

SAYING *Coffee*

the NAMING REVOLUTION

by
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Davids

LANGUAGE IS SUPREMELY important in the world of coffee. We need it to lead media and consumers alike toward a deeper, more knowing, ultimately more committed relationship with the beverage, and we need it to deepen our own ability to deliver on that relationship.

Which is why I think a review of our collective language about coffee is in order. Both specialty coffee and the language of specialty coffee have undergone an especially dramatic transformation over the past five to seven years. In particular, languages describing roast and green coffee origin are in the throes of change. Older languages overlap with newer languages, while some of the founding terminologies of specialty coffee have disappeared entirely, either to be replaced by new terms or dismissed entirely.

continued on page 38



FROM HEAVY TO FRENCH

Let's start with the evolution of language around darkness or degree of roast.

In the old days, say before cheap robusta took over coffee cans, the language around degree of roast ran something like this:

- Cinnamon (very light brown)
- Light (light end of the traditional American norm)
- Medium
- Medium-high (still preceding the second crack)
- City-high (or just "City"; still preceding the second crack but very close)
- Full city (usually into the second crack; occasional light patches of oil on the surface of the beans)
- Dark (definitely into the second crack; dark brown, sheen of oil)
- Heavy (very dark brown, shiny surface)

Of these terms, light, medium and dark all survive, of course, along with the less obvious descriptor "full city," a term that was taken up enthusiastically by the pioneers of specialty and is still used in some circles. I suppose it survives because the middle of the roast spectrum is so crucial and full city is an attempt to describe the turning moment of the roast cycle—that tantalizing transition at the leading edge of the second crack, neither definitively medium nor dark.

ENTER ROMANCE AND EUROPE

The pioneers of specialty had little use for the rest of the hoary, unglamorous language inherited from commercial coffee. Instead, they preferred something that glamorized one of the founding appeals of specialty coffee—more choice for the consumer, more sensory possibilities. And romanticized it with language that evoked the presumed European roots of in-store, small-batch roasting and the old-world artisanry of it all. Consequently, early specialty offered the consumer a whole roast geography: New England (the lightest roast in those days), American (a.k.a. medium, regular), Viennese (just into the second crack), and southward in presumed darkness to Italy (Italian or sometimes espresso; solidly into the second crack), farther south darker still—Spanish, Neapolitan or Turkish—with a final bounce back up to northern France for the ultimately dark-roasted French roast.

No wonder dark roasting triumphed over the next 20 years or so of specialty history: Among the romantics and rebels who crowded the early Peet's and Starbucks stores, who wanted to be New English when they could be Italian or French?

Some reality attaches to these names, of course. Certainly in 1950 most American coffee was, well, "American" in roast style, and certainly northern France traditionally roasted coffee darker than anywhere in the world. However, in the 1980s enough specialty coffee namers had actually visited Italy to realize that Italians did not, at least in 1980, roast coffee particularly dark.

In fact, Italians roasted their espresso coffee rather light, say somewhere between (using the language of the day) "American" and "Viennese." So to smooth this problem over, some in the industry popularized the idea of a "northern Italian" roast—a phrase describing the middle-of-the-spectrum roast style actually practiced in Italy rather than the very dark styles produced by nostalgic Italian immigrants in New York's Little Italy and San Francisco's North Beach, styles that first gave Americans the idea that dark roasting and Italy went together.

Today most of these romantic European roast descriptors have disappeared from coffee bags and bins. All, that is, except for the ubiquitous "French roast." The extreme nature of this ultra-dark roasted profile, with its thin body and burned pungency, is so polarizing to consumers and so clearly derived from the impact of roast and not from the character of the green coffee. It virtually creates its own product niche, wearing a label that is simultaneously warning to those who find it bitter, shallow and astringent and positive identifier for those 10 percent or so of the coffee drinking population who find its pungency bracingly intense and who won't drink anything else. The "northern Italian" roast



descriptor also lives on, though much less prominently, perhaps because it remains a useful way to signal to consumers that the espresso they are about to buy and is sweeter and subtler than the robustly pungent espressos that until recently ruled America.

NUMBERS (IN PART) CONQUER ROMANCE

What happened to virtually wipe out these early sets of romancing descriptors? Several things, I think. One was the advent of another language to describe roast, a language that comforts us because it rings with such certainty: the language of numbers.

Instrument manufacturers devised ways to read roast color by instrument alone. The instruments report back to us with numbers that describe a continuum of roast color or, more hopefully, changes in sugar chemistry associated with changes in roast color. Carl Staub's Agtron devices have achieved particular success in North America. In my lab, where we regularly use an Agtron instrument to confirm roast color, we talk about roast not with words, but with numbers based on our instrument readings.

Assuming we keep our Agtron device serviced and calibrated, it gives us quite consistent readings from week to week and month to month. But compare our readings to those generated by another Agtron instrument in another location? The results are considerably less consistent (although still much

better than staring at the beans and guessing). Cross-referencing is further complicated by the fact that Agtron proposes two different numerical scales—one set is the original "Commercial" or E10/E20 scale, and the second is the "Gourmet" or M-Basic scale, which Staub devised later in his work to better apply to the specialty practice of 20 years ago, with its emphasis on the dark end of the scale. Our instrument reports in the M-Basic scale.

What about the color readers manufactured by Fresh Roast Systems, Javalitics, Neuhaus-Neotec, Probat and QuantiK? With the exception of Javalitics, these instruments all use their own proprietary scales. (The Javalitics offers the user a choice of four scales, including the two developed by Agtron.) These various scales can roughly be cross-referenced with one another and with the two Agtron versions, but my experience suggests that, regardless of manufacturer or scale, the only way to communicate with any precision between instruments in different locations is to do private instrument-to-instrument calibration by exchanging samples and readings.

continued on page 40



FROM NUMBERS BACK TO WORDS

To return to the theme of language, then, the scales provided by Agtron and various other instruments (all of which invariably read with the *lower* number representing a darker roast and a *higher* number a lighter roast) provide a useful language for describing roast, but a language that remains tricky and ambiguous, almost as tricky as words. Plus, not all small roasting companies have the money to spend on an instrument that costs several thousands of dollars.

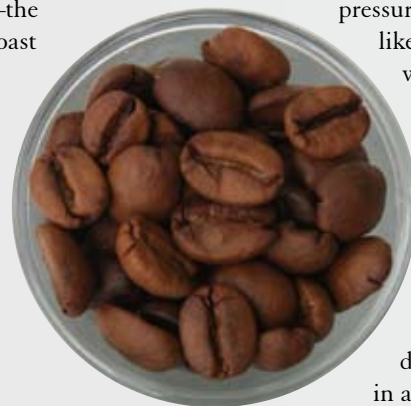
The effort to turn Agtron numbers into a usable language accessible to everyone with three hundred bucks to spare came from the Specialty Coffee Association of America, which in the early 1990s collaborated with Staub to develop the Agtron/SCAA Roast Classification Color Disk System. The eight reference points in this classification system are identified with rounded numbers in 10-point increments and are matched to eight carefully prepared color disks bearing the most direct possible linguistic descriptors, ranging from “Very Light” to “Very Dark,” with “Medium” occupying the midpoint. A sample of roasted coffee, when ground and pressed into a Petri dish, can be matched with a color disk, thus assigning it a number that approximately matches the equivalent number for a ground sample measured on the M-Basic Agtron scale. This system, however ingenious and well-considered, nevertheless appears to have made only a modest impact on the specialty industry.

For one thing, the entire idea of communicating roast color by numbers is thoroughly confusing to consumers (the most frequently asked questions to the editor at *Coffee Review* are puzzled queries about the Agtron numbers that appear with each review). Plus, the high end of the industry appears lately to have re-committed to a more organoleptic and craft approach to determining degree of roast; in other words, more tasting and fewer numbers.

OTHER NUMERICAL LANGUAGES

Numbers figure in other systems for determining and communicating degree of roast. One approach is roughly measuring the internal temperature of the roasting beans by using a probe in the bean bed. Another is measuring the weight loss of the roasted beans—the darker the degree of roast the greater the weight loss. A third is the equipment-relative act of measuring the time of the roast, the favorite starting point of beginning roasters.

The heat probe is particularly useful because it gives us a moving, real-time, on-the-fly numerical measure of roast development or color. Like a thermometer stuck in a turkey, the higher the temperature registered by the probe, the more “done” the roast. I would contend that every roasting installation, however modest, should incorporate such a probe. However, the problem with these simple little devices is, again, consistency across time and place. Even with large, sophisticated, computerized roasting installations, the final call on when to terminate the roast is typically made by the oldest of roast-measurement acts, a human being pulling out a sample of beans with a trier and eyeballing it against a retain sample. The probe and other instrument readings of



temperature and air-flow supply only a basic framework for this final crucial act (except perhaps in the case of very fast, convection-based “high-yield” roasting machines, where the roast typically develops so quickly that only a machine can act quickly enough to make the call). Certainly formulas have been developed aimed at correcting for variables that impact the variations in probe temperature, like ambient temperature, barometric pressure, bean density and the

like, but it appears that, at least with conventional roasting equipment, nothing quite substitutes in that climactic moment of the roast for actually extracting some beans and observing them.

Most of the ways of monitoring roast color and describing it are summed up in a chart on pages 44–45. Note,

however, that all of the quantitative values and correspondences proposed in the chart are approximate. Roasting, like so many aspects of coffee production, continues to be difficult to quantify and control with precision owing to coffee’s chemical complexity and variability—a fascinating challenge for some of us and a source of frustration for those who seek quick and certain answers.

Experienced roaster folk also will note that I have simply passed on the much more complex issue of roast profiling, the sequencing and method of transferring heat to the roasting beans and impact on sensory character. Frankly, it was tough enough to get through degree of roast without monopolizing half the magazine.

DARK-ROAST KAMIKAZE AND ROAST-COLOR GRAPHICS

Returning to the perhaps more important issue of communicating degree of roast to consumers, a second development appears to have doomed the old geographic-romantic roast-color terminologies: a kind of dark-roast kamikaze that occurred in the ’90s. Remember when everybody in the specialty industry except a few East Coast companies roasted *really* dark? By that time Starbucks had managed to define (temporarily, as it turns out) all specialty coffee as dark-roasted coffee, and smaller, newer companies attempted to differentiate themselves from Starbucks by roasting their coffees even

darker than Starbucks did. I recall roasters snickering about “Charbucks” when in fact many of their own coffees read several Agtron points darker than the Starbucks norm. For me, the final proof that words had failed us in regard to roast came when I received a sample in the early 2000s that was clearly labeled, on the bag, as a “light” roast. This “light”-roasted coffee was—literally, measured by instrument—considerably darker than a Starbucks espresso roast.

Another thing happened. Consumers began to untangle the impact of roast and the impact of the green coffee, permitting roasters to represent darkness of roast graphically using roast color scales or thermometers. Advances in inexpensive color printing accelerated this graphic approach to communicating roast color. For me, roast color thermometers are an immeasurably better way to communicate roast color than any of the older sets of names. Roast thermometers or scales may not be romantic, but they get the fundamental point across—roast color is relative and exists as a continuum. It cannot be reduced to a series of separate, absolutely defined points on that continuum.

Roast-color thermometers also get the roast-color-communication act out of the way using economical visual means, allowing roasters to allocate more words to the green coffee. And, as it turns out, they needed those words.

ADDING THE DETAILS

Because as roast descriptors diminished in importance, green coffee description grew dramatically richer and more complex.

In the ’70s, specialty coffee lured converts away from the boring world of supermarket and diner coffee not only with European roast names, but also with the exotic names of the places the coffees came from: Kenya, Guatemala, Sumatra, etc. There was usually a second part to those early names, a qualifier: Kenya was usually Kenya AA, Guatemala usually Guatemala Antigua, Sumatra usually Sumatra Mandheling and so on.

Where did this first wave of names come from? They were, of course, lifted straight off the burlap bags in which the coffee arrived and they reflected the traditional terminology provided by the decades-old system of origins and grades developed by the traditional coffee supply chain. The coolest sounding of these market names migrated right from the bag to specialty coffee menu boards and labels. Much of the Colombia coffee specialty roasters bought in those days came through the rather anonymous channels of the Colombia Coffee Federation, so grade rather than region was the preferred modifier: “Colombia Supremo.” Same with Kenya; you didn’t want to challenge the newly coffee-energized brains of your novice consumers with a lot of cooperative names that changed by season and auction anyhow, and most Kenya came from the same general region, so grade to the

continued on page 42

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rescue again: Kenya AA. For Guatemala, however, region worked better than grade. Antigua sounded romantic (a few customers may actually have visited there) whereas Strictly Hard Bean required too much explanation. Plus, back then, most fine Guatemalas that made it to the United States came from Antigua (or pretended to) anyhow. Hence, “Guatemala Antigua” became the label name of choice.

TRADITIONAL ORIGIN AND GRADE NAMES AS FREE CO-BRANDING

As this regional and grade naming caught on and codified, it brought with it another powerful benefit to the new specialty roasters. These regional and grade names essentially became brands. An impressive and, to me, slightly baffling example of the power of this informal origin-name-branding is Tanzania Peaberry. True, peaberry is a grade, but Tanzania is the only one of these early specialty green coffee names that regularly added an obligatory reference to bean type. And the connection of Tanzania and peaberry has hung on. Despite the obvious availability of many fine coffees from Tanzania that are not peaberry, it apparently is still difficult for roasters to sell a Tanzania without the peaberry name attached.

ELEMENTS OF A CONTEMPORARY COFFEE LABEL

- Country of origin
- Region
- Farm or cooperative name
- Growing altitude
- Varietal
- Crop year
- Processing method
- Certifications
- Roast level
- Flavor summary
- Grade
- Harvest date, if available
- Roast date

CUP CHARACTER AND ORIGIN/GRADE

Along with freebie brands, the specialty industry also inherited from the conventional coffee supply chain an expectation that various origins and grades embody a matching traditional cup character. What people seldom recognized at the time was the fact that the consistent cup character associated with certain origins is not at all natural or inevitable, but the product of human will and cultural practices, hence subject to change.

Allow me to characterize the traditional Costa Rica SHB profile as cleanly acidic, powerful and balanced in structure but relatively straightforward in aromatic nuance. This cup expectation is based on three factors: a Costa Rica tradition of meticulous wet-processing, an almost universal planting of the balanced but aromatically straightforward caturra variety, and high growing altitudes. It also was owing to a supply chain that favored the recognized Costa Rica profile when grading and selecting coffees. Going to the other extreme, we now know that the cup character of the classic Lintong or Mandheling type of Sumatra is mainly owing to a processing wrinkle only recently named wet-hulling, and secondarily to moderate growing elevations. Classic Ethiopia Yirgacheffe coffees mainly owe their unusual cup character to very distinctive local varieties of arabica as influenced by careful wet-processing and moderately high growing elevations.

Readers may disagree with the detail in the preceding paragraph, but the point I am making should be clear: Origin cup character is not inevitable or natural, but the product of culture, history and human will.

At any rate, we know where this story went: jet planes, Internet, marketing-savvy producers, footloose and curious roasters. And relentless efforts at product differentiation at the green coffee level. Producers and their roaster partners began looking for any differentiator, any edge, something that would allow them to say that their Costa Rica was excitingly different from the usual Costa Rica. For example, today a differentiated Costa Rica

could be a “honey” coffee (dried with some mucilage still adhering to the bean) or grown in a special geographical pocket or terroir, or only from trees of the bourbon variety. To the simple region and grade names of specialty tradition the industry first added “estate” names, then an increasingly precise set of identifiers, now routinely including processing methods, botanical variety, farm name and precise growing region.

The old, traditional origin/grade names are still powerful marketing tools among specialty coffee consumers, of course—a fact that has not escaped the attention of some producing country associations and their NGO allies. Formal protection of these valuable but heretofore unprotected names perhaps has begun with the success of the Ethiopian authorities in claiming ownership and licensing rights for the names Yirgacheffe, Sidamo and Harrar.

GREEN COFFEE DESCRIPTORS RULE

But what is quite apparent in observing communication at the top end of the specialty segment today is that detailed green coffee descriptors have taken precedence over roast descriptors. The implication appears to be that the roaster has chosen the right degree of roast to showcase an often elaborately described green coffee. Rather than ask consumers to first decide which degree of roast they like, the new naming moves directly to extolling the green coffee.

Something similar has happened with mid-tier supermarket blends, those blends that compete on the cusp between true specialty on one hand and cheap blends in plastic cans on the other. I’m thinking of the Starbucks supermarket line of bagged coffees and similar coffee repertoires from companies that compete in the same niche. Here a series of names, probably originating with Starbucks, simultaneously attempts to define *both* roast style and general green coffee style. “Breakfast Blend” appears to be a code name for a medium-roasted, gently acidic coffee (“Mild” in Starbucks-speak); “House Blend” is a little darker and less acidic—

think full-city or Viennese in the old languages. Next darker is espresso, apparently meant more as a descriptor of roast and style rather than recommendation for brewing method. In the supermarket this term appears to describe a blend that is roast-forward (Starbucks: “Bold”), low in acidity and sweetly pungent. And at the dark end of the spectrum, the inevitable French roast lurks (“Extra bold”).

A final curious note on implicit supermarket codes for roast color and green coffee style: “Kona Blend” in supermarket and some food service lineups appears to be more a roast and blend character descriptor than an (albeit phony and deceptive) origin descriptor. In other words, rather than functioning as an origin-oriented descriptor for a coffee made up of 10 percent Kona and 90 percent coffees from anywhere except Kona, it functions as a kind of consumer-oriented code name for a generic low-acid, medium-roasted arabica coffee, a sort of milder version of the supermarket 100-percent Colombias. It represents a carryover of the romance theory of naming. Rather than call your coffee a breakfast blend or a medium-roasted blend, give it a fake geographic association.

MORE MEDIUM ROASTS AND STILL MORE MEDIUM ROASTS?

The future? At the top end of the market, I predict more medium roasts and more medium roasts as well as more honey-and-flowers super-light roasts. I hope that the tendency to roast control by artisan response to the cup rather than pure quantitative controls continues at the top end of the market, although I feel that heat probes and roast color readers are invaluable for overall contexting and keeping us on track when the shop is busy and palates are blurred. I expect green coffees to continue to be described in detail, with roast color continuing to be pushed into the conceptual background.

By letting the green coffee lead, we doubtless are maximizing opportunities for sensory distinction and quality. On the other hand, if we fall head over heels roasting everything dark or roasting everything light, we will be committing a version of the same mistake we made in the ’80s and ’90s, a sort of blind adherence to roast-color ideology rather than the expression of a sensitive dialogue among green coffee, roasting machine and roastmaster.

KENNETH DAVIDS is editor and principal writer for the Web publication www.coffeereview.com. He has published three books on coffee, one of which has sold over 250,000 copies and was recently issued in Japanese by Inaho Shobo, Japan. In addition to his work as coffee writer, reviewer and consultant, he is Professor of Critical Studies at the California College of the Arts, where he teaches a class on critical theory.

SEE ROAST COLOR CHART ON PAGE 44

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ROAST COLOR CHART

Roast Color	Bean Surface (after coffee is rested)	Approximate Bean Temperature at Termination of Roast	Agtron Gourmet Scale Numbers (SCAA Color Tile Number in <i>Italics</i>)	Common Names	Acidity	Body	Aroma	Complexity	Depth	Green Coffee Distinctiveness	Sweetness	Pungency	Comments
Very light brown	Dry	Around 380°F/195°C	95-90 <i>Tile #95</i>	Light Cinnamon	■■■	■	■■	■■	■	■■	■		Roast is barely developed
Very light brown	Dry	"First crack" Below 400°F/205°C	90-80 <i>Tile #85</i>	Light Cinnamon New England	■■■	■	■■	■■	■	■■	■		Rare in United States but becoming less so
Light brown	Dry	Around 400°F/205°C	80-70 <i>Tile #75</i>	Light New England	■■■■	■■	■■■	■■■	■■	■■■■	■		
Medium-light brown	Dry	Between 400°F/205°C and 415°F/215°C	70-60 <i>Tile #65</i>	Light Light-Medium American Regular	■■■	■■■	■■■	■■■■	■■■	■■■■	■■		Currently favored by many "Third Wave" roasters
Medium brown	Dry	Between 415°F/215°C and 435°F/225°C	60-50 <i>Tile #55</i>	Light Medium Mild Medium High American Regular City	■■■	■■■	■■■■	■■■■	■■■■	■■■	■■	■	Traditional American roast style; also currently favored by "Third Wave" roasters
Medium-dark brown	Dry to tiny droplets or faint patches of oil	"Second crack" Between 435°F/225°C and 445°F/230°C	50-45 <i>Tile #45</i>	Full City Mild Viennese Northern Italian Espresso Continental After-Dinner	■■	■■■■	■■■■	■■■	■■■■	■■	■■■	■■	Least polarizing roast style for American consumers; often used for "one roast fits all" blends and "Third Wave" espressos
Moderately dark brown	Faint oily patches to entirely shiny surface	Between 445°F/230°C and 455°F/235°C	45-40	Espresso Bold Dark French European High Continental	■	■■■■	■■■	■■■	■■■■	■	■■■■	■■■	Favorite for lighter American espresso blends
Dark brown	Shiny surface	Between 455°F/235°C and 465°F/240°C	40-35 <i>Tile #35</i>	French Espresso Italian Dark Turkish		■■■	■■	■■	■■■		■■■	■■■■	Favorite for older-style American espresso blends
Very dark brown	Very shiny surface	Between 465°F/240°C and 475°F/245°C	35-30	Italian Bold Neapolitan Spanish Heavy		■■	■■	■■	■■		■■	■■■	Definitely roast-dominated but still retains generalized body/flavor
Very dark (nearly black) brown	Shiny surface	Between 475°F/245°C and 480°F/250°C	30-25 <i>Tile #25</i>	French (also Dark French) Neapolitan Spanish		■	■■	■	■		■	■■	Best known as "French roast." Polarizing for consumers; not much left in the coffee

Thank you to St. Martin's Press, New York, for kind permission to adapt this chart from Kenneth Davids' book *Home Coffee Roasting: Romance & Revival*, 2nd Edition, 2003.