INTERNATIONAL COFFEE ORGANIZATION

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Existing definitions of specialty coffee

Background

1. During the 3rd meeting of the Focus Group on Specialty Coffee held on 15 January 2025, Members decided to consolidate the additional definitions of specialty coffee submitted by Members in preparation for the next meeting.

2. Existing definitions of specialty coffee can be found in Annex I.

Action

The Focus Group on Specialty Coffee is requested to consider this document.

1. Specialty Coffee Association

Used by: Origin Roasters (United Kingdom), We Are Coffee Company (United Kingdom), Blue Box Coffee (United Kingdom), Guenter Coffee Roasters (Germany), Firebird Coffee Company (United Kingdom), Mountain City Coffee Roasters (United States of America), Perk Coffee (Singapore), Vietnam Coffee United (Vietnam), VN Beans (Vietnam), Buah Berdikari (Indonesia), Specialty Coffee Association of Japan/Indonesia/Canada/Spain (Japan, Indonesia, Canada and Spain), Luxe (China), China Story (China)

- Specialty coffee can consistently exist through the dedication of the people who have made it their life's work to continually make quality their highest priority. This is not the work of only one person in the lifecycle of a coffee bean; specialty can only occur when all of those involved in the coffee value chain work in harmony and maintain a keen focus on standards and excellence from start to finish.

- The SCA also sets clear standards on the coffee grading process. A minimum requirement for a specialty coffee is the number of defects: to be considered specialty a coffee must have 0 to 5 defects every 350 g (12 ounces) of milled beans.

2. Coffee Quality Institute

Used by: Specialty Kava (Slovenia), NationWide Coffee (United Kingdom), Third Wave Coffee Roasters (United Kingdom), Firebird Coffee Company (United Kingdom), Happ11 (Vietnam), Yunnan Coffee Traders (China)

- Beans free from impurities and defects that have distinctive sensory attributes. These attributes, which include a clean and sweet cup, balanced body and acidity, give the drink a score of over 80 points in a sensory analysis. In addition to intrinsic quality, specialty coffees must have certified traceability and meet environmental, economic, and social sustainability criteria at all stages of production.

3. International Trade Centre

Used by: Perfect Daily Grind (United Kingdom), Landed Coffee (Spain)

Indicative parameters

i. Standard coffee
   - Standard quality denomination (commercial qualities)
   - Minimum quality definition, lowest price possible
   - Clear defect counts, but few quality attributes
   - Price is the main drive

- Qualities are often interchangeable and traded in baskets
- Often traded in large volumes (multiple container loads in forward spreads)
- Quality parameters defined by ICE for Arabica and Robusta tendering
- Volatile pricing logic; mainly traded on a differential basis, price-to-be-fixed logic
- Little to no traceability (focus on food safety), no major focus on certifications, verifications as a viable alternative
- Final buyers are usually large roasters, soluble manufacturers, industrial sector
- Commonly used in blends
- Commercial/commodity approach
- Easily substitutable
- Category includes triage, low grades, stock-lots, etc.

ii. Premium coffee

- Regional approach (e.g. Mogiana, Caldas, Yirgacheffe)
- Balances quality with price/value
- Traded on differential basis or outright basis
- Price premium for higher quality definition (e.g. strictly soft, fine cups, fancy)
- Combines factors of traceability and voluntary standards such as Fairtrade, organic, RFA/UTZ, or company sustainability programmes such as Nescafé PLAN, Starbucks CAFE Practices, Nespresso AAA, Lavazza Terra and Tchibo Joint Forces!
- Final buyers are usually midsize to big roasters and national or large coffee shop chains. Small buyers gain access through importers
- Usually one quality per container, but multiple containers with same quality
- Market access through additional quality components: traceability, sustainability projects, co-investments, etc.
- Frequently used as 'single origin'
- Sometimes used for blending and obtaining a specific cup profile

iii. Specialized coffee

- Highest quality definition: main focus is quality, price is of secondary importance
- Mainly traded on an outright basis
- Quality is the main driver, with presence of desirable flavours and other attributes such as variety, post-harvest processing and certifications
- Sensoric cup profile: SCA-grading, Q cupping, etc.

- Explicit quality denomination: specific region, farm, variety, altitude, farmer/producer
- Innovative and traditional production process (e.g. pulped natural/honey, barrel-aged, anaerobic and yeast fermentation)
- Micro-lots with difficult replicability, championship coffees, Cup of Excellence, etc.
- Multiple qualities per contract/container, high coffee value
- Coffee farms with enough know-how, finance and international market access become 'producing exporters'
- Full traceability (farm-plot) and if certifications, then mainly organic and Fairtrade
- Final buyers: small/midsize roasters, single shops, small/midsize coffee shop chains. Growing presence in retail and digital marketplaces
- Partnership/direct trade/stability of supply (long-term contracts of at least a year)
- Artisan roasteries, freshly roasted
- Rarer (e.g. high cup scores, high differentials, zero defects, unique stories)

4. Brazilian Specialty Coffee Association

Used by: Mokka Specialty Coffee (Greece), Horsham Coffee Roaster (Unted Kingdom), XLIII Coffee (Vietnam)

"Specialty Coffees are beans free from impurities and defects that have distinct sensory attributes. These attributes, which include a clean and sweet beverage, balanced body and acidity, qualify the beverage as above 80 points in the sensory analysis. In addition to intrinsic quality, specialty coffees must have certified traceability and comply with environmental, economic and social sustainability criteria at all stages of production."

5. Hooshmand

Used by: Hooshman (India), Naivo (India)

1. High Quality Bean sourcing and roasting:
   i. From established high end roasters
   ii. Café/roasters roast(s) its/their own coffee in house, via direct trade or a specialty importer

2. Scientific brewing:
   i. Café offering more than one brew method
   ii. Barista/roaster/buyer has competed in and been awarded placements in regional competition (implying a level of care)

6. Erna Knutsen

Used by: Sprudge (Unted Kingdom), Third Wave Coffee Roasters (Unted Kingdom), GoSpecialty (United States), San Remo Machines (Italy), Mountain City Coffee Roasters (United States)

Specialty coffee is a term for the highest grade of coffee available, typically relating to the entire supply chain, using single-origin or single-estate coffee. The term was first used in 1974 by Erna Knutsen in an issue of Tea & Coffee Trade Journal. Knutsen used specialty coffee to describe beans of the best flavour which are produced in special micro-climates. Specialty coffee is referred to by farmers and brewers as the third wave of coffee, especially throughout North America. This refers to a modern demand for exceptional quality coffee, both farmed and brewed to a significantly higher than average standard.

7. Specialty Coffee Association of Japan

Used by: Specialty Coffee Association of Japan (Japan)

'Coffee that consumers evaluate and are satisfied with.'

8. Ministry of Economy, Mexico

Used by: AMECAFÉ (Mexico), ANACAFÉ (Mexico), Cafiver (Mexico), S.A. DE C.V, Instituto Tecnológico de Veracruz (Mexico), Instituto Mexicano de Normalización (Mexico), A.C. (IMNC), Sociedad Mexicana de Normalización y Certificación, S.C. (Mexico), SABORMEX, S. A DE C. V., Grupo Nestlé México (Mexico)

Scope of definition includes attributes on quality, sensory analysis and defects. Full standard is available here: http://www.economia-nmx.gob.mx/normas/nmx/2009/nmx-f-177-scfi-2009.pdf (available in Spanish only)

9. Rwanda Standards Board and the National Agricultural Export Development Board

Used by: NAEB

Coffee is graded according to its size, moisture content, defects, odour, colour and cup taste. Current regulations are specific to each coffee type (Arabica and Robusta), defining minimum quality standards for the export of coffee beans in order to ensure quality and safety, as stated below:

Arabica

A sample of 350 g is taken for both physical and organoleptic analysis (cupping) in a systematic sensory approach with which the trained cuppers grade the coffees as follows:

(a) **Fully washed**

– Super specialty grade: score 90-100% points.

No more than 5 full defects in 350 g of coffee. No primary defect allowed, must pose at least one distinctive attribute in the body, flavour, aroma or acidity, must be free from cup faults and taints, no quakers, maximum of 5% below screen size

indicated. Moisture content between 10-12.5%. .

– Specialty grade: score 80-90% points.
No more than 5 full defects in 350 g of coffee. Primary defect permitted, maximum of 5% below screen size indicated, must pose at least one distinctive attribute in the body, flavour, aroma or acidity, must be free from cup faults and taints, no quakers. Moisture content between 10-12.5%.

10. Democratic Republic Congo

Used by: National Office of Agricultural Products (ONAPAC)

Specialty coffee is product that meets the following conditions :

- An organic and easily traceable product with certification ;
- Benefiting from technical audits during all key stages of its production (choice of the land following a healthy environment, seeds used according to a good variety of sustainable agricultural practices, standardized post-harvest operations, etc) by globally recognized accreditation bodies ;
- During the examination in green, we must have in a sample of 350 grams
  a) Zero defect of category 1 (black beans or pieces of wood etc)
  b) No more than 5 defects of category 2 (broken beans, breaks, etc)
- During a standardized and regulated tasting by the Q-Graders (certified testers), this coffee will have to get more than 80 points out of 100 points according to the specific protocol of SCA, which is established on several criteria (aroma, flavours, acidity, body sucrose, etc) and also have less than 5 defects of roasted beans in a sample of 350 grams.
- Coffee that has benefited from compliance with the socio-economic conditions required in any value chain (non-use of children, good remuneration of the interveners.)

11. El Salvador

Used by: Salvadoran Coffee Institute (ISC)

Specialty coffee refers to coffees that stand out for their superior flavour, unique attributes and careful handling throughout the entire supply chain; these attributes are characterized by the absence of defects and impurities, presenting a clean and balanced cup, attributes determined by the Cupping protocol and obtaining 80 points and above. These coffees come from specific regions, farms or microclimates, where special attention is paid to factors such as the optimal point of harvest, post-harvest processing and preparation, providing the consumer with a unique experience.

12. Indonesia

Used by: Ministry of Trade of the Republic of Indonesia, Specialty Coffee Association of Indonesia

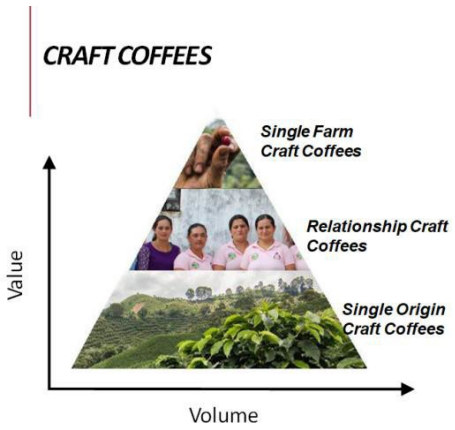
To be classified as specialty coffee, coffee must meet a few specific criteria regarding the number of defects and cupping scores. A coffee must contain between 0 to 11 defects every 350 g (12 ounces) of milled beans. Additionally, it needs to achieve a cupping score higher than 80 points in sensory analysis. This analysis assesses different characteristics, including a clean and sweet flavour, balanced body, and acidity. Consistent standards must also be applied throughout every process, particularly from planting to the roasting stage, to maintain the high quality associated with specialty coffee. This stage greatly influences the coffee's flavour, aroma, and overall quality.

13. Colombia

Used by: Colombian Coffee Growers Federation (FNC)

Coffees grown under **special** and well-defined **microclimates**, which have outstanding sensorial characteristics. Therefore, they are preferred by consumers and are worth a **higher price**, resulting in **better income** for the coffee growing families.

Specialty coffees are coffees with a differentiated cup profile, derived from a specific variety and processed through a distinct method. These coffees can originate from a single farm, a specific region, or be relationship coffees—sourced from a tailored group of producers with a defined social purpose.



The primary objectives of specialty coffees at the FNC are:

- Connect producers and roasters through direct trade or traceability, create trustable and long term relationships which guarantee a stable supply chain.
- Better coffees, better income. As Specialty coffees have a higher Price, this high Price gets transferred to the coffee producer and support our main aim of increasing coffee producer wellbeing.
- Identify and target differentiated products, continuously searching for new trends in the market, innovating and offering our customer a variety of products, staying competitive with the international offer and development.

- Enhance production processes through continuous improvement. Feedback from clients helps coffee producers focus on quality, adopt advanced industrial practices, and evolve their farms into successful, business-oriented operations.

Specialty coffee, described as 'craft coffees' have several tiers of definitions:

1. **Single Origin Craft:** Consistency and Prestige of Our Origins
Origin coffees are those coming from specific regions or farms which are known for their unique environment, soil characteristics and taste, and are offered to the final consumer without being blended with coffees from other origins. These coffees are preferred due to their outstanding flavour and aroma. Coffees with an outstanding cup quality and profile, traceability to the department or municipality, that represent the unique characteristics of each Colombia region (average quantity: 1750 bags x 70 kg) (SCA 83+).

2. **Relationship Craft Coffees:** Stories and Unique Quality
- Coffees sourced from specific associations, traceability in the group of producers and cup consistency (SCA 84+).
- Woman producers Projects
- Young Coffee Producers
- Beneficio stations: Wet mills managed by the FNC where we buy red cherries and process them in specific departments.

3. **Single Farm Craft Coffees:** Jewels of Our Land
- Unique tailor made product, with exceptional sensorial characteristics, traceability to the farm and coffee grower, (SCA 85+).
- Craft Exotic Lot: from 1 bag to 10 bags (average quantity) (SCA 87+)
- Craft Microlot: Coffees produced in small quantities with exceptional organoleptic characteristics, from 5 bags to 50 bags (average quantity) (SCA 85 +)
- Craft Estate Coffee: Coffees from a single farm, compiled with strict quality standards, usually above 50 bags x 70 kg. (SCA 85 +)

Examples of Varieties include:
Colombia, Castillo, Canicafé 1, Caturra, Typica, Tabi, Pink Borbon, Geisha, Caturra Chiroso, Papayo, SL28, Laurina, etc.

Examples of Processes include:
Washed, Natural, Semi washed, Honeys, co fermentations and diverse fermentation process.

Coffee quality preparations:
Washed and Honey's: EP 10% 7 Defects max. Naturals: Colombian Natural 7 Defects max.