



INTERNATIONAL
COFFEE
ORGANIZATION

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Existing definitions of specialty coffee

Background

1. During the 2nd meeting of the Focus Group on Specialty Coffee held on 3 July 2024, the Members decided to survey existing definitions of specialty coffee.
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 (United 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 (United Kingdom), Third Wave Coffee Roasters (United 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

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%.