

## What Is the Value of Roasting Education and Certification?

By Trey Cobb



Photo courtesy of Greater Goods Coffee Roasters



Photo by Lily Kubota

“How did you learn how to roast coffee?” If you’re currently a roaster, you probably get that question a lot. If you’re thinking about becoming a roaster, you might be the one asking it. Truth be told, there are a multitude of ways to answer that question. You might have heard:

“I was a barista and I wanted to do more in coffee, so I asked our head roaster if I could shadow her.”

“I started out roasting at home as a hobby, and my friends kept telling me that I should start a business.”

“As a cafe owner, I figured that roasting my own coffee would cut my costs and give me more control.”

“Our head roaster just stopped showing up for work, and someone had to step in.”

The good news is, whether you’ve chosen roasting or roasting has chosen you, opportunities abound for education and growth. But that abundance of opportunity can be confusing. Should you work toward certification through the Specialty Coffee Association (SCA), or take private classes at a respected coffee lab? Should you apprentice under a local roaster, or hire an outside consultant? Or should you just take the DIY route with a combo of books, videos and online forums? What’s the *right* way to do it?



Cupping at Coffee Roasters Guild Retreat, August 2017.  
Photo by Lily Kubota

The answer depends on your individual experience and goals.

For some, the “school of hard knocks” is the chosen path. If you’re fortunate enough to be in an experience-rich environment where you have resources available to learn from, this may be what you need to grow. However, in many cases roasters are working in isolation. If that’s the case, then this learning-on-the-job path may only take you so far—and you may find yourself reinventing the wheel along the way.

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Sample roasting at Coffee Roasters Guild Retreat, August 2017. | Photo by Lily Kubota

"My mentor taught me everything he knew about roasting," says coffee consultant and instructor Rocky Rhodes. "After I took my first roasting class, I realized how narrow that knowledge was."

While some people can learn roasting through observation, formal education allows roasters to learn from the community and those with more years of experience. It also provides a common language that enables us to work together as an industry.

One education option that's readily available is the Coffee Skills Program developed by the SCA. This professional development series is divided into specific roles within coffee and is an accumulation of international knowledge crafted by leaders in our industry. Currently, there are pathways specific to roasting, sensory, green buying, barista and brewing. Additionally, within each pathway there are three skill levels based on an individual's experience: foundation, intermediate and professional.

The roasting skills classes aren't a direct replacement for years of experience, but what they can do is help you better understand the decisions you make when roasting. If you're completely new to roasting, they can help you start off with a solid foundation. Alternatively, if you're a seasoned veteran, it's an opportunity to polish your skills, perhaps learn some new techniques, and receive an industry-recognized certification for your expertise.

"Acquiring a certification from the SCA confers a certain weight and respect associated with the organization, but it also ensures that you have been educated according to agreed-upon standards," says Drew Billups, director of education and quality control for Atlas Coffee Importers. "In light of the fact that there is no university-based prep for most of the roles within the specialty coffee sector, SCA education and certification provide an efficient way to prepare people for a career in the industry and ensure that they have the knowledge and skills required to be successful."

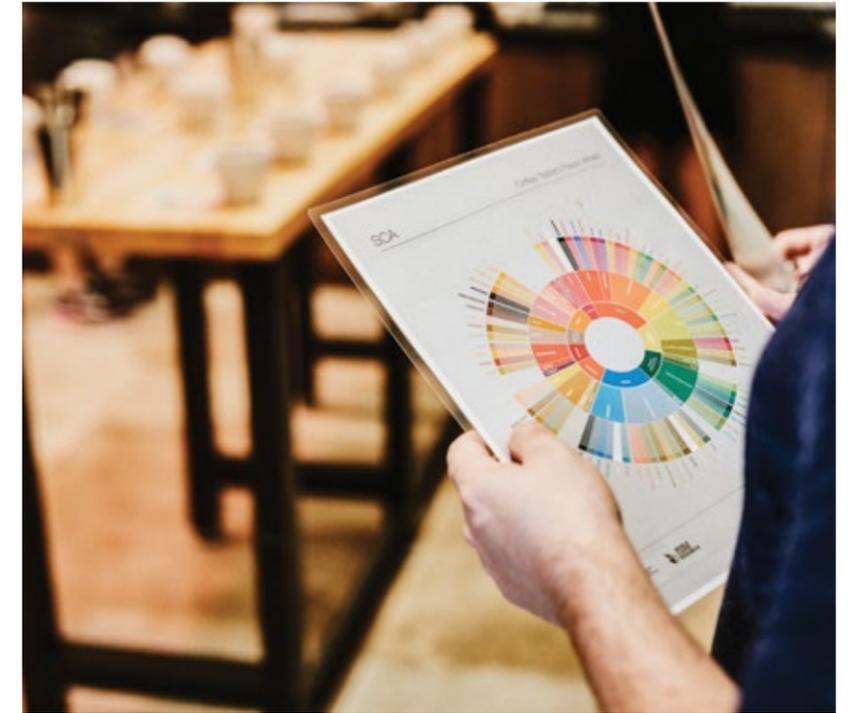


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Coffee Roasters Guild Retreat, August 2017. | Photos by Lily Kubota

Billups adds, “While SCA certifications are not widely expected or required by employers in the industry today, certification certainly makes an impact on a potential employer, and I think it will only gain in importance as our industry continues to mature.”

Another certification that many roasters pursue is the Q program through the Coffee Quality Institute (CQI), which licenses coffee professionals as certified Q-graders. This is one of the most highly regarded certifications a coffee professional can earn. Additionally, the newer Q Processing certification can help round out a roaster’s understanding of the green coffee they buy and roast.

The value that these certifications represent can be very personal. For some, they serve as a way to validate their knowledge and skills. To others, these credentials may provide an opportunity for a promotion or pay raise. For those looking to become roasters, it can be a way to get a foot in the door.

There are several education opportunities outside those offering certifications as well. Custom-designed courses are another avenue worth considering if there are unique goals you hope to accomplish for yourself and your roastery. These may be specialized training courses specific to your brand of roaster, or your desired roasting style, or even topics outside of the scope offered by institutions like the SCA or CQI.

The Coffee Roasters Guild (CRG) also hosts annual events around the world where knowledge is shared. These events, such as Retreat (United States), Camp (European Union), summits and origin trips, all serve to help us learn from each other, work toward certifications and build valuable relationships with others in our industry.

Regardless of the path you choose, the measure of a successful education program is one that gives you confidence to implement the skills you learn to improve your craft. It’s down to having more tools to work with in getting the most out of your coffee and roaster. The ultimate value of education may simply be our ability to apply what we learn, but it may also be the opportunity to share what we learn with others. As the CRG and roasting community continues to grow, so can our collective knowledge through our continued dedication to education.



**TREY COBB** is the co-founder of Greater Goods Coffee Roasters in Austin, Texas. He is an authorized SCA trainer, a Q Processing Level 2 Professional, and a member of the Coffee Roasters Guild Membership Committee.

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