



# How to Taste Coffee

U.S. Cup Tasters Champion

STEVE CUEVAS Ep. 46 Aired 9/12/17

## How did you first get started in coffee?

- First job was not technically in coffee. Was working for a chain of specialty cafes in San Francisco as baker and worked the sandwich bar
- Saw their coffee program and didn't pay much attention to it.
- Moved to the east bay and ended up going to the coffee house everyone was working at Zoccolo coffee house and went to go work there.
- That's where he first started to learn about coffee, pulling shots, milk, etc.
- It started with a question in his mind when learning espresso 1oz of volume or 1oz weight? From there he went on a crazy tangent of years and years learning and reading about coffee.
- How long were you a barista before getting into roasting.
- I was there for about 2 1/2 years at Loco Ben on and off barista 13 years.
- He has been roasting for 2 years.

## As a barista were you really into tasting, flavor etc from the beginning?

- Espresso in particular was where he focused for good portion of his career. He did not really get into drip until he started roasting.

- Back then it was a very ristretto shot 21 g in 15g -20g out
- he recalls thinking there is something wrong with the espresso shot so he started experimenting a lot with the dialing in until he found something that was little more palatable

### **What caused you to want to go then to come a roaster?**

- like a lot of people roasting just looked cool dn after groin barista work for so ling your day to day ibecomes very similar you become more service focused but not pushing th e coffee limits.
- At that point roasting was the next logical step as he had not yet learned to roast.

### **Did you start to learn cupping when you started roasting?**

- He came off the street at Back Oak and hung out until they gave him a job
- He asked can he help cup and they let him nd he went from helping to cupping to sample roasting. He practiced cupping on his off time.
- In 3-4 months they felt secure in his skills then went to the big roaster and finally let him do it on his own on his second roast.
- From then on he did not look back.

### **How did you describe flavor etc back in the begining vs now?**

- When you first start off in your career you don't know what you're tasting. It either tastes good or it doesn't
- He could tell you it was wrong but not why.
- Plus, customers in th early 2000's did not ask about flavor too much so he did not get a lot of these question.
- Compared to today where we are really splitting hairs and have a tasters wheel etc.
- When he talks to customers he often has to translate the detailed notes into broader flavors and textures
- Sometimes a coffee like a natural helps people get it easily other times it's more difficult like between central and south Americans
- Cup Tasters Champion ship gives you sets of 3 cups to taste and select the odd one out. It tests your taste and speed.
- Steve's participation was very last minute. Joined upon hearing there was an opening in Knoxville coffee champs.
- So he was not stressed about it as he would be from practicing etc. It worked out very well for him.

- Steve says he does not feel the most confident about his palate. He is not one to brag or claim he has a great palate but regularly credits the palates of those surrounding him at Black Oak
- Together they pin point what the coffee has to offer and he absorbed everyones points
- It's better to understand what everyone tastes than to be like I know what I'm tasting and that's the answer
- Triangulation of different palates is what he recommends don't go try to do it on your own.
- taste in a group of three or more.
- The community aspect of building a great product is really important.
- Its nice to have a variety of difference in tasting
- Steve tends to have a strong ability to know what the consumer will go for with taste.
- What kind of balance do you strike between something you love as a pro and something the customer will love?
- Black oak is located in a small town and originally before the owners of Black Oak took over ...the pre-existing coffee shop offered darker roasts and they tried single origin and lighter and it was met with push back.
- They had to do medium, dark, a melange etc.
- Steve loves that Black Oak is his first roasting job because he has the humility to do french roast
- At first it was difficult because he was used to shorter lighter roasts. Had to understand a different style of roasting and what the customer loves.
- We roast for our customers. At the end of the day they are the ones who serve and pay the bills. Single origin is more of a side project.
- You have to know who you're talking to. Give the customer what they want and meet their requests with understanding

## **How do we balance pushing coffee forward while still keeping an open ear and heart to the consumer?**

- They offer artisan drinks and coffee as well. They offer also what their built in customers want.
- You can get away with restrictive progressive menus in a saturated city that has a lot of 3rd wave bars but in a small town without that you are held hostage in a sense.



- our goal is to provide what we can and do it better than what people ar doing around us.
- There are a lot of people who make fun of darker coffee. They dismiss it if there is a hint of roast on it. But you look at Sudden Coffee and they had the guts to do something controversial. But he was going after a whole market the rest of us were not considering
- If you are ignoring part of the market then you are ignoring customers.
- Sometimes a customer will apologize for putting sugar or cream in coffee and his response is."It's not my coffee it's your coffee, if you need me to do anything else let me know"
- Nobody should feel guilty about drinking coffee the way that they like it.
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- **What are the best things that we can do to train and expand our palates to encompass a bigger spectrum of flavor but do so accurately?**
- Doing flights of coffee: only doing one coffee limits your experience and it lacks point of reference. Compare it against radically dif coffees train yourself to taste the differences and make it harder over time. The more coffees the better
- Taste everything you eat and drink.
- Mindfully explore flavor. The more different things you can taste the better. Eat consciously. This from advice given to him by Todd Goldsworthy
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- **How do we know what to say to customers that will be effective?**
- First question SCA teaches is "How are you brewing this?"
- That gives insight into how they view coffee and can guide further conversations. simple machine can mean simple taste or not really into coffee as much.
- 2nd question is usually around what types of coffee they like. Low acid high acid etc.
- People that prefer brighter coffees are more likely into he nuance of the coffee vs those who want more chocolate notes etc.
- You have to go by the answers an cues given in the conversation.
- Based on a little info you get from them you can figure out how to reply to them You have to feel it out. A little like a back and forth. if they respond well and ask a lot of questions then you can engage further. If they just listen and don't respond you can simplify it and be more brief.
- Make it genuine/ try not to script anything
- Reference what their looking at as a start.
- What you say is important but eye contact is more important to pick up if they are receptive or not to you.

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- **What are some challenges and things that can trip us up along the way?**
- Different countries or processes will be challenging. Especially new markets like anaerobic processing or coffee from china etc.
- Instead of saying you don't like something right off the bat. Try to think how it would be viewed by the consumer.
- Different does not always mean negative
- Train yourself to think who is this for NOT what do I think of it
- As for competition, inspired of a tumultuous world's experience, his mentality is that he does not go to win but if he learns one thing he can take with him to the next one then it was worth .
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- **Any final words of advice?**
- These competitions are not really the best of the best. It's who's brave enough to compete.
- Who's brave enough to fail on a public stage.
- Don't be afraid to go out and give it a try.
- The industry is so inclusive now so go and ask questions and talk with people/ and answer peoples questions to. Share.

## LINKS:

[WWW.BLACKOAKCOFFEE.COM](http://WWW.BLACKOAKCOFFEE.COM)

[STEVE'S INSTAGRAM](#)

