

Let Technology Quantify What Artisans Qualify

By Marty Curtis

Last Year, I wrote an article titled, “Is Our Current System Sustainable”. I concluded the piece by asking “Can the Specialty Coffee system truly survive without the proper distribution of knowledge, wealth and sustainability? Now a year later, I want to extend that conversation and address a key area, Knowledge. The knowledge that exists in the cup of coffee as we know it now and the knowledge still waiting to reveal itself. Join me as we strive to learn more about the black gold we call coffee.

There are several ongoing efforts by companies and organizations in our industry, attempting to address concerns and shortcomings as we grapple with that Big Elephant in the Room. The ones that keep us from connecting the dots along the coffee chain. The ones that remain hidden in our quest to understand, what happens and what is possible, as we produce and evaluate coffee from seed to cup. The ones that keep us from speaking the common language that exists in the cup. The ones that keep us from reaching coffee’s quality frontier. Is there a silver bullet? I think not. There is however an underutilized participant, waiting in the trenches. Technology, or rather, the frontier that Technology can help us identify and reach. Technology that helps address these concerns and shortcomings, by improving the standards and protocols we use, implementing new methods gleaned from research and quantifying what we as Artisans qualify with our senses and experience.

I have worked extensively in understanding how to achieve the most out of the roasting process. Technology has given us the ability to track roasts, by capturing specific data points in the process; temperatures, time and rate of rise to name a few. This all helps create a roast profile that can be reproduced over and over with a degree of consistency. Sure, there are a lot of variables here, with different type of roasters, electric or fuel, etc. This is just a simplified example that exposes a key takeaway here: Technology offers us new ways of visualizing & validating a process; one that is an important step in the seed to cup journey.

Mixing science with art is a subject that has and will continue to be debated within our industry. Science has its role as we strive to extract more knowledge from the coffee bean. I think the next big trend lies in our ability to reveal the mind’s eye of coffee; Cupping.

Cupping is the universal representative of a producer, cooperative, region, country, variety, processor, mill, exporter, importer, broker, roaster and barista. While there are several hats here to wear, there is not an appropriate distribution of importance that addresses each of these roles. Its focus needs to become more balanced and not so heavily weighted toward its traditional use of a market-facing, descriptive tool. It needs to be producer-facing, offering insights from data that help farmers improve their

practices and financial stake. It needs to quantify everything in-between the producer and consumer. As the art of cupping meets the science of data evaluation, we have to capture that interaction, that data, each step of the way and let it reveal its Cupping DNA. Not DNA in the traditional sense, instead the consummate voice of coffee.

Earlier this year we witnessed a prime example of science mixed with art, in the form of the Sensory Evaluation Project, one of many projects in a Multi-Year, World Coffee Research effort. Just look at the stated purpose: “To evaluate coffee quality in an accurate, repeatable, and statistically discriminatory sensory analysis.” While this only addresses certain attributes (Fragrance, Aroma, Flavor), it does attempt to quantify a framework and reference point for sensory evaluation. It remains to be seen how this can and will be implemented in the cupping evaluation. Make no mistake here though, the science of data is in play.

Cupping needs to connect the producer to the consumer and fulfill the appropriate role each step of the way, letting it reveal its Cupping DNA. Utilizing all the participants available, will quantify our knowledge and help us blaze the quality frontier we strive to reach.