

What's Brewing

Coffee, Etc.
By Alisa Morkides



The New Wine?

Coffee cuppings = wine tastings?

Most consumers are unaware that levels of coffee quality and flavor exist beyond their wildest dreams, and well beyond those offered by the typical specialty coffee retailer.

"Coffee is the new wine," says Andrew Hetzel, president and founder of Cafemakers, a specialty coffee consultancy based in Hawaii.

Coffee entrepreneurs at the top of the fast-growing specialty coffee heap like Vince Iatesta, owner of Caffè Pronto Roastery, agree. "While U.S. coffee consumption is flat, there is a huge shift in the industry from commercial and gourmet coffees to specialty and boutique coffees," Iatesta says.

This presents tremendous potential for growing and marketing quality coffees. By identifying the many similarities between wine and coffee, coffee growers and retailers can educate the public about coffee options. For example, both wine and coffee are sniffed and sipped for pleasure, both offer a complex variety of palates and aromas, and both enhance meals and occasions. Both are agricultural products from specific regions that are grown, prepared and sold to the consumer as a drinkable commodity.

We've all been educated about how different wines can be paired with different foods to bring out the flavor characteristics of both. Coffee, which possesses even more flavor components than wine, can also be paired with foods. Hetzel points out, for example, that Asian/Pacific coffees tend to be roasted darker to bring out their more full-bodied and intense flavor with low acidity. This makes them ideal for hearty dishes, such as beef, game, fowl, or heavier chocolate-based desserts. Coffees from Africa and Latin America tend to be high in acidity and offer delicate floral, berry, and citrus tastes, making them better suited for pairing with fruity dishes or main courses with light flavor, such as a mild fish.

The other important aspect of understanding coffee is being able to taste all its nuances and subtleties, and then communicate those tastes to others. And that's where wine and coffee cross over again. Wine tastings are a common practice for wine-lovers who want to learn the proper way to taste wine, to develop their palates, and to talk about flavor characteristics using a clear tasting vocabulary. Similarly, coffee aficionados take part in coffee "cuppings" to compare and contrast the particular flavor notes of a prescribed set of coffees.

Coffee cupping is the practice of observing the tastes and aromas of brewed coffee. A standard coffee cupping procedure involves deeply sniffing the coffee, then loudly slurping the coffee so it spreads to the back of the tongue. The taster attempts to measure aspects of the coffee's taste, body (or mouth-feel), acidity, and balance.

While the coffee industry has a long way to go to reach the achievements of the wine industry in retailing quality varieties, a small cadre of coffee growers and retailers are at the forefront of educating and refining the American palate when it comes to coffee. No longer should you expect just a house coffee, but instead a slew of single-origin varieties that vary in flavor, just as a Shiraz does from a Chardonnay. Every day more and more people are being turned onto the power that coffee can have over people. From the farmers who work and cultivate their land to the baristas who pour perfect rosettas atop lattes for their customers, coffee is becoming a culinary art.

