DEAR COFFEE BUYER

A GUIDE TO SOURCING GREEN COFFEE

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Once you know how much you roast on a weekly basis, project that amount for 3-6-12. If you're roasting one thousand pounds of green per week right now, you'll want about thirteen thousand pounds in your roastery or warehouse to cover the next three months. If you don't have that much stockpiled and don't have much landing in the next six months, begin reaching out to importers about spot coffee to get you closer to three months of coverage. Remember, even if you have a bunch of coffee that is supposed to land in a month or two, delays can happen, and there's nothing you can do to speed up your country's customs service when it decides to inspect your container. This doesn't happen frequently, but it can happen to *any* international shipment. I have been in the unfortunate situation of desperately needing a coffee to become available right away, only to get a sad phone call from the importer, grimly informing me that the container would undergo a random inspection, delaying its availability by at least two weeks.

Slow and steady wins the race

If there's another lesson to learn from my story of Stumptown overbuying during an historic market-price peak, it's that trying to time the market is not for the buyer who is focused on satisfying customers and optimizing quality. We believed that the price would go higher, so we bought aggressively to protect our interests, worrying that if we waited it out, we would find ourselves without coffee in a pricier market six months down the road. We were wrong, and it made a bad situation worse.

Don't overthink the market

Unless you had a previous career as a successful commodities trader, stick to your forecasting method and do your best to ignore price fluctuations. You may miss some opportunities, but you'll also avoid some pitfalls. The best hedge is not playing the market at all. Just buy what you need, as you need it.

A price-based forecasting approach

If you offer a menu with variable pricing, where the cost of a green coffee has a strong effect on its customer-facing price, you can build your forecasts around that cost. It is no surprise to anyone that less expensive coffees sell faster than more expensive coffees, but how can you model this? At Ritual, where the bulk of our menu was made up of variably priced single origins, and I wanted each one to last for two to four months irrespective of price, I found that the total *lot* price was the best indicator of how long a coffee would last in inventory. That is, a lot with a cost of $600 would sell in about the same amount of time, whether it's made up of 150 lbs of $4/lb green, 300 lbs of $2/lb green, or even 100 lbs of $6/lb green.

Well, more or less. As you get further from "standard" pricing in either direction, the formula doesn't work as well, especially at greater volumes. No matter how great a $20/lb green coffee is, you may find it difficult to sell even one 60-kg bag of it at the prices you have to charge. And no matter how great a $1/lb green coffee may be, you won't suddenly have enough customers to go through twenty-four 60-kg bags of it. (There are separate reasons why you shouldn't buy or even work with someone who sells $1/lb coffees, but that's another story.)

Chapter 8

SAMPLES

What are the different types of coffee samples? What do they represent?

Day-lot samples, type samples, offer samples, pre-ship samples, arrival samples, spot samples—what do all these terms mean?

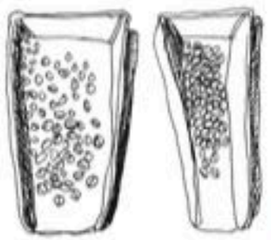
Day-lot samples

A day-lot sample is a trial portion of coffee representing one day's worth of harvest. The significance of a day-lot sample is its specificity both to its location of harvest and the conditions of its handling, including *terroir, tree variety,* husbandry, ripeness selection, processing, fermentation, drying, and more.

Day-lot samples afford cuppers an opportunity to taste and evaluate a very narrow slice of a harvest, isolating exceptional lots that would otherwise be mixed together to create one large, monolithic lot. This makes it possible to isolate particularly great coffees to offer as micro-lots, and good coffees to consider for blend-component purchases. Of equal importance, day-lot sampling helps identify bad coffees and prevent them from being blended into larger lots.

Type samples

A type sample is nearly the opposite of a day-lot sample. A type sample is an attempt to show what a coffee would taste like, without purporting to be the coffee available for purchase. For suppliers or brokers working with large buyers, type samples are convenient for showing what they can offer at various price points.



As you can imagine, the ability of a supplier to successfully match the quality of a purchased type sample is critical. It requires her to balance the cost of filling it with expensive lots with the quality detriment of filling it with cheap lots.

Offer samples

An offer sample is what is available for you to purchase, and it can be used at any stage of purchase, regardless of the loca-

cialty coffee production, is drying on "tables," also known as *"raised beds"* or "African beds." These are mesh-top surfaces that allow air to flow through the thin layer of beans. By raising the beans off the ground, drying tables avoid inevitable parchment-breaking from walking on them and limits their exposure to the extreme temperatures of a patio. The producer typically "rakes" the beans throughout the drying days and occasionally wraps them at night to minimize condensation; they are, however, less prone to condensation because they do not reach the extreme temperatures of patio-dried coffee. This method can take anywhere from seven to fifteen days.

In most cases, washed coffee is ready for shipment within weeks. As compared with other methods, coffee prepared with the washed process is unlikely to have fruity or off flavors, and it tends to emphasize sweetness, acidity, and the truest expression of coffee-plant variety.

Natural process (aka dry process)

At the other end of the spectrum is the natural, or dry, process, the original way to remove the fruit from the seed. There are two basic natural methods:

- Allowing the coffee fruit to partially or completely dry on the tree before picking and then husking off the dried skin, mucilage, and parchment
- Picking the coffee cherries relatively ripe from the tree—as in other methods—and then drying them for weeks or months on patios or raised beds, before hulling to remove the dried skin, mucilage, and parchment

Coffee laid to dry on raised beds at Beneficio Xinacla, Honduras

Ripe coffee cherries laid to dry during the natural process at Finca Matalapa, El Salvador

Natural processing is much more likely to involve an exchange of organic material between the mucilage, skin, and seed, and it is known for producing coffees with pronounced body and emphatic fruity character, but it's unfortunately prone to defective flavors.

Literally every other process

This may seem an oversimplification, but every other process is more or less a variation on the washed and natural processes.

Pulped-natural process (aka honey process)

The most prominent of the remaining processes to discuss are *pulped-natural* and honey (or *miel*), both of which involve pulping the coffee fruit, with or without use of a mechanical demucilager, and then allowing it to dry with some or all of the mucilage sticking to the seed's parchment. Brazil pioneered the pulped-natural process with the goal of reducing water usage in the washed process, and ostensibly Costa Rica coined the term "honey process," and in most cases, that's the extent of the difference. Because of snobbery, most of Central America has adopted Costa Rica's terminology, but don't be fooled; pulped-natural and honey are routinely the same process, transpiring in different locales.

Among the primary choices a producer makes when preparing a pulped-natural or honey coffee is the amount of mucilage left on the bean for drying. The character of most of these coffees is similar to that of their washed counterparts, albeit usually with less-pronounced acidity, more body, and, often, more fruited flavors. My experiences shipping honey coffees have been less than great, as I have found that much of the aromatic nuance and acidity diminished quickly.

Chapter 18

CULTIVARS AND THEIR CUP CHARACTERISTICS

How do the various cultivars affect flavor?

Bourbon and Typica are the parents of most modern coffee varieties, and those two cultivars are responsible for most of the flavors you associate with coffee. In likely the fourteenth century, they were taken from the wild coffee forests of Ethiopia to Yemen, where they were first cultivated as a coffee crop, and later taken to Réunion Island (formerly Bourbon Island, which sounds like a coffee taster's paradise) east of Madagascar, in the early eighteenth century. Much of Latin America's coffee production today depends on Bourbon and Typica and their many, many offshoots.

Despite the romanticization of coffee varieties, more flavor-profile variation comes from soil, plant-nutrition, cherry-ripeness, and processing differences than from the difference between varieties as similar as *Caturra* and Bourbon. This could be because an overwhelming percentage, perhaps more than 99 percent, of *Coffea arabica* from outside of Ethiopia is Bourbon or Typica, whether directly or indirectly. In other words, when we—and our customers—talk about the flavor of coffee, we are really talking about the flavor of Bourbon and Typica and their many cultivated children.

Pacas variety coffee—a relative of Bourbon—at Finca Matalapa, El Salvador

Having said that, I would generally describe my experience of the difference of cupping Bourbon and Typica as such: Bourbon is likely responsible for why you think of coffee as being chocolaty, caramelly, and rich, while Typica is likely the reason you think coffee is delicately fruited, floral, and has a long, satisfying finish. It is the prevalence of Bourbon and

Coffee growing wild in southern Ethiopia

Typica that make Geisha, Maragogipe (and its half brothers), and heirloom Ethiopia varieties such salient exceptions on the cupping table.

Caturra, Pacas, Borboncito (Borbon Enano, Bourbon 300), and Tekisic are close to Bourbon in cup quality, though I find they often lack its finish, resulting in a shorter-lived tasting experience. In my experience, Catuaí, a commonly grown variety, at its best is sweet but has hints of vegetal flavor as it cools. All of these cultivars have had their fair share of exceptions, in my experiences cupping them.

Many varieties of Catimor—derived from the *Hibrido de Timor,* originally crossed with Caturra—produce an inferior cup quality. Catimors grow throughout the world, though often under less infamous names: Lempira in Honduras, Cuscatleco in El Salvador, Colombia and Castillo in Colombia, Icafé 90 in Costa Rica, Ruiru 11 and Batian in Kenya, Sarchimor throughout Central America, and so on. Each new one seems better than the one that came before it, but they are all more or less the same. They start off nice enough, with good or even great aromatics, and they offer a sweet cup when hot, but as they cool they typically fall apart, lose their sweetness, often become quite astringent, and almost invariably turn into green, vegetal cups.

How you approach varieties as a buyer depends on your offering philosophy. Early in my coffee-buying career, I sought out rare varieties out of sheer curiosity and desire to share them with my customers. Sadly, they often arrived in a compromised state compared to more conventional varieties. I think it's safe to include a rare, exotic variety from time to time, but I recommend finding these from suppliers who have proven their ability to deliver quickly and consistently. A rare variety should be interesting because of its flavor profile, not because of its name.

There are hundreds of *known* varieties of *C. arabica* and likely many more unknown. I won't try to document them all

I believe is the most manageable, improvable factor in a coffee's seasonality) and the approach to storage, both at origin and domestically, have a huge impact on the longevity of a coffee.

Now, the elephant in the room is the roasters who have marketed the heck out of arbitrary seasonality rules. Why would they do that? Two reasons stand out:

1. Purchasing ease. The roasters were already buying a small amount of coffee from a large number of countries, so it was a natural hedge to buy enough to last only a short time. There's nothing bad about this. In fact, I generally recommend it, if you're big enough to spread your resources across many origins, which leads to the second reason. . .
2. Larger roasters knew it would be difficult for smaller roasters to adhere to such self-imposed stipulations. Smaller roasters might employ only a single (or split-time) buyer, compared with a larger roaster's buying team of two to six full-time employees (one or two traveling buyers, plus a host of cupping-lab personnel).

What good are seasonality rules if there are more exceptions than adherents? If you have a handful of old coffees that taste great and a bunch of relatively new coffees that have lost their appeal, you should rethink your seasonality rules.

Get to know your coffees well, and pay attention to how they're changing over time. For example, I've generally been able to rely on coffees from Ethiopia and Kenya lasting a very long time after harvest. I recall a roaster finally receiving a shipment of washed Ethiopia coffee that had been in transit for *over a year*. He opened a bag, roasted a sample, and the coffee was still one of the best I tasted that year. It's not a miracle when the origin has heaps of similar stories.

On the other hand, I've had coffees from Colombia that tasted just as vibrant on arrival as they did fresh off the patios but rapidly lost their appeal after eight to ten weeks. I've had coffee from other origins that never matched their pre-shipment quality. From my experience, the more humid the country is *after* harvest, the shorter the "seasonality" of the resulting coffee. (Now *there's* a rule.)

Freezing green coffee

I am confident that freezing green coffee is beneficial, despite caveats such as that the roasted coffee will stale faster if it was frozen when green. For that matter, the green coffee, after removal from frozen state, will also stale faster than normal. I don't entirely embrace the coffee-as-wine comparisons, and the idea of vintages of coffee is a little absurd to me. Coffee is more like wine than it is like macaroni and cheese, but not more than it is like coffee, and coffee is best fresh.

If the roaster's objective is to freeze coffee for the three to nine months that it will wait until she can get to it, that's another matter. I do not want to come across as limited-minded, but the pragmatic concern here is a financial one. As there are no International Coffee Organization–approved warehouses that

freeze coffee (to my knowledge), you'd have to buy the coffee outright and then freeze it yourself, which would be expensive, until you're ready to roast it. Many roasters do buy their coffee outright, and if you have the cash to do it you should, as the financing terms of importers are steep. On top of that, you'd have to build and/or maintain a cold-storage room.

Barring an unforeseen explosion in the number of refrigerated warehouses or a sudden inheritance from your great-uncle of a couple of dozen large refrigerators, I'd stick with good forecasting (see the 3-6-12 approach on page 22).

86 in February > 88 in April

For years, the job of coffee buying seemed obvious: find the very best coffees you can, and buy them.

This often meant waiting until late in the harvest season for the coffees grown all the way up at the top of the mountain, with their slow maturation, complex acidity, and resilient sweetness. These coffees would dazzle on the cupping table at origin or in the lab at home when confirming purchases. But there are problems with buying late in the season:

1. Coffee is produced in tropical regions that tend to have a lot of rainfall. The harvest is typically a dry time quickly followed by a wet season. With rain comes humidity, which can quite negatively affect any green coffee in the vicinity.
2. As the season progresses, it gets progressively more difficult to efficiently combine small lots headed for the same country, which slows exportation, and . . . see point 1. (Shipping a container is a fixed cost in exporting—it's a few thousand dollars regardless of whether it's full or empty. Even if *you're* willing to eat that cost by shipping it half full, it is unlikely to be worth the time for your exporter and importer. You can do it, but it will take some convincing, and I recommend doing so sparingly, for the good of the relationship with your suppliers.)
3. Even if you can fill a container, dry mills get backed up, often for months, and . . . see point 1.

That 88-point coffee you held out until April for could have become an 85, 84, or 83 by the time you receive it in August or September.

At the beginning of the Central American harvest of January 2010, I wanted a different approach. I had seen my 88- to 90-point April and May selections lose 2 to 5 points in quality and take four to five months to arrive, and I knew that something had to change. I was in Antigua, cupping tons of day-lot samples. They were really good—clean, sweet, solid coffees—but not the showstoppers I was seeking. My host, Luis Pedro Zelaya, assured me that better coffees were coming, but still, these were 86- and 87-point coffees, and if they were to arrive in California tasting as good as they did on that cupping table, they would be excellent compared with the normal condition of coffee arrivals.

So, knowing how many bags I would buy from Antigua that year, I bought about half of that quantity right then. Because it was so early in the season, my importer was able to ship for late-February arrival into San Francisco. I would have 86-point, new-

Chapter 24

DEFECTS

What's wrong with your coffee?

While strong relations and communication with your suppliers will have a meaningful impact on the green coffee you buy, you will nonetheless come across defects in your samples and, occasionally, in your purchases—oh dear!

Specialty's "every-coffee-a-snowflake" approach can mean even your best coffee may be riddled with defects. Being able to identify, name, and communicate them back to your suppliers will help everyone move forward. Let's take some time to study a handful of defects and their potential impact on your coffee.

Green-coffee grading

Black

Looks like: covered, fully or partially, by an opaque, dark/black color
Tastes like: dirty, moldy, or phenolic (a medicinal or iodine-like flavor, very unpleasant)
Why: over-fermentation, overripe cherries collected from the ground
Avoid by: harvesting only ripe fruit, avoiding over-fermentation, density-sorting or hand-sorting

Sour

Looks like: yellowish bean (sometimes coupled with brown or red tints)
Tastes like: sour or over-fermented
Why: contamination during harvesting and/or processing, including picking overripe cherries or using contaminated water in processing

Full black

Partial black

Full sour

Partial sour

Fungus

Foreign matter

Dried cherry

Damaged

Avoid by: harvesting only ripe cherries and processing the coffee as soon as possible after harvesting; additionally, ensure control over fermentation times and avoid using potentially contaminated water in fermentation

Fungus damage

Looks like: brown-to-yellow discoloration (from spots to fully covered beans)
Tastes like: fermented, earthy, or moldy
Why: most often caused by fungi that attack between harvest and storage, given the right combination of present fungi, humidity, and temperature
Avoid by: omitting fallen cherries, sorting out insect-damaged, chipped, or cut beans; hand- and color-sorting can weed out the more extreme fungus-damaged beans

Foreign matter

Looks like: not coffee, i.e., contains sticks, stones, bones (not really), nails, rocks, pieces of concrete, popcorn (surprisingly, this is not a joke, and if you roast enough natural-processed coffee from Ethiopia, you'll know it)
Tastes like: not coffee, but really, any of various off-flavors (additionally, many of the non-coffee things that show up in coffee can damage a grinder)
Why: foreign matter can end up in coffee at almost any stage
Avoid by: detailed sorting; use of destoners, magnets, etc. to remove foreign matter

Dried cherry

Looks like: dried skin covering most or all of the green bean
Tastes like: depending on the health of the pulp, may taste as "innocuous" as over-fermented or as bad as moldy and phenolic
Why: occasionally, poor pulping of cherries can allow a cherry to slip through untouched
Avoid by: floating coffee fruit before pulping, density sorting

Broken, chipped, or otherwise physically damaged beans

Looks like: beyond matching the above description, you will often find a dark-reddish color from oxidation of the exposed, raw area
Tastes like: depending on type of contamination, may taste earthy, dirty, sour, or fermented
Why: usually the result of poor pulping-machine calibration and occasionally from the dry-milling process
Avoid by: calibrating and adjusting equipment to reduce frequency of the defect