Coffee-industry professionals are known for their creativity, passion and innovative ideas. They are also infamous for analyzing the minutiae behind each step the bean takes in its journey, from processing to roasting to brewing. So it’s no surprise that some coffee companies have been putting serious thought into how they cup. They asked themselves, are we using the right tools for the job?

continued on page 66.

Alternative Cupping Forms and Standards

by Kelly Stewart
The Specialty Coffee Association of America’s cupping form remains the industry standard for evaluating green coffee for purchase, yet some coffee professionals have introduced new standards and scoring sheets to their cupping labs. Their goals were quite different—some developed standards to more accurately grade coffees produced by different processing methods, while others sought to introduce stripped-down forms that would be easier for their staff to use on a daily basis. Still others wanted to infuse their cupping forms with their company’s particular style.

Roast caught up with roasters and buyers who use alternative forms and standards for evaluating their coffees at the cupping table. They told us why they chose to tinker with the way they cup, how they grade each coffee’s attributes, and how they translate their scores to others who don’t use the same forms.

Let’s start with a cupping team that completely overhauled their standards. Then we’ll move on to talk with specific roasters who discuss their experiences with incorporating in-house cupping forms.

Re-evaluating the Standards

When cupping non-washed coffees using SCAA standards, the team at Minneapolis-based Café Imports noticed that their post-cupping discussions often hinged on qualifying statements. “Some cuppers were making their own mental adjustments for processing, while others were not,” recalls Ian Fretheim, the company’s director of sensory analysis. “One would say, ‘Well, on the standard, it’s this…’ and another would say, ‘Yeah, but for a wet-hulled coffee, it’s really…’”

Fretheim and his colleagues found that the SCAA’s scoring scale was built to evaluate washed coffees. “Coffees prepared by other processing methods were often technically penalized right off the bat,” he says.

After Café Imports co-owner Jason Long likened the challenge of evaluating alternately processed coffees with this standard scoring scale to “trying to score blue cheese on a cheddar form,” Fretheim and his colleagues embarked on a project to define and refine the company’s cupping standards.

“The goal really was to score coffees more closely for what they are, regardless of whether the taster cares for it or not, rather than tossing scores out from a washed-centric point of view,” Fretheim explains. “We wanted to define what we were doing, for ourselves internally, and also for our customers.”

Café Imports invited Paul Songer for a week-long series of sessions to work with its staff on cupping and calibration. Songer wears many hats in the coffee industry, including as quality control and technical advisor for Cup of Excellence and a training specialist in sensory analysis. The idea of defining specific standards grew out of those sessions.

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Natural coffee standard created by Café Imports. This and other standards are available for download at www.cafeimports.com/info_cupping.php. | courtesy of Café Imports
“We began basically by sitting down and roughing out a natural standard,” Fretheim says. “The idea was to ask what it is that a person who really loves natural processed coffee loves about it. From there, it became a question of identifying what things could be expected in naturals, what should be accepted as part of the process, and what needed to be considered as defective.”

After the team drafted a scale, they started using it. That led to post-cupping discussions that focused not only on the coffee but also on the scoring standards: what was working, and what wasn’t? The team revised the standards as they came up with new ideas.

Before Café Imports settled on the standards it uses today, “I had layers upon layers of revisions taped up to the cupping lab wall,” Fretheim says. “Each layer would get marked up with notes as we cupped, until it was time to print off a revision.”

With this painstaking process, the team developed five process-based standards for cupping coffee (for a glimpse at the naturals standard, see page 67; to see all five standards, visit www.cafeimports.com/info_cupping.php). “We’re still essentially on the SCAA standard for our washed coffees,” Fretheim notes. “We opened up the others—natural, wet-hulled, Brazil/India, and decaf—because of what a strong standard does not allow: variation.”

Though the new standards are now framed posters on the walls in Café Imports’ cupping room, Fretheim says the team is still evaluating them and may make changes in the future. “They really are meant to be living things, adaptable as coffee changes, and as we do,” he says.

Form and Function

The SCAA cupping form enables coffee professionals to organize their thoughts and discuss each coffee using the same language and scoring scale. But some companies have left this standard form behind in favor of creating their own targeted evaluation systems.

At Durham, N.C.-based Counter Culture Coffee, cuppers use many different forms, depending on the venue and purpose of the cupping. To critically evaluate pre-ship and arrival samples, Counter Culture uses its most sophisticated cupping form, which is still “more efficient, perhaps simpler” than the standard SCAA form, says Jeff McArthur, the company’s head roaster.

Standard forms “tend to be more confining with all of the parameters being measured as a score, whereas we tend to balance the tangible measurements with descriptors and preferences,” explains McArthur. “Our forms were created to help build a consistent evaluation, making sure that each cupper is noting categories that impact score while at the same time allowing for written descriptors that turn a numerical score into a qualitative measure.”

After experimenting with creating different scales and forms for different processes, similar to Café Imports’ approach, Counter Culture decided to focus on a single evaluation form for green coffee. However, McArthur notes, “We look specifically at which products we anticipate coffees to flow into. For example, we might cup a coffee that perhaps is a more nutty, round and medium body profile that we would anticipate filling an espresso role within our product line.”

McArthur sees himself and his colleagues at Counter Culture as “very much a descriptive-based class of cuppers.” But he underscores that the team places an emphasis on scoring coffees, not simply on describing them. “We are in search of the high-quality coffees, with strong potential for partnerships and future collaborations, and we have ever-evolving preferences for what these coffees should be as we highlight producing countries and farmers for our products,” he adds.

Counter Culture does not score or evaluate coffees differently because of origin, McArthur says, which helps to “shed preconceived quality references to countries of origin” and keeps quality the main focus.

“We believe it is important to recognize how well producers can cultivate, harvest and process their crops and ultimately deliver them to market regardless of geographical origin,” McArthur adds. “An example would be that a coffee from Kenya that we score an 86 is not as good as a coffee from Mexico which scores an 89—sure, it isn’t just score that is important during purchasing decisions, but this is how it looks on paper with regards to quality.”
Chicago’s Intelligentsia Coffee also moved away from traditional cupping forms several years ago and “developed a form that allows us to evaluate the attributes that we feel are the most important,” says Michael Kearby, the company’s lead roaster, QC specialist and green buyer. “We felt that a lot of our scores were bottlenecking in the same range, and because of that, we felt we were not scoring the coffees properly,” Kearby says. “Our new system allows for a broader range and [for] coffees to be evaluated correctly.”

The company’s form focuses on a numerical grading system, with descriptors to help the cupper defend his or her score. “One cannot just arbitrarily put down a score without showing how they came to that conclusion. It’s like math class—the cupper must show his or her work in order to get the credit.”

Geoff Watts, Intelligentsia’s vice president and green buyer, took the lead in developing the form, with feedback from the company’s cupping team. “We felt that a lot of our scores were bottlenecking in the same range, and because of that, we felt we were not scoring the coffees properly,” Kearby says. “Our new system allows for a broader range and [for] coffees to be evaluated correctly.”

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As coffee professionals move from company to company, the alternative scoring sheets sometimes travel with them. Deaton Pigot, buyer and head roaster at Toby’s Estate Coffee in Brooklyn, is a former Intelligentsia employee who uses a modified version of Watts’ form when evaluating green coffee and for quality control. Toby’s Estate has added an “age” column to the form because “we sample roast our coffees once a week to track how they are aging,” Pigot says. “When coffee starts tasting old, we can try to change roast profiles to make it taste better. We then cup the coffee again to determine whether it needs to be pulled from our offerings.”

Weighing Options

Each cupping form approaches coffee evaluation from a different perspective. Which attributes have more importance and value? Should cuppers grade aroma, or simply note its intensity? Should sweetness be ranked with a numerical score or treated as present/not present? Companies that have created their own cupping forms have had to grapple with these questions. And the answers don’t come easily, especially when working with alternately processed coffees. As Fretheim notes, “You’ll never create a form capable of truly defining and doing justice to a diverse group of coffees. At some point you have to say yes and no.”

On a scale of 6 to 10, the SCAA cupping form grades fragrance/aroma, flavor, aftertaste, acidity, body and balance, plus an overall cupper score. Additionally, cuppers may award 2 points per cup for the attributes uniformity, clean cup and sweetness, and subtract 2 points for each cup displaying a fault and 4 points for each cup displaying a fault. After each attribute is judged, the final score is tallied. Eighty points is the SCAA’s threshold for specialty quality.

But depending on what a company is looking for in a coffee, some attributes become more important than others. Flavor, sweetness and acidity carry more weight than other attributes at Intelligentsia. “To me, sweetness is really important—call me crazy. I can’t really recall having a coffee that was too sweet,” Kearby says. “If a coffee is not sweet, it tends to suffer a bit in the scoring department.”

The cupping form used at Toby’s Estate also quantifies a coffee’s sweetness. “As there are varying degrees of sweetness perceived in all things, a simple yes or no does not do sweetness levels justice,” Pigot says. “If a coffee is not sweet, it tends to suffer a bit in the scoring department.”

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“A good example is pulp/coffee cherry flavor. The tolerance is much lower in a washed coffee than in a natural processed with this. Similarly, transparency is much more important in washed coffee than it is in wet-hulled.”

**Translating Scores**

When buyers or roasters use a different scoring system or set of standards than most of their peers in the specialty industry, does that automatically spell trouble when it comes time to discuss scores? Not necessarily.

To translate their cupping scores to customers, the Café Imports team simply shows off its standards, which consist of a numerical grading system that’s tied to descriptive definitions. “Ninety-two is a grade, and as such is tied to a definition,” Fretheim says. “At the same time, 92 doesn’t tell you what sort of coffee you’re looking at. Floral? Fruity? Caramelly? There could be many variations of profile at 92 points, or within any of the grading bands. We use descriptors to refine the specifics of a coffee within those bands.”

Likewise, Fretheim, Kearby feels like the scoring at Intelligentsia is more justified because the company can show how it came up with its numbers. “With each numerical score, there is a reason for how that score was achieved. I feel like anybody off the street would be able to understand our scores,” he says. “We have a place on the sheet specifically for the producer or broker. We also provide them with a detailed report, which includes each cupping we did of their coffee.”

Pigot affirms that using an alternative scoring system has not led to trouble communicating with importers and producers. “People are really good with scores these days, so I will give a flavor profile that I like with a score range along with it,” he says.

Even so, a little back-and-forth sometimes occurs when sharing scores, says McArthur. “Our overall scores are given openly, and usually it takes the addition of support from the descriptors to clarify any discrepancies.” 

When larger issues arise, Counter Culture has a team of cuppers it consults for reference, as well as data about green moisture readings. During green coffee evaluation, the company uses cupping flights of at least 10 cups, and often more if defect or consistency issues show up.

No matter what form or standards you use, roasters and buyers say what’s most important is that cupping standards and scoring systems should be written in such a way that allow everyone to understand them. “The cornerstone here is that the scores are directly tied to definitions. Those definitions allow our scoring to relate to any person’s scoring, even if we don’t match in the attributes, given preference,” Fretheim says. “Our 84 Brazil may be your 86, or your 80. The important thing is that you can see what we mean by ‘84’ when you look at our cupping notes.”

**Communication Breakdown**

But roasters who experiment with an in-house form may realize that their new cupping system just isn’t working. As Sean Capistrant, green buyer and roaster at Chicago’s Metropolis Coffee, knows firsthand, alternative forms can be confusing to cuppers and to coffee professionals who use the standard SCAA form.

When Capistrant moved from production to the apprentice roaster position at Metropolis in 2009, he was introduced to the company’s stripped-down cupping form, which mirrored the SCAA form in some ways and veered away from it in others (see page 74 for a more detailed look at the form). The Metropolis form scored the attributes acidity,
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body and finish using 5-point scales for both intensity and quality. Fragrance and aroma were also graded with 5-point scales, while cuppers could award up to 50 points for sweetness. Cuppers were able to add 5 points per cup for uniformity and clean cup. Additionally, cuppers could add or subtract 10 overall “cupper points.” Defects, taints and faults were not formally recorded.

As he took on the green buying role for the company, Capistrant began to realize that the form was falling short in many ways. “When we communicated with people in the industry—with our exporters and importers, and what have you—we found that there would be a great disparity in scoring,” he said. “Lots of coffees were unfairly punished or haplessly rewarded” with the in-house form.

Orlando, Florida-based importer and roaster Caffe Lindo is an NSF approved cleaner that is dried for cleaning group heads, portafilters and other important parts of your espresso machine. For more information, contact info@CaffeLindo.com.

Learning and Keeping Pace

For inexperienced coffee tasters, cupping can be an intimidating process. The trepidation is amplified when cuppers are handed an evaluation form. “When I first saw one of these sheets, I thought, ‘Oh, my god, what do I do? I don’t know where to start,'” Capistrant recalls. “It felt like a Scantron sheet for your history exam.” But with time and practice, coffee professionals grow comfortable with whichever form they use.

Beginning cuppers may choose to start with a simplified form, but Pigot advises that there are benefits to learning to cup using a standard form, such as the SCAA or Cup of Excellence versions. “Trying to compartmentalize two to three different attributes during the three passes I perform really helped me understand cupping a lot faster,” he says. “Because of this, I encourage beginners to start using the COE form, and I explain what to evaluate at each of the three passes.

“For example, when cupping coffee on the first pass I tell the cupper to focus on the bigger attributes like body,” Pigot explains. “The second pass should focus more on flavor and aftertaste, and with the third pass I focus on acidity, sweetness and overall perception. This simplifies the entire process and focuses my attention at each pass, rather than trying to complete all the evaluations all at once.”

Similarly, it behooves cuppers to familiarize themselves with the SCAA form, Capistrant says, because it’s important to cup with other coffee professionals and determine whether your scores fall in line with those of your peers.

“Over time, you just develop a sense of ease with the form,” Capistrant says. “You want the form to help you; you want it to work for you. Because even if you have a bad day, you’re able to look at coffee objectively, and it usually tells you the right answer.”