



THE ULTIMATE CUPPING

Nespresso is committed to ensuring best quality at all steps of the coffee production process. One key link is the training of regional quality-control experts in the countries of origin. Just as wine has its sommeliers, coffee has its cuppers.

An introduction into these tastemakers' lives reveals a world full of acute sensitivity, passion and dedication. In the heart of Colombia's coffee belt, the N Magazine visited an international consortium of sense experts, brought together by the Nespresso Green Coffee Team.



“You can find essences with the tongue, only five different basic tastes — but a thousand aromas with your nose.”

Alexis Rodriguez
Nespresso Green Coffee Manager



International cuppers and agronomists from five regional countries deepened their knowledge and shared experiences at the Nespresso AAA Sustainable Quality™ Workshop in Manizales.



Nespresso Green Coffee Manager Alexis Rodriguez (right) and Nespresso Sensory Specialist Edouard Thomas (left) demonstrate the unique Nespresso Sensory Evaluation and Green Coffee Cupping Methodology.

On a fall morning in the heart of Colombia’s most significant coffee-producing region, a ritual akin to prayer for the brown bean is beginning. Here in Manizales, a city whose motto proclaims it the “World Capital of Coffee,” coffee-tasting experts from all over Mexico, Central and South America are all quietly standing in rows over long common tables, slightly hunched over individual spreads that include a small bottle of water and spittoon, a crisp white paper napkin, a custom-made, crafted silver spoon with a long handle that is common to the trade, and a series of white ceramic coffee pots and cups. A silence hangs in the air. And then, all at once, the serenity is exploded by a succession of quick ceramic clicks. Like a loosely choreographed dance ensemble, the coffee experts begin with a procession of opening, smelling, occasionally stirring, and then closing their coffee pots. Some sniff the lid only, and others take in the aroma by placing their nose deep inside the pot like a sommelier. Others smell with their eyes closed, as if attempting to isolate the necessary sense by shutting down the others. A product as complex as coffee – said to have a thousand substances that can be detected – requires complete concentration. The first pot that is smelled contains a standard, and ensuing samples are judged in terms of how closely they match the standard. Notes are taken on scent, scores calculated. The gathered group is just beginning the quality-control process of evaluating coffee known within the industry as cupping.

Then the tasting begins. A symphony of slurping now accompanies those quick ceramic clicks. Each sense-expert dips their spoon into the pot, sips the liquid into their mouth, runs it over the tongue, and loudly slurps the beverage in order to spray it all around the mouth and nose. Slurping creates a sprinkler effect. The cacophony is remarkable, sometimes sounding like nose-blowing and sometimes evoking that uncomfortable hiss in an airplane when a passenger’s hand struggles to twist off an air-conditioning vent in the pressurized cabin. No one pauses to acknowledge how strange the slurp might be to the outsider. Instead, spoons are quickly dipped in water, and the process is repeated with the next sample. All are focused on mind, nose, and mouth, and those thousand different notes that coffee can hit. The clicking continues.



One of Colombia’s foremost coffee experts and Quality Head of Colombian Coffee Federation, Dr Edgar Moreno González tests the subtleties of taste (top), while Edouard Thomas (right) and Harry Odio, cupper and coffee trader of Costa Rica’s Cafe Capris (left) discuss the nuances of the trade.



The cupping process is one of staccatoed movements. Every step is performed quickly and without waste. Unlike wine-tasting by sommeliers, coffee-tasting does not have any slow, semi-graceful action or showy swirl as part of its routine. (Cupping is still more of a private back-room ritual than more public wine tastings.) Quality-control experts wear aprons primarily because of the spraying of the coffee that is done in the mouth – you never know where bits of coffee water might end up – but it seems that while cupping has its own rhythm, any step of the rapid process could result in a bit of a mess. The overwhelming symphony of slurping and ceramic taps that make up cupping, however, can almost drown out the intensely focused inward process in which cuppers engage. “We are the filter,” Edouard Thomas says of his colleagues as he surveys the cupping session taking place. Thomas, who as Sensory Specialist at Nespresso helped envision the workshop in Manizales, is hardly mixing metaphors when using a popular coffee-machine part to explain the role that his fellow quality-control experts play in the shipping of beans globally. A small group of tastemakers who remain largely unknown influence the coffee that all the world drinks.

Who are these coffee samplers? Rarely are they full-time cuppers – cupping is just part of a broader quality-control job that can include sourcing of coffee, bean buying, selling, and more. Nevertheless, hundreds of cups are tasted daily by those individuals involved in quality control. As a result, one of the first challenges to cupping is being able to clear one’s tongue and mind. For the tongue, crackers low in salt, sugar and fat, and apple slices are popular neutralizers. Mentally preparing for cupping, however, is a more complicated process than taking a bite from an apple. “You have to have some rhythm,” explains Harry Odio, a trader for Cafe Capris in Costa Rica, a major supplier of coffee for Nespresso. Odio sips some 500 cups of coffee per day, relies on a repeated personal ritual as a basis for standardizing his own procedure. Rhythm and gesture move his mind away from the day’s work and into a cupping zone.



Tasting in cupping involves slurping a single spoon of each sample coffee at a time. Samples consist simply of coffee grounds placed in hot water, not the finished brewed product consumers drink.

“From a coffee’s taste and aroma a good cupper can deduce the variety and altitude of the crop, the type of mill, drying and conservation processes, the roasting conditions, blend, and more.”

Karsten Ranitzsch,
Nespresso Green Coffee Head





The Nespresso AAA Sustainable Quality™ Workshop also included expert lectures and excursions to local coffee farms to examine the implementation of sustainable production practices.

Cupping as often as Odio has for the last eight years is not just a matter of impressive skill – it is a necessity. Regardless of the quantity – and every taster is certainly testing hundreds of samples a day – cupping is a daily requirement of all who do it because bags of coffee are constantly arriving. “All lots are different,” Odio says, so each one must be gauged in terms of its basic quality and then the characteristics possessed that might match a client’s taste requirements. These client requests, preferences that they have for coffee from a particular region, are called a profile.

Cupping tends to be standardized at any one location so that a taster’s evaluations can be consistent. Test samples do not consist of brewed coffee – instead, they are made up of hot water with coffee grounds added to them. Careful attention is paid to roasting and grinding each sample similarly. Water temperature, water type (soft), and the containers in which samples are poured (usually ceramic) are also standardized.

The comparison between cuppers and sommeliers is a strong one. Evaluation methods can be similar, and the celebrated role that the nose plays in a sommelier’s work might be even more important in a cupper’s profession. Broadly speaking, however, the goal in cupping (which doesn’t involve testing the final product) is rarely to award a prize or to rank coffee. Beans rejected by one client always find an appreciative market in some other region of the world.

For all the standard practice that can inform cupping at any one location, as soon as the first lid is lifted, human passion enters into the equation. Marcia Zacharkiv, a quality control supervisor in Brazil who cups from approximately 1.5 million sacks of Brazilian coffee every year, considers her spoon her heart. “I carry it around it with me always,” she explains, and as soon as she unwraps the utensil and touches it, she can start to forget her surroundings in order to focus on test samples.

“You never know everything, you’re always learning,” she says of coffee. “Every day is amazing. It’s like a good vice.” For the cupper, the tasting process is about holding a conversation with the coffee. “For me, finding the spirituality of the beverage involves developing a relationship with the beverage,” says Colombian cupper and quality control manager Ricardo Piedrahita. “You use different senses to try to find a way in which the coffee starts to talk to you.” Piedrahita is not alone in detecting a transcendent note in coffee. “If I like the cup when I’m cupping a coffee, I don’t spit it out,” Odio adds. “I drink it. And when I swallow, that’s when you find that spiritual idea.”

Clearly cuppers are a unique breed. In matters non-coffee they are still more likely to lead with their nose – many take in the smell of a meal well before picking up a utensil. Dr. Edgar Moreno González, one of Colombia’s foremost coffee experts and Quality Head of Colombian Coffee Federation, admits to taking things even further. When “I’m close to a lady,” he confesses, “I try to mentally identify their fragrances and characteristic aromas.” González – a lifelong coffee man who is alternately playful and serious, one minute sniffing the lid of a coffee pot in a quietly noble gesture and another minute popping his inflated cheek with his spoon in a child-like manner – acknowledges that his habits “can be bothersome at times, particularly during social reunions.” He knows that cuppers “have a great curiosity and perceptive capacity” that can lead to unintentionally awkward situations, but he still thinks they “are normal people”.

In the end, all that smelling comes from a desire to learn more. Each inhale is a lesson. As Zacharkiv discovered once she started working with beans and cupping in 1998, “The more you learn about coffee, the more you want to know. If you start with coffee, you will die in coffee.” ☘

QUESTIONS ? ANSWERS

Questions from Coffee Connoisseurs, Answers from Coffee Experts.

When was the AAA Sustainable Quality™ Program initiated?

In 2003, Nespresso announced the launch of its AAA Sustainable Quality™ Program and signed a Memorandum of Understanding with all of its main green coffee suppliers, thus committing all parties to work towards the sourcing of green coffee according to defined quality and sustainability criteria. For farms that grow coffee beans of the quality and aroma profile required for our Grands Crus, we developed a step-by-step plan together with our green coffee suppliers and the international environmental organisation Rainforest Alliance to improve the sustainability of green coffee production.

What has the AAA Sustainable Quality™ Program achieved so far?

There are many important milestones, but the two most significant ones are the overall expansion of the AAA Program, and the increased amount of coffee that is sourced through the programme. To date, five countries – Brazil, Columbia, Costa Rica, Guatemala and Mexico – and 14,980 coffee farms in the region are now part of the programme. Together with our partners from the Rainforest Alliance and our green coffee suppliers we have a team of more than 40 agronomists based in these coffee-growing countries to consult with the farmers and to conduct farm assessments.

The first Nespresso AAA Sustainable Quality™ Workshop was held in September 2006, at the training centre of the National Federation of Colombian Coffee Producers, in

Manizales. What was the aim of the workshop?

The event brought together participants from the five countries where the AAA Program has been established so far: Brazil, Columbia, Costa Rica, Guatemala and Mexico. Delegates represented two disciplines that are of crucial importance to highest quality coffee: agriculture and green coffee sensory. The workshop not only provided expert training, it also emphasized the importance of a close collaboration and exchange between those who work with farmers to produce sustainable quality and those who taste and judge the quality of the coffee.

How much coffee does Nespresso source through its AAA program?

In 2006, 30% of the coffee that we buy

came from the AAA Program, which is up from 20% in 2005. By the end of 2010, we plan to source up to 50% of all of our green coffee through our AAA Program.

Which Grand Cru coffees can be considered 100% AAA?

Since November 2005 our Grand Cru Volluto is made 100% from AAA coffee, and since November 2006 the Caffè Forte for the B2B market has become the second 100% AAA Grand Cru.

In November 2006, Nestlé Nespresso and the International Finance Corporation (IFC), a member of the World Bank Group, announced a partnership pledging \$500,000 over two years to expand the Nespresso AAA Sustainable Quality™ Program in Central America. What should be achieved in this time?

Central America is a source of much of the highest quality coffee that goes into the Nespresso Grands Crus. The financing will be used to dramatically expand the scope of the AAA Program and substantially improve the quality and sustainability of farm practices in three important coffee-growing countries: Costa Rica, Guatemala, and Mexico. Nespresso will gauge farm performance against sustainability and highest-quality farming practices using its innovative Tool for the Assessment of Sustainable Quality™ (TASQ™). In addition, Nespresso will stage a series of technical assistance workshops covering subjects such as water conservation and labour practices. There will be no cost passed on to the farmers.

