

Turn off the rock music and breathe deep. There's a whole world of coffee over here, but you still might miss it if you don't pay attention. So pay attention. This is the basic process we follow whenever we want to compare cup qualities of different beans. Invite a couple of friends for a second and third opinion: make it a research party. The whole process is a matter of preparing the samples, brewing them, and then tasting, while making observations at all steps.



PREPARING SAMPLES

Open the bags, stick your nose in, and inhale deeply. Do the same with samples from a competitor and compare the intensity of the smell. Be sure you have fresh samples. We try to roast coffee the day before it ships. When you get samples from us, you oughta cup them that day, or at least by the end of the following day.

Label samples with numbers, so you can do a blind test.

Grind samples, using a clean grinder, as fine as you can.

Dump the finely ground beans into separate cups.

Smell the dry aroma. Stick your nose into the cup and breathe in and out to get the smell in your nose.

Record your observations. Use words that describe any familiar fragrances that come to mind – smoky, earthy, etc.

BREWING SAMPLES

Brew three cups of each coffee you are sampling. This will help you measure consistency. For example, if you have four coffees to try, you want to have 12 cups.

Fill empty water kettle with fresh water and bring almost to the boil.

Place 7.25 grams of grounds (about one heaping tablespoon) per 5 ounces of water.

Take water off the heat just before the boil and pour over ground samples immediately. Coffee grounds will float on the top and form a crust.

Let it steep for 2 minutes.

TESTING AND TASTING SAMPLES

Smell

Give each person in your tasting party a soup spoon and a glass of water.

Use the spoon to “bust the crust,” that is, break just through the surface.

Inhale the wet aroma. Spend 20 seconds sniffing, and record your observations, again, using words that evoke the fragrances.

Use the spoon to scrape all the wet grounds from the rim of the cup. The grounds will fall to the bottom leaving the top ready for a taste.

Repeat this process for all cups, until all crusts are busted.

Taste

Dunk spoon and get ready to slurp for your first sample. As you bring it to your lips, inhale deeply, slurping it as offensively as possible. The goal is to coat the entire inside of your mouth with the coffee so the flavor goes all over. After you slurp, if you haven't burned your mouth or got coffee in your lungs...

Ponder the taste for five to ten seconds.

Spit it out in a designated spot. If members of your party swallow all the tastes they cup, you may have to peel them off the ceiling by the end of the cupping.

Record your observations

The attributes you are looking for are acidity, balance, body, and dimension. The lighter roasts will tend to have a higher acidity, and you can tell because they will make your mouth water. The darker roasts will have a lower acidity, and perhaps more bitterness.

Take a sip of fresh water to rinse your mouth, and move on to the next sample.

TIPS

In the beginning, it may be difficult for you to come up with the words to describe complex tastes and flavors: these words will come with practice.

Try to have your entire cupping party share notes after all the samples have been slurped.

Keep your notes in a 3-ring binder, for a great resource for your own likes and dislikes.

Test your results again at another time by brewing up a batch in a French press or vacuum pot.