

A wine taster tastes coffee

23 Jul 2009 by Richard Hemming

There are two things most frequently on the tip of my tongue: wine, and the words to describe it. Conjuring up tasting notes that join creativity with functionality is one of the most constant and enjoyable challenges for any wine fan. Loquacity is a prerequisite. When faced with four black coffees, however, I became lost for words.

The occasion was a tasting held by Square Mile Coffee, in Bethnal Green, east London, as signposted on our forum [here](#) [post no 28]. My particular interest was to approach a subject about which I knew nothing, but which has so many parallels with wine. I wanted to explore how something so specialist could be made accessible to a coffee amateur such as myself, and so how that might inform the quest for that holiest of grails: informative, intelligent and above all populist wine writing.

Entombed under an East End railway arch, the Roastery is snuggled amidst car mechanics and builders' merchants. Behind their gruff roller-shutter is a gleaming kitchen bedecked with brushed-steel contraptions devoted to the brew, and from these various spouts, valves and taps came four small steaming cups of espresso. The challenge was to match each one with a tasting note provided by the owners, James Hoffmann and Anette Moldvaer.

Getting a good score wasn't the most important factor, however. Of course I would say that, since I got only one out of the four right. Even so, the most interesting discovery for me was how challenging I found it to describe a beverage unfamiliar to me - it was fascinating but intimidatingly alien, reminiscent of the nervous early days of my professional wine life, when first faced with full glasses of wine and empty sheets of paper.

Feeling similarly neophytic, I tasted each coffee and wrote as much as I could to describe it. I then read the official tasting note and matched them up. The results are below, with the Square Mile notes in italics.

1 Dark choc, bitter, charcoal. *A rich, heavy body with notes of peaches, plums and stone fruit. Hints of blackcurrant and cocoa are reinforced by a pleasant juicy acidity.* (Blackburn AA from Tanzania.)

2 Smoke, dried fruit, like figs or prunes. *A cake-like cup with dark chocolate on the nose and notes of apples and raisins in the cup, all bound up in a creamy texture and honey sweetness.* (El Carrizo from Colombia.)

3 Sweet berry, earth, charred meat, very rich and concentrated. *Exceptional coffee full of the sweet aromatics of tangerines, the juiciness of fresh strawberries and a caramelly sweetness that is magnified by a vanilla note. Light bodied with a clean acidity and a wonderful lingering finish.* (Ngunguru AA from Kenya.)

4 Molasses, burnt caramel, something like blueberry? Dark and treacly. *Huge, rich and ripe fruits in the cup - blackcurrant, blackberries, redcurrants and fresh blueberries tied together with a sweet syrupy body.* (Tegu AA from Kenya - this was the one that I got right.)

What surprised me was how tricky I found it to make more than a few fairly broad comments. I knew they tasted remarkably different, but I couldn't say how. This is the exact same obstacle faced by vinous newcomers, and helping them overcome that hurdle is the challenge. At Square Mile, the notes provided gave handy pointers and definitely piqued my curiosity to learn more, so I took the chance to discuss it further with Anette.

Within moments, the word *terroir* had surfaced, and there is the same sacrosanct attitude to provenance that underpins so much that is related to wine. Similar fundamentals apply also to species, cultivars and hybrids - although the latter are *de rigeur* for coffee, having been developed to give the best quality for specific growing conditions without any negative stigma. Even so, for coffee specialists, cultivar remains subordinate to appellation - that is, the name of the estate and the grower. Little wonder that the word coffee stems from an Arabic phrase translating as 'wine of the bean'.

Coffee beans are picked with familiar principles of ripeness and *triage*, and the roasting variables bear resemblance to the myriad stylistic options available to a winemaker - time, temperature, vessel and so on. Wine and coffee even share many of the same problems: over-production, domineering supermarkets and bulk producers, all of which undermine the quality-driven idealism of *aficionados*.

There are differences too, of course. Bean size is often emphasised on the label, with 'AA' being the biggest and best. Freshness is paramount to quality coffee, with an urgency to consume roasted beans within a month, which is why supermarket coffees will nearly always be lower quality - they are usually already three weeks old as they reach the shop floor. Coffee shop chains are no better for the cause of the speciality sector, positing lifestyle and experience above the quality of the drink itself.

It is issues like this that misinform the consumer, and educating coffee drinkers is a critical challenge. Myths, like the phrase '100% Arabica' being synonymous with quality, or that espresso has more caffeine than other coffees, still frustrate the cause of enthusiasts such as Square Mile. Which returns me to the dilemma of accessibility. Like any worthy challenge, there is no easy answer. Successfully navigating the channel between specialism and populism - be it for coffee, wine, cheese or whatever - is an enigmatic challenge. For as long as that is the case, writing remains a crucial part of the puzzle. The pleasure lies not in discovering the holy grail, but in the actual quest itself.