



The Good Bean

Finding the perfect coffee is a fine art that relies on a number of factors, starting with the humble coffee bean. Not all beans are created equal and as you expand your coffee horizons, you naturally want to learn more about how to judge the quality of the coffee beans available for your drinking pleasure.

Just like gourmet food and fine wine, fine coffee offers interesting new and unique flavour sensations to experience. As you develop your palette, you will quickly discover just how different one coffee tastes from another.

The coffee bean is actually a misnomer for the seed of a coffee plant, perhaps derived from the seed's resemblance to true beans. A coffee berry most commonly contains two stones with the flat sides pressed together.

Coffee is grown in over fifty different countries and regions around the world, with Brazil and Vietnam being the most

prolific producers. The variety of coffee plant, the specific growing region, the soil and the climate are just a few of the factors that contribute to the distinctive taste and flavour of the coffee. The two most economically important varieties of coffee plant are the Arabica and Robusta. 75-80% of the coffee produced worldwide is Arabica and a further 20% is Robusta, so these are the beans that dominate the market. Arabica beans are generally considered to have richer flavour than Robusta beans and also have more varieties.

Professional coffee tasting to judge the flavour characteristics and quality of a

coffee is called cupping, therefore professional coffee tasters are called cuppers. With cupping, the coffee is ground into a small cup, and hot water is poured on top. As the coffee steeps the grinds rise to the top, forming a thin crust. The cupper breaks the crust with a spoon and evaluates the aromas. After the coffee cools, the cupper sips the liquid to evaluate the flavour. As with professional wine tasters, the cupper then spits the coffee out into a receptacle.

Next time you sip your brew, test your cupping abilities by judging the basic taste characteristics of coffee. This starts with flavour. Naturally, flavour is subjective as people perceive taste differently, however, there are a number of terms that tasters commonly use to communicate the distinctive taste characteristics of coffee. These include winy, for a full bodied flavour reminiscent of red wine, the self-explanatory term nutty or bitter. Some coffees have a

hint of berry or citrus. The overall flavour of a coffee also includes the balance between the acidity, body and aroma of the coffee.

Acidity in this case does not refer to the degree of scientific acidity, but rather to the sharp aftertaste of the coffee, often referred to as the liveliness. Acidity is considered a desirable quality that describes the brightness of flavour and it ranges from low or smooth, to high, otherwise known as lively. A coffee without any acidity is referred to as flat.

The aroma is the smell of the coffee. Our sense of taste and smell work together so the more complex or subtle taste characteristics of coffee come from the aroma of the coffee combining with the palette.

Another term related to coffee is body, which refers to the taste sensation as the coffee flavour settles on the tongue. Body refers more to the feel of the coffee in the mouth rather than the actual flavour. It is the weight, thickness, and viscosity of the coffee that contribute to the sensation of richness. The oils in the coffee bean that are extracted during brewing contribute to this sensation and the brewing method will have an impact. An espresso or French press brew will produce a full bodied coffee, while a drip filter will produce a lighter bodied coffee as the filter removes the some of the oils.

The aroma is the smell of the coffee. Our sense of taste and smell work together so the more complex or subtle taste characteristics of coffee come from the aroma of the coffee combining with the palette. Without a sense of smell, our taste buds can only detect the four basic tastes; sweet, sour, salty and bitter. The

more subtle nuances of flavour come from our sense of smell. In recent times, the word finish, adopted from the world of wine tasting has been added to cupping terminology. Finish describes the sensation on the palette after you have swallowed or discarded the coffee. Some coffees will leave a pleasurable taste that lingers and that lingering taste sensation can be different from the initial sensation of the coffee is in your mouth.

While it may seem that coffee just became a whole lot more complex, the best way to understand coffee is to jump in and start sampling the many different coffee beans. Think about the flavour characteristics as you sip and as your coffee palette develops you will soon find the best combination of flavour, acidity, body, aroma and finish to suit your palette.

