

# CAFE IMPORTS STEP-BY-STEP INSTRUCTIONAL GUIDE TO CUPPING

## WHAT YOU NEED

### COFFEE

For sensory-analysis cupping in our lab, we roast the coffee light enough to detect any defects or imperfections. The degree of roast that you use in your cupping will depend on your desired purpose. Do be sure that the coffee you are cupping is no more than a few days off-roast.

### SCALE

You will need a scale for weighing whole-bean coffee for the cupping. The scale will need to read with an accuracy of 0.10 of a gram. The cupping ratio as recommended by the SCA is 8.25 g of coffee per 150 ml of water.

### GRINDER

To calibrate the grind size for a cupping is tricky, as the key is consistency rather than necessarily the grind size that makes the coffee taste best. According to the SCA, “Grind particle size should be slightly coarser than typically used for paper filter drip brewing, with 70–75 percent of the particles passing through a U.S. standard-size 20 mesh sieve.”

### CUPS OR BOWLS

You will need a collection of standard-size bowls or cups in order to eliminate variables in your brew. Our lab and many others uses 5.5-ounce rocks glasses for cupping, but many other glassware works. You will want to set between 3–5 cups of each coffee on the table in order to evaluate for consistency.

## RINSE CUPS

In addition to cups for the coffee, you will also need cups for hot, fresh water which you will use to rinse your spoons between tastes of each cup.

## SPOONS

Cupping-specific spoons are available on the market, but inexpensive bouillon spoons will do the trick.

## WATER

Plenty of water should be heated before the cupping begins. The water should be between 195–205°F, and should only be boiled once.

## TIMER

You will want a timer capable of counting up in seconds as well as minutes, and it should be able to work for an hour.

## SCORECARD OR NOTEPAD

If you are cupping for any professional purpose, you will want someplace to record your results and your findings. Most cuppings are conducted “blind,” meaning the coffees themselves are not specifically identified until the end; you might label them 1–5 on a table in order to keep track, or so on.

## SPITTOONS OR SPIT CUPS

If you're cupping anywhere near what our sensory analysis team tastes every day—50 or more coffees, 3 cups or each!—you probably don't want to swallow every sample. We use communal spittoons, but a paper or ceramic cup to spit into will work just fine.

## CUPPING ETIQUETE

To prepare the environment and yourself for cupping, there are a few guidelines that are generally accepted as best practice.

- Try to be fragrance-free in the cupping lab, as scents such as cologne, cigarettes, or soap can affect cuppers' perception.
- Cleanse your palate or avoid eating pungent or spicy food before entering the cupping lab.
- The room should be comfortable and quiet, with no distractions such as heavy foot traffic, or audible talking or music.
- Most cupping labs follow the "rule of silent work," and the evaluation is done in silence, with discussion at the end.
- Focus, try to eliminate distractions, and enjoy this time to give the coffee your full attention

## THE STEPS OF A CUPPING

01: WEIGH COFFEE – Coffee should be weighed in whole bean: 8.25 g coffee to 150 ml water. Keep samples clustered and do not mix cups.

02: HEAT WATER – Start the water boiling so that it is ready as soon as the coffees are all ground and placed on the table in order.

03: GRIND COFFEE – Before grinding each distinct coffee sample, be sure to purge the grinder with a small handful of beans, so that the coffee you ground for the last cups doesn't

wind up tainting the next ones. Be sure that no more than 15 minutes passes between grinding the coffee and beginning the cupping.

04: POUR WATER\* – As soon as all cuppers are ready to begin, pour fresh hot water into each cup at the same steady rate, filling the cups to the top. Pour gently so as to preserve the “crust” of grounds that forms at the top of each cup. Begin your timer counting up in time as soon as the first water hits the first coffee grounds. \*In most cupping labs, cuppers will evaluate the scent of the freshly ground coffee, which is described as the “fragrance.” At Cafe Imports, we do not as standard practice record the fragrance of the coffee.

05: “THE BREAK” – When your timer reads 4 minutes, cuppers will need to “break” the crust of grounds, both in order to evaluate the aroma, or the smell of the wet brewing coffee, as well as to stop the actual brewing process by drawing the grounds to the bottom of the cups, where they will not extract as aggressively. To break the crust, gently push a clean, rinsed spoon (bowl-side down) into the crust of coffee grounds, puncturing it gently. Be sure to do this in the order that the coffees were poured, and rinse your spoon between each cup. Different cuppers have different techniques for the break, but whatever you do for yours, be sure to remain consistent from cup to cup. While your spoon punctures the grounds, breath in deeply with your nose held just over the top of the cup to experience the coffee’s aroma, and write down your notes.

06: SKIM THE CUPS – After the break is complete, there will be some grounds and foam on top of the cups which will need to be gently removed.

07: COOL THE COFFEE – The cup will be too hot to taste right away: We typically wait until the timer reads somewhere between 16–18 minutes before beginning the tasting round.

08: TASTE – To taste the samples, you will want to learn to “slurp” the liquid into your mouth vigorously, which will probably take some practice. (Don’t be shy.) Slurping violently will not only allow you to spray the coffee across your palate, but it will also vaporize some of the liquid and allow you to taste and smell it at the same time. Most cuppings are arranged in order, so that the tasters all move from left to right along the table, but we like to switch the order in our lab on

the third pass, going in reverse. It is recommended that cuppers taste repeatedly, while the coffee cools, and be sure to rinse your spoon between each taste.

09: DISCUSS – Once everyone is done tasting and has recorded their notes, we like to sit and share our findings, both the scores that we have assigned the coffees (between 1–100, with 80 and above being considered “specialty”), as well as some of the tasting notes that jumped out at us along the way. This helps us to be calibrated, or to feel confident that we are speaking the same or a similar language to describe what we are tasting. Cupping protocol is more or less standard across the industry, but as with everything else in coffee there is room for interpretation (and there are no cupping police). If you have questions about cupping or would like more information about how we conduct our analysis, feel free to e-mail us at [info@cafeimports.com](mailto:info@cafeimports.com).

## SCORING

There are different score cards and even scoring standards in the industry, and ours have been developed over time and with deep consideration by our sensory analysis department. We evaluate coffees for several specific categories and characteristics, though your mileage may vary and ours is not a hard-and-fast methodology across the professional community.

On our forms and in our process, each of these characteristics is assigned a particular score, and those scores tabulated should equal the coffee’s final “cupping score.” Specialty coffee is defined as being 80 points or above on a 100-point scale.

FRUIT – We mark down whether the coffee a lot or a little prominent fruit flavor, with some key fruits identified specifically, such as tropical fruit or stone fruit, which are given extra “credit” so to speak.

FLORAL – Does the coffee have floral qualities or not? We also take note of how intense or absent the florality is.

**CARAMEL** – Caramel is a specific family of flavors related to sugar browning, and is different somewhat from “sweetness,” just as we define “fruity tasting” as different from “having fruity acidity.” Caramel can even be a slightly savory or herbaceous flavor, but it will refer to that developed sugar reaction in the coffee.

**ACIDITY** – The “effervescence” or sparkle that a coffee seems to have on the palate. Consider biting into a Red Delicious apple, which tastes very fruity but is also predominantly sweet; compare that with biting into a Granny Smith apple, which is also fruity-tasting but is also predominantly tart. We would say that these two apples have different perceived acidity, with the Granny Smith being more intense and the Red Delicious being less intense. Coffees can have high perception of acidity without tasting necessarily “fruity” in their flavor.

**SWEETNESS** – Straightforward sweetness is definitely a key component to coffee, and we take record of how much or how little sweetness there is in the balance of flavor.

**BITTERNESS** – Bitterness is also a key component to a coffee’s profile: All coffee has some bitterness, and the significant thing to track is how that bitterness complements or covers the other flavors, especially perhaps sweetness.

**BODY** – The tactile feel of the coffee in the mouth and on the palate: Is it creamy, silky, smooth, gritty, dry, and so on?