam.

What Qualifies as a Q Coffee?

A longstanding argument in specialty coffee centers on the qualification for specialty coffee. I have heard various coffee professionals define it as sweet, clean and uniform coffee with other notable/interesting attributes—like bright, sparkling acidity or distinctive fruit notes—which should bring the score to 80 points or higher. This score, matched by a successful physical evaluation, will qualify a coffee for the Q auction system. If the coffee is out of specification on even one aspect of the evaluation, such as a quaker found in the roasted sample, it will not pass. This evaluation system is rigid and standardized in a fair and comparable way across origins for washed coffee. A Q Certified coffee provides the buyer with an independent confirmation that this coffee is indeed specialty quality.
Making the Grade (continued)

When looking at other types of professional development courses or certification in the specialty food industry, you will find that this course is comparable and, in many cases, economical. If you would like to become a cheesemonger, for example, you could start by taking a variety of independent classes to gain in experience (at a range of $90 to $150 per class), attend focused seminars about making and producing artisan cheese ($300 or more per day), and read about many different types of cheese and take a one-day exam at the American Cheese Society for $650. If you pass, you would be granted the title of cheesemonger. Becoming a certified and accredited food specialist is not something you can do overnight, but the Q course offers coffee professionals a reasonably priced opportunity to earn that certification.

A Test for Coffee Professionals

It is important to note that the Q course is set up to be a series of tests for experienced coffee professionals. It is not meant to teach students cupping, grading or the fundamentals of sensory evaluation; students are expected to understand the standards and evaluation protocols before the class begins. The SCA and regional coffee events offer many opportunities to help coffee professionals prepare for the exam. The Q-class is a combination of coffee knowledge and both practiced and innate sensory ability. First and foremost, you should have a good working knowledge of the SCAA cupping form, cup on a regular basis and study all of the information recommended. You can be a great natural-born taster, but if you don’t have experience with the cupping form you will be hard pressed to pass. More often than not, I hear people say, “Oh, yeah, I use the form,” but ask yourself, do you use the SCAA cupping form frequently, and are you using it properly?

Retakes and License Expirations

As you know, there isn’t a group called “almost a Q Grader.” Participants must pass all of the tests to earn the certification. Imagine that you took the Q course but needed to pass only one more test; this would be called a “retake,” and would be listed on your profile in the CQI database. Once you start a Q Grader exam, you have 18 months to complete it. In other words, if you take the five-day Q Grader course starting on September 10, 2012, and you do not pass one of your triangulation tests, this class will be listed on your personal page in the Q Grader database as a “Fails.” You would need to take the test again and pass it within an 18-month period, on or before March 9, 2014. Retakes are available through many labs around the world: you just need to contact the instructor running the course, which is listed on the CQI website.

Just like many professional certifications, the Q Grader license does expire. This may come as news to some, but if you earned your Q certificate more than three years ago, you must take a calibration class to maintain your license. If you earned your Q Grader certificate in September 2009 or earlier, your certification is up and you have 18 months to take a calibration class. This is a one-day class where you will be given three cuppings; you will need to pass two out of the three cuppings to renew your Q Grader license. If you don’t pass, you have the opportunity for a retake. If you fail the second time, you would need to take a re-certification course. Essentially, CQI wants to make sure you are still qualified as a Q Grader.

Now You Are a Q Grader

The sheer number of professional development classes has blossomed over the past decade through many organizations and companies, such as the SCAA and private consultants. I have both given and participated in many of these coffee courses, but I was attracted to the idea of the Q’s third-party certification and the idea that I was testing myself— that based on my experience in coffee, I could pass a set of standardized tests that were put forth by the Coffee Quality Institute. There are also a variety of additional benefits to the certification.
Your First Job Is
As a Q Grader

As a Q Grader, you become part of a large pool of candidates who may evaluate green coffee samples; this is one of the primary reasons the Q system was established. CQI invites licensed Q Graders to provide a green analysis and/or a sensorial analysis of samples. The samples are blind: you have no idea about the coffee’s region, producer, altitude or varietal. The only piece of information you get is the country of origin. Licensed Q Graders are then required to perform the evaluation and file a report through the CQI database, and then Q Graders are paid for this service.

Q Graders can make money on grading Q samples (approximately $30 per analysis), but due to the number of Q Graders in the world and the limited number of samples going through the system, you would have a hard time making a living from this alone. (Currently, there are less than 200 samples in the system and more than 2,000 licensed Q Graders.) Nevertheless, you provide an independent service and determine if the coffee sample is good enough to be called “specialty.” Your job is to provide an important service to CQI as a grader, but there are many additional benefits to having your Q Grader license.

Additional Benefits

A sense of pride accompanies earning a Q certificate. Fatima Lopez of PRODECOOP in Nicaragua clearly saw her completion of the Q course as a meaningful professional accomplishment. “It’s not only a certificate—it’s recognition for my capabilities,” she says.

In my experience of both taking the Q course and teaching it, I have been able to see people becoming more confident throughout the week, and that confidence continues to rise well after the class has ended.

Andy Sprenger, the head roaster for Ceremony Coffee in New York, is a recent recipient of the Q Grader certificate. “There are only a handful of certifications in coffee that convey the same level of commitment and expertise, ” he says. “Attaining the Q certification was a career milestone. ”

Earning a Q Grader license is also a résumé builder. You don’t have to be a Q Grader to be a coffee buyer, but it does seem to hold some weight. Rob Stephen, senior trader at InterAmerican Coffee, notes, “The impact on both your résumé and the reaction of your business colleagues is noticeable, and this impact carries over to your company as well.” Various coffee companies advertise their Q Graders on staff as a way to entice new buyers. It may not be a formal requirement for many coffee jobs yet, but that may be changing. I recently read an employment ad for a coffee quality assurance position. One of the qualifications for the position was a QGrader license, which demonstrates that from a career perspective the certification has value.

There are also a plethora of specialty coffee competitions available through regional and national coffee events that tap Q Graders as judges. Many of these competitions do not require judges to be licensed Q Graders, but the certification seems to be an attractive characteristic for the judges. I have been to more than one competition where the emcee announces, “All of our judges are Q Graders.”

The Q course also gives coffee professionals the opportunity to learn from their peers, says Craig Holt, owner of Atlas Coffee Importers in Seattle. “The course is taught by people with years of experience in many parts of the industry,” says Holt, who’s also the current chair of the CQI Advisory Committee. “With that guidance, you spend the week of the course learning how producers, exporters and buyers around the world react to different coffees. You get to see what attributes bring value to coffees, and what can compromise a coffee’s monetary worth.”

Stephen of InterAmerican Coffee appreciates the shared experience that the Q program brings to the specialty coffee community. “The Q creates a common bond almost instantaneously by creating a shared experience with other industry professionals,” he says. “If you are working with someone else who you have just met, and you find they are a Q Grader, you instantly know that they possess a similar skill set, and have been through the same grueling task that you have endured. This shared experience allows for people to feel more comfortable with each other, which enhances the relationship.”

Q Graders also form a bond by speaking the same coffee language. “One thing the Q course is great for is calibrating industry professionals by creating a common ground for scoring coffee,” says Sprenger of Ceremony Coffee. “Using the SCAA score sheet, I should be able to score a given coffee very closely to how any other Q Grader would score it.” This may be one of the most positive byproducts of...
the Q Grader certification—it forces coffee professionals to use common tools to build a common vocabulary through a shared set of standards. The byproduct of a common vocabulary reaches beyond basic cupper-to-cupper exchanges and translates into business transactions. As Holt of Atlas says, “You learn a language for experiencing and describing coffee that is relatively objective, which makes it easier to communicate positive and negative results to origin. This makes your purchase/sale transactions more efficient and profitable for every part of the chain by reducing the risk of misunderstandings about quality.”

Professional Development Vs. Q Coffee Brand

The Q class has allowed many coffee professionals the opportunity to become accredited, but the basis of the Q program was truly developed to create a common language of quality in the supply chain—from producer to buyer and within a business to ensure a good and consistent flow of specialty-grade coffee into the international market. However, the Q class as a means for professional development has been more successful than the actual sale of Q coffee. Why are there so many Q Graders, yet such a small flow of actual coffee flowing through the Q program? The answer appears to be related to brand equity. As roasters and cafe owners, we all work diligently to create our own brand identity in the market. This takes time, education and money (and, of course, great coffee). For us as business owners, the money generated through the sale of our coffee helps to fund our sales and marketing strategy. As we look to the future of the Q program, we need to reflect on the fact that the program is only eight years old.

A nonprofit like CQI, which does not generate substantial income on its own, lacks the capital to create a market for the Q brand. The reality is that without the funding to push the brand, there is little awareness of it across the coffee supply chain. Producers and exporters may be hesitant to submit samples to the system (at $150 to $300 per sample) to sell their coffee because there is low demand from buyers and roasters. And roaster buyers don’t purchase Q Certified coffees because there is low consumer awareness or demand for Q branded coffee. Many of those same roaster buyers may also have a Q Grader on staff who already evaluates their coffee, so they don’t see the brand value of the Q symbol. The challenge for the Q system appears to be around the brand equity that is associated with the Q as a symbol of quality in the marketplace. This makes your purchase/sale transactions more efficient and profitable for every part of the chain by reducing the risk of misunderstandings about quality.”

Professional Development Vs. Q Coffee Brand

Making the Grade | An Exploration of the Q Program

Professional Development Vs. Q Coffee Brand

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The Q’s Impact on the Specialty Industry

Even though the Q has not yet been able to capitalize on its brand in the marketplace, it is clear to me that the Q system has had a deep and lasting impact on the ever-evolving specialty coffee movement. There are more than 2,000 Q Graders in the world who have passed a series of tests and are putting their status to work in a variety of ways. For coffee professionals who do not have a strong lineage of apprenticeships, the Q program is an interesting and innovative addition to the CQI lineup. The Q program has been influential with deep international impact, and it continues to mold our industry. This shared knowledge, language and skill set leads to more sophisticated and empowered coffee professionals who understand the value of their own coffee.

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