

TALENTED TASTERS

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How to Recruit and Develop Cuppers

by Beth Ann Caspersen

As far as I can tell, there aren't many people in the specialty coffee industry with the sole job title of "cupper."

Although determining the sensory aspects of coffee is one of the most important functions in any coffee business, in most coffee companies the work of cupping is usually wrapped into another title, such as

green coffee buyer, roaster, quality control or quality assurance technician—and many times the task is done by the owner of a coffee business.

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Cupping at Sustainable Harvest, 2004.
photo by Connie Blumhardt



Green coffee sorting seminar in Uganda. | photo courtesy Beth Ann Caspersen

Historically, the skill and craft of cupping coffee was highly prized and gained through years of apprenticeship. The formation of the Specialty Coffee Association of America (SCAA) in the early 1980s, coupled with the rise of the specialty coffee market in the '90s, helped to birth a changing industry where learning about coffee—especially cupping—became accessible. Through educational forums, the secrets of cupping were exposed; protocols and standards became available, and coffee producers and roasters began to think and act differently. The conversation about quality extended beyond the New York “C” market with the advent of coffee auctions and the development of a universal coffee language.

In the early 2000s, we saw an increase in coffee quality workshops all over the world, financed by NGOs, aid organizations and private business—all working to find and develop cuppers as a tool to increase quality. This led to empowerment throughout the supply chain; skilled and knowledgeable cuppers at origin could identify the quality of their coffee and the potential needs of their buyers, which could increase the value of their beans.

Today, there are thousands of coffee professionals who conduct sensory evaluations of coffee through cupping and even more people working in coffee who aspire to be professional tasters. The pathway from an informal love for coffee to a

professional coffee cupper may be as simple as a job opportunity—being in the right place at the right time, demonstrating the ability to differentiate flavors and aromas, or being selected from a group of interested employees to train as a cupper—or it could be a carefully planned journey to accomplish professional goals. In either scenario, or everything in between, the route to finding a cupper depends on what your company is looking for. Are you starting a new business, formalizing an existing business or replacing an existing position? Are you looking for someone with or without experience?

Let's examine a variety of positive attributes to consider when searching for a cupper. Though many of these hiring criteria can be used for a variety of jobs, this article brings together the traits you want in a coworker with desirable characteristics that you should look for in a sensory professional. Raw talent, passion and excitement for coffee are good starting points, but they are not enough. It doesn't matter if you are working in a dry processing mill in a coffee-producing country or as a barista in a coffeehouse, many of these criteria will cross borders and cultures. However, there are some things you just cannot skip on or omit—the first being education.

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Cupper seminar in Caranavi, Bolivia, 2007. | photo by Beth Ann Caspersen

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Education

We may take it for granted, but working with people who know how to read and write is a necessary element to cupping. There are people with natural talent, but without the ability to write down thoughts, add up points and communicate to either buyers or staff, it will be difficult to move beyond the cupping table. Many people in the world today are unable to read or write, but literacy is a fundamental skill needed to progress as a cupper.

For those looking for more advanced education, there are a variety of food science degrees and sensory certificates available at universities such as U.C.

Davis and Cornell that coffee professionals can use to expand their knowledge. I attended the sensory science and consumer testing program at U.C. Davis in 2007, and although some of the coursework did not apply to our business, the program heavily influenced my decision to implement a coffee and specialty products tasting panel in our company. The return on investment in sensory training has been well worth it.



Lydia Nabulumbi from Uganda cups in the Equal Exchange lab and in Uganda. Left and middle, 2009; right, 2011. photos by Beth Ann Caspersen

Deciding whether to pursue a cupper with advanced training in sensory evaluation depends on many things, including the purpose of your cupping lab, your budget and the strength of your existing tasters, says Andi Trindle Mersch, a senior trader at Atlantic Specialty Coffee. “I believe everyone can benefit from a broader knowledge base,” she says, “but I don’t believe that well-trained and experienced cuppers are any less capable than a taster with specific sensory science background.”

At origin, it’s more important than ever to have skilled coffee tasters available. However, most cuppers are producers or sons of producers and have no sensory training, says Claudia Aleman, trade manager at the Peru office of importer Sustainable Harvest. “A cupper needs to be passionate about coffee, because the passion is a motivator to investigate and learn more about what makes a good coffee, the causes for poor quality and how quality issues can be solved. If a cupper can specialize later in agronomy, post-harvest or dry processing knowledge, then this cupper can be a source of quality solutions.”

Coffee is fascinating because each step in the process can dramatically change the way it tastes. As Aleman notes, those with a natural curiosity about how things work often make great cuppers. These are people who love to geek out on coffee, enjoy tinkering with machines, and understand the importance of micro-adjustments to a process—and they keep the question “Why?” at the front of their brain. These people have a strong desire to do things better and continue to learn.

Testing for Basic Flavor Identification

People all over the world have some understanding of basic flavors—sweet, sour, salty, bitter and umami—but they may need help

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Fatima Rodrigues from PRODECOOP in Nicaragua cups with Beth Ann Caspersen in the Equal Exchange QC lab, 2004. | photo courtesy Beth Ann Caspersen

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articulating these tastes. A cupper must have this knowledge and understanding. The fact is, approximately 25 percent of the population is “bitter blind,” or unable to taste bitter.

So how can you test a potential coffee cupper? Keep it simple and focus on the basic flavors. Begin with a review of the basic flavors and then conduct a test. The beauty of this testing is that it is scientific, and the answers are concrete—this is a “yes” or “no”

test. Basic flavor identification is a necessary skill for all coffee cuppers. Another option would be to perform a difference test (which is which?) or ask a candidate to participate in a triangle test (two of the three samples are the same—pick the odd one out). See the SCAA’s *Coffee Cupper’s Handbook* (pages 31, 34 and 35) for additional testing options, complete with recipes and testing forms.

The Ability to Verbalize and Work Together

I can appreciate the depth of knowledge I find when cupping with others. I always learn new things and hear different ways to describe coffee, but, quite frankly, there is nothing worse than cuppers, roasters or baristas who think they know it all. Don’t get me wrong: there are so many knowledgeable people in specialty coffee, and we are lucky that our industry has become so mature. But there is so much more about coffee that we still do not understand. Everyone is born with a different set of taste buds and should be allowed the opportunity to express his or her opinions. At the start of all cupper trainings, companies might consider outlining the protocols of cupping, which encompass obvious no-nos like avoiding the use of strong fragrances, but perhaps most importantly, each person’s role as a respectful cupper. Take note of those who ignore the advice.

On the other hand, you sometimes find cuppers who are shy or lack confidence to discuss what they find in a cupping score. I believe that asking for input and encouraging cuppers to put their thoughts down on paper and talk about their findings in a group helps build confidence and continue the education process. Cuppers do not always need to verbalize their thoughts, but they do need to write them down.

The Cupper’s Role in a Tasting Panel

As humans, we are prone to be distracted by many of the things that life throws in our way—bias, fatigue, attention drift, changing moods and states of mind. Each of these affects our ability as tasters to be accurate and to have repeatable results. To paraphrase U.C. Davis sensory science Professor J.X. Guinard, individuals vary over time, and individuals vary among themselves. In order to account for this, many companies use a panel of cuppers for each tasting session. At my company, we implemented a panel of trained tasters in 2008 as a way to combat these possible

issues in the tasting laboratory. All of our cuppings are done blind with two to four cuppers, and each roasted coffee sample is covered and coded with a three-digit number to prevent bias. We review our notes and scores at the end of each session and then unveil the coffee’s origin. We track our progress over time and record all of the data to share with our producer partners.

“Regardless of the professionalism and years in training, every cupper has her or her limits of capability and also applies some subjectivity when evaluating coffees,” notes Andrew Hetzel, a consultant with CafeMakers who has trained cuppers around the world. “Sensory evaluation is tricky stuff and often measured with averages. Take, for example, the issue of dry natural-processed coffees: individuals have vastly differing sensitivity to acetic acid, the primary component in vinegar created by bacterial fermentation during the drying process. Some cuppers are extremely sensitive to acetic acid and from their experience in coffee, consider even its minute presence as being a vinegary sign of over-fermentation. Others less sensitive to acetic acid enjoy the flavor in higher concentrations as being sweet and fruit-like.”

Because of these differences, it can be helpful to cup with a panel of experts, Hetzel adds. “Other times, the experience and opinion of just one cupper is preferred, perhaps to maintain one consistent style or when making efficient decisions without the time to organize a group event.”

Trindle Mersch prefers cupping panels for consistency. “I do believe that we experience things differently and that there is advantage in taking multiple results into account,” she says. “It’s also important for cuppers who are cupping as a team regularly to make sure they get out of their own labs and cup with others, so that they can be sure they are calibrated within the greater industry.”

Cuppers Who Roast

If you have a coffee quality laboratory anywhere in the supply chain where coffee is being sorted, roasted and cupped, it will behoove you to know how to roast and

cup. I strongly believe that if you want to cup coffee, you have to know how to roast it—the two go hand in hand. One without the other seems like you are missing vital information. All of the details that you find in sorting a green coffee sample—moisture content, density and more—will inform both the sample roasting and production roasting processes.

Aleman agrees that training at the roaster can elevate cupping skills. “Sometimes a coffee

receives a low score because of improper roasting,” she says. “A cupper needs to evaluate roasting, using all their senses, not only tasting, but also viewing, smelling and touching. Having that broad view ensures fair judgment. The roasting process can highlight a lot of information about a coffee, so it is important for a cupper to be well versed in the roasting process.”

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Colombia coffee quality seminar, 2011. | photos by Beth Ann Caspersen

Sherri Johns—a consultant who wears many hats in the industry, including director of training and events with Alliance for Coffee Excellence and head judge with Cup of Excellence—says a cupper needs to be able to sample-roast, understand thermodynamics and heat transfer, and understand how to achieve a desired result for each coffee. Conversely, roasters must be able to cup. "Maybe a coffee looks the same on the surface, but unless you can cup and identify if the coffee is baked, you may send this out to your customers," Johns says.

For many companies, there is an overlap in responsibilities for cost saving and efficiency—whether it is because there is not enough work for a full-time cupper or roaster or because employees job-share for wider organizational knowledge about cupping. For some larger companies, responsibilities for physical and sensory evaluation are separated to prevent bias. No matter what size your company is or the amount of resources you have, you can reduce and prevent bias in the lab by implementing strong protocols and cupping blindly. You don't have to be a roaster to be a cupper, but why wouldn't you want to?

Love of Food

Prospective cuppers are most likely people who enjoy cooking and eating different kinds of food. They have a deep appreciation for ingredients and how to combine them to build flavor. They work in the kitchen to enhance or negate flavors, and they think about temperature, texture and aromatics. This category is not limited to the chefs of the world, however; there are many people out there who love to eat. The foodie wants to sit down and enjoy food—to savor the complexity or simplicity of a dish, a specially prepared beverage, or a scrumptious dessert.

For those of us in the specialty coffee industry, this is a lesson in enjoyment. I can remember having dinner with a few friends at a local restaurant a few years back. One friend was astonished that my husband and I spent the entire meal talking about everything we were tasting. At the end of the meal, our friend asked, "Do they always do this?" Yes, we do. We translate our love of food and flavor into coffee. Coffee is so complex, and it is the cupper's job to stop the hustle and bustle, inhale the aroma and enjoy the coffee's characteristics as the temperature changes.

A potential cupper who is a foodie likely has an expansive palate with an ability to understand flavors that cross food groups. Working with a variety of specialty food products is an excellent way to expand your own tasting experience and continue to build valuable aroma memory—which can often translate into coffee cupping terminology.

"Become obsessed with taste," advises Johns. "Reverse-engineer your soup from the Thai restaurant. Put fruits on the table and practice matching them to a coffee. Tasting ports, wines and cigars—all will contribute to your coffee knowledge."

Coffee Experience: Beginner vs. Veteran

There are many talented cuppers, but there are a few who have been hired because of their status or years of experience in coffee rather than their ability as great coffee tasters. There are also many cuppers that have been hired without any experience. What are the benefits of hiring a beginner versus an industry veteran?

"Where a strong skills development program is in place, hiring a beginner will allow you to mold your cupper in the image of your company, emphasizing values and preferences important to the organization," Hetzel notes. "Though probably less malleable to exactly fit a company's prescribed way of doing business and likely coming at a higher cost, hiring a veteran may provide new ideas, skills and concepts resulting from his or her years of experience not before considered by an organization. Those additions to a company's fabric of doing business can make an impact far beyond one individual's salary."

Although a veteran can bring new insights to the cupping table, beginners often "absorb everything very fast," says Aleman. "And if the skills, interest and commitment are present, then the rest is easier. In a short time, this cupper will be cupping in a way that is consistent with others within the organization."

Coffee companies must examine their needs and budget before deciding on a preferred level of tasting expertise, advises Trindle Mersch. "If I had the opportunity to hire someone with experience over someone without, I would choose the experienced veteran," she says. "Skilled cuppers are more efficient and can move through more samples in a timely manner while maintaining integrity of results. The integrity of results is really key, since cupping notes are used to communicate approvals and rejections in buying situations."

In looking for a new cupper, cast a wide net and pinpoint the skills and abilities you are looking for to support your business.

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If all of these elements fit the description of the person you want, there is one very important detail that cannot be overlooked: you have to get the job done. No matter what job you have, cupping is only part of the work. Many people love to cup, but the hard work needs to get done to make it all happen.

For most green buyers and roasters, the lab is a bustling place where green coffee is being analyzed, roasted, cupped and analyzed again. Raw talent is important, but understanding what job you are hiring for and finding someone with the ability to execute the tasks in the job description are crucial.



Julio Obregon from CECOCAFEN in Nicaragua, 2004. photo by Beth Ann Caspersen

The Gut Check

You have to imagine a scenario in the future for the person you are thinking of hiring. Can you see that person being successful in the job they are applying for? Are they a good fit for the position and is the position a good fit for them? This in combination with a gut check can help you to find the right fit for the job and your company. Can you imagine working with that person for years to come? What does your gut tell you? New employees need to have enthusiasm and motivation for the position, have the aptitude and intelligence to perform the job functions, and possess the mentality and personality to join a working group or team environment. The job skills can always be taught.

Progress and Continuing Education

Many people ask me how long I have been cupping. When I tell them 15 years, they always say, "Wow, that's a long time," but the reality is that cupping is a lifelong endeavor—the learning never stops.

Cuppers develop at different rates, depending on their natural tasting ability, background, and practice at the cupping table. Hetzel says cupping trainees advance by following a classic model of learning: Beginning at *awareness* ("these six coffees taste different"), cuppers progress to *comprehension* ("this coffee has a silky texture and berry-like flavor"), *application* ("we need an Ethiopian coffee for its typically silky texture and berry-like flavor"), *analysis* ("this tastes like a good example of a natural-processed Ethiopian coffee"), *synthesis* ("we will create a new espresso using this coffee"), and finally *analysis* ("was this the right decision and what trade model can we employ to procure this same coffee again next season?").

Hetzel adds, "Cupping to a level of awareness or comprehension may be appropriate for non-production skills,

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Conducting a Copper Identification Workshop



Copper selection seminar, Democratic Republic of Congo, 2012. photo by Beth Ann Caspersen

In October 2012, I conducted a copper identification workshop in the Democratic Republic of Congo. I worked with two cooperatives in North Kivu to identify one copper for each group. There were 16 candidates, both male and female, between the ages of 18 and 25 years old. The candidates were invited from different communities, and a high school education was required for participation.

Our first day focused on the basics of flavor through tasting and smelling exercises, cupping as a process and identification of basic flavors. This activity was foreign for many of the students, especially since they don't drink coffee on a daily basis—many of them enjoy chai, a milky tea consumed throughout East Africa—and they had little experience drinking coffee without sugar. We tasted milk chocolate, dark chocolate and a series of dried fruits, such as apricots and cherries, all to introduce them to flavors that we find on the cupping table. These foods helped to open their eyes. I was looking for the people who could translate the aromatics and these new basic flavor experiences into coffee. Could they identify any of these flavors? Were they able to describe the weight and texture? Were they able to articulate the bright and zesty sensation on their tongue?

The selection process culminated in a series of exams to test their aroma memory recall, understanding of basic flavors, and flavor identification in both defective and amazing coffee. This was combined with the skills discussed above—attention to detail, willingness to experiment or try new things, ability to take direction, and a great attitude. By the end of the seminar, I had identified two fantastic people for the job. ■

such as sales and marketing, whereas synthesis and analysis should be targeted for those employees with production-critical tasks affecting the wider enterprise. The specific timeline for advancement will vary by copper based on his or her sensory acuity with basic awareness being achieved in days or weeks, comprehensive understanding in weeks or months, and deeper-rooted levels of learning measured in years.”

Time is not as important as experience and training when measuring progress, says K.C. O’Keefe, a Peru-based consultant and trainer who specializes in green coffee sourcing and quality control management for producers and roasters. “I’ve trained cuppers in the past that in one harvest season (five months) have gone from zero to cupping competently,” he says. “Of course, this meant cupping 30 to 60 coffees a day for a good portion of that time, and the individual in mind was naturally talented.”

Those looking to enhance their cupping skills will find educational tools available through a variety of networks, including the SCAA professional development program and certifications like the Q Program. O’Keefe worked with the SCAA to help develop the association’s new Coffee Taster Certificate Program, which will take participants one to two years to complete. There are also basic testing protocols that you can implement on a regular basis, like triangle tests and descriptive cupping. Read *The Coffee Cupper’s Handbook* for directions and tools, and look beyond coffee for sensory experiences and classes that cover other specialty foods like cheese, wine, beer and chocolate.

The coffee industry has a long history of apprenticeship as a means to develop sensory evaluation skills, and today there are countless ways to get experience. In looking for a copper, you can access a myriad of sensory professionals through trade shows like the SCAA Event, Coffee Fest or other international coffee events, or by posting the job on websites. In addition, there are many experienced and talented cuppers who participate on international juries for the Cup of Excellence, Expocafe and other coffee auctions. The power of networking can yield great candidates, and, of course, one of the most timeless ways to find someone is through word of mouth.

Determine what it is you are looking for in a copper, and use some of these lessons learned to find the ideal taster for your business.

BETH ANN CASPERSEN is quality control manager for Equal Exchange, an importing and coffee roasting cooperative in West Bridgewater, Mass. She is responsible for managing the green grading, cupping of green coffee shipments, and copper training; and she oversees quality-control procedures for roasted coffee production and all Equal Exchange products. Beth Ann is a licensed Q Grader and Q Instructor for the Coffee Quality Institute. She can be reached at bacaspersen@equalexchange.coop.



Coffee quality workshop in Chiclayo, Peru, 2006. photo courtesy Beth Ann Caspersen

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