



making taste

AN ESSAY ON THE PHILOSOPHY OF TASTE

by Ian Fretheim and Jamin Haddox

photos taken by Mark Shimahara at Workshop Coffee Co. and Ozone Coffee Roasters, London

Taste: It's physiological and aesthetic, manufactured and developed, subjective and objective. It's tied historically to our survival and more modernly to our identities and cultures.

Yet taste conveys a complexity and depth of meaning that has been all but ignored in our burgeoning culture industries (referencing a term that refers to popular culture as a factory producing standardized goods to manipulate the masses into passivity). Instead of having a nuanced discussion about what it means to taste in our society, the opposite has happened. The complexities of taste that enrich our lives have been exploited; our tastes have been suppressed, and the richness of taste has been drained from our lives.

In this article, let's look at taste through a critical lens. We'll explore how taste has evolved, how it can be biased, and why it's important that we evaluate coffee on its own terms, without the hum of marketing campaigns distracting our taste buds.

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To begin, here are two quotations that treat the concept of taste:

“What is taste? It *could* be described as the expression of a preference between, say, A and B. But what distinguishes taste from mere opinion is that such a preference emerges from a sensory, emotional reaction with the subsequent ability to intellectually decipher that reaction for the self (and, if really necessary, for others). But ultimately, the defining characteristic of taste is the coherent relation of that preference to one’s own conduct, to an ethical relation to oneself and to the world.”

—Jonathan Nossiter
Liquid Memory: Why Wine Matters

“In order to distinguish whether anything is beautiful or not, we refer the representation, not by the understanding to the object for cognition, but by the imagination (perhaps in conjunction with the understanding) to the subject and its feeling of pleasure or pain. The judgment of taste is therefore not a judgment of cognition and is consequently not logical but aesthetical, by which we understand that whose determining ground can be *no other than subjective*. Every reference of representations, even that of sensations, may be objective (and then it signifies the real element of an empirical representation), save only the reference to the feeling of pleasure and pain, by which nothing in the object is signified, but through which there is a feeling in the subject as it is affected by the representation.”

—Immanuel Kant
Critique of Judgment; Of the Judgment of Taste, According to Quality

chocolate bars and well-balanced tools. We have had the taste of things, such as failure and success. Some tastes, we are told, are acquired, while others come naturally. There are supertasters and nontasters, though most of us are medium-tasters. (Supertasters are genetically about 25 percent of people. Nontasters make up about 25 percent of people. Most of us, the remaining 50 percent, are medium-tasters.) There are tastemakers, and there are the consumers of made taste.

Is it insignificant in a discussion about tasting coffee to bring up a broader sociological connotation for the word “taste”? If we want to know more clearly what it is to taste coffee, it is instructive to examine the tastefulness of the coffee industry itself. That the industry contextualizes our tasting before we ever put coffee to palate means that any assumptions or biases on its part travel with that coffee. Pursuing taste beyond the mere physiological functioning of our chemical receptors opens new and fuller ways of relating to our ability to taste. We can become more proficient and well-rounded tasters by expanding our definition to include all facets of taste and the taste experience. If we limit our understanding to the Specialty Coffee Association of

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Cupping at Workshop Coffee Co., London

The Complicated

When you step up to the cupping table and place coffee in your mouth, your tongue’s receptor buds are activated by chemicals that tell your brain if it is sweet, salty, sour, bitter or savory. Your body automatically provides a value-free record of sensation prior to personal judgment. This immediate experience is what is called physiological taste. Once one interprets those stimuli through the lenses of personal experience, character and value, they become something else: an expression, or sense, of taste. A sense of taste is born from questions that are simple to ask, but more difficult to answer: “What is this, do I like this, and why?” Cuppers, roasters and baristas taste plenty of coffee, but it is important that they also learn to express taste.

The turns of phrases that our society uses relating to taste tell us that one may have and one may lack taste. One may be tasteful, or tasteless. We have tastes for things, such as the early bebop movement,

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Making Taste (CONTINUED)

America's—flavor is the mixing of both taste (gustation) and aroma (olfaction)—we may never enjoy another cup of coffee in our lives.

Taste is expressive and relational. It is a dialogue and sometimes an argument—with oneself, with others and with the object of taste. Taste must be highly respectful of the tenuous distance between the tasting subject and the object that is tasted, as well as between the tasting subject and any other tasting subjects. It is a question of how a person might go about tasting and communicating this experience, and not merely how many flavor compounds they can reliably identify. Taste occupies a gray area, neither subjective nor objective. It is an undervaluation to say that related to coffee and commerce, taste is a common language used to describe attributes of the commodity, between buyer and seller, to specify quality and communicate acceptable and unacceptable characteristics. It is true, but what sort of relationship is this to have with coffee? Can a relationship be commodified? Would it still be a relationship? Do we as a specialty industry want to reduce our interactions with coffee, each other and the world to those of commodification?

If opinions can be shot from the hip, the first lesson of taste might be that it requires our attention, our time and our effort.

Further complicating taste, it should be noted that there is a moral dimension here as well. Food is necessary to sustain us, but humans don't eat merely to ingest the nutrients necessary for keeping our metabolic processes moving forward. In that sense, coffee would be absolutely unnecessary (though some caffeine junkies may argue otherwise). In contrast to other animals who taste, humans possess intellect, which allows taste to become a path to pleasure as well as personal and social enrichment. Since early history we have turned our mouth tastes into moral tastes and, conversely, we have turned our moral tastes into mouth tastes. Look no further than the religious and social mores surrounding food preparation and consumption for examples of this social mechanism. The food you eat or the coffee you drink, and the way you go about its preparation and consumption, says a lot about your values and your taste.

Your sense of taste is an extension, even an exercise, of your moral belief, whether you are aware of it or not. Pretend you meet a stranger for a business lunch. She or he orders a bacon-wrapped filet of beef topped with a crab cake, smothered in Béarnaise sauce.



Cupping at Workshop Coffee Co., London

What unspoken information about values, personality, religious belief and political leaning might you be led to estimate? How about if your dining companion ordered a locally grown, organic micro-green salad with organic, vegan green-goddess dressing? Whichever way you judge in this case, the point is not right and wrong. The point is that there is a judgment at all. You are what you eat, as you have heard, but you also eat what you are. It's exactly this physiological/mental/emotional/social feedback loop that complicates and simultaneously enriches taste and the tasting experience.

Taste, The Aesthetic

Taste has an aesthetic register as well. It is here that we find many of the sociolinguistic connotations of taste. The vast store of material on aesthetic theory generally comes from a time when aesthetics were considered important to the overall development of a person. While the specifics of Kant's personal taste may now be considered distasteful, what is much more important is the existence of his overall theory, and the effort he gave to investigating and explaining it. If opinions can be shot from the hip, the first lesson of taste might be that it requires our attention, our time and our effort.

In many instances, it's easier to deal with opinions with which one disagrees than with tastes that one does not share. An opinion we can disregard. An incongruent taste we cannot. If a person comes into the cupping lab as the panel is sitting down to go over their results and begins dropping scores on cold coffee at a single spoonful, it is meaningless. However, when a person has applied himself sincerely to the process of cupping and comes up with a dramatically different score than another taster, it is a different matter (or it should be). Even if the person is very new to cupping, their experience is validated in large part simply by their having attended to the experience. An incongruent taste on the part of a person endowed with similar but different tools piques the curiosity, gets under our skin, and illumines and challenges the horizons of our own sense of taste.

Taste is a significant way in which we dialogue with the world around us.

Another lesson of taste is that we can never really know other people's tastes. We can surmise, intuit and deduce. We can even question a person directly, but we cannot say conclusively whether they have taste.

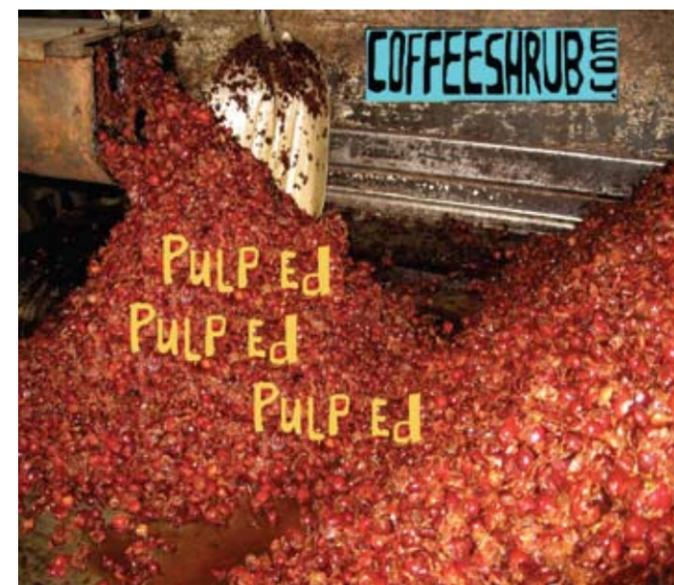
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There is a philosophy of roasting whereby the roaster attempts and claims to in no way show up personally in his or her roasted product. While this philosophy may initially sound benevolent, it's hard to evade the reality that coffee is a roasted product. As such, it must engage in some human relations. One might hope that roasters and their coffee do not sleep in separate beds! Even if the coffee/wine analogy is rather tired and generally misguided, there are some interesting parallels to be drawn in this case. In terms of the role of the roaster and his/her relation to roasting coffee, wine still offers for learned example its master craftsman, the vigneron.

Traditionally, the defining mark of the vigneron was his/her purposive expression of expertise in relation to a particular year's harvest of grapes, as the process of making wine. While a heavy-handed approach to roasting might easily be compared to the modern California cabernet, so overworked as to be both ubiquitous and somehow meta- or cyber-terroir, it's striking how the opposite trend in roasting fits here as well. Standoffishness toward roast flavor in coffee, as currently popularized by the enzymatic-roasting fad, is no more expert than heavy-handedness. Indeed, they are two sides of the same coin. The trend in enzymatic under-roasting is easily comparable to the grape juice that goes into wine. These grapes are seeded, they're smaller, and they tend to have much thicker skins than table or juice grapes. In a word, they are tannic. To hear extra-light coffee described by one of its proponents only furthers the case, as the conversation inevitably revolves around acidity, intensity and the raw truth of a product barely touched by the hand of man.

While you may not share these tastes, your own tastes should not be taken as incontrovertible. A person may truly love the juice of the pinot noir grape, and in the same way they may love coffee roasted, but still well within the enzymatic phase. If the person says that this is the greatest and truest way to taste a Burgundy, or an El Salvador bourbon, you can doubt both their taste and their ability to taste. If the person were to say that the intrinsic properties of the pinot noir grape were fascinating and that you should try a glass of juice, or that

a light cupping roast on an El Sal bourbon accentuated its acidity, and informed its production counterpart, you would have something to engage, and another conversation around taste to enjoy.

Taste À La Carte

Surely we can agree that specialty coffee is more than an 80-point score or a screen-size standard and defect count. What, then, is the taste of specialty coffee, and who has made it so? Of Rainforest Alliance-certified, fairly traded, direct traded, Q-certified, 90+, responsibly sourced, bird-friendly, organic and UTZ-certified? Of auction lots and micro-lots? Of Finca de Nuestros Sueños? Many of these categories do not carry any sort of sensory requirement, and yet they often carry a strong influence on sensory experience. Of those that do have a sensory requirement, it is arguable that that very component can cause their (tasteless) influence on sensory experience to be stronger yet.

In today's frenzied society, marketing may be among the most serious barriers to taste. Says Kant, "...only the reference to the feeling of pleasure and pain, by which nothing in the object is signified, but through which there is a feeling in the subject as it is affected by the representation..." (In Kant, the representation refers to our perception of an object. One of Kant's major contributions was to say that objects are experienced by us not directly and in/as themselves, but via representations, essentially processes of filtration and coloration contingent on sensory and perspectival limitation.) This is the specific mental function that Kant identifies as aesthetic, or of taste. It is also the primary target for all advertising: *you*, and not the thing advertised. Are we saying that fair trade is nothing but marketing? No. But how much inconsequence does fair-trade certification have for the co-op bag runner, defect picker or security guard? Perhaps more than we would like to believe.

Which brings us back to marketing in its broad sense. There is the obvious marketing known as advertising: television commercials,

print ads and companies telling you to purchase their products. However, when we consider the overall structure of an advertising statement, we can begin to see other less-obvious instances where marketing affects our ability to taste. Advertising is merely the most explicit form of marketing. At a more subtle end of the spectrum we find names. Names, which seem so simple and obvious, convey meaning in complex ways.

In the case of fair trade, some meaning is conveyed specifically about a coffee with regard to its farm and sourcing. The definition of marketing here is not bad, but it is marketing in a definite way. Farms are certified so that you do not have to look into their running in order to be certain that standards important to your mores are being met. It is marketing in the broad sense that the label precludes your experience—or taste—in this case, of a farm's operations. (And thank goodness for it! Very few people have the time and resources to visit and inspect the sources of all of the goods they consume. It's also doubtful that the producers of these goods would be thrilled by such inspections.)

At the same time, these labels can convey meaning not included in their definitions, as supplied by you and me. The problem for taste arises when these terms are accepted too readily and applied beyond



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the scope of their meanings. A good example is the organic label. There is much to be said in favor of organic practice. Yet holding strictly to organic production means accepting a less consistent harvest and, therefore, cup quality, from year to year. To insist that organic tastes better is a misconception. In a hard year, when the plants struggle and the coffee cherry does not fully develop, it is not likely that the final brew will have the same content (sugar, acidity, brew colloids, etc.) as in even a moderate growing year, or as that from a farm using conventional agricultural practices. Sometimes it may, and sometimes it may not. From a larger perspective on taste, one may *more tastefully* select a *worse-tasting* organic coffee.

The discussion really gets interesting when considering the organic label. With the standardization of organic law came the minimum necessary requirements of meeting that law. There are organic fertilizers (we're not talking kitchen scrap compost here), organic pesticides and even synthetic sprays. These can represent major energy inputs for a farm, and it is easy to find cases where the strengthening of the letter of the law has led to a weakening of its spirit. One might ask, "What's more organic than a pile of organic apples?" To which a USDA-savvy retailer might respond, "A pile of organic apples individually wrapped in plastic."

The conversation here is about the functioning of a label and not its merit. If you want to taste a coffee, you will be best able to do so blindly. When you put a coffee onto your tongue, if you already

Today's coffee professionals are the makers of taste for future generations of coffee drinkers. As such, we must learn to taste, and to have taste.

have resting there a name, a label or a brand, you will not be able to help but taste these as well. If you want to express your taste, say for a fairly traded coffee, your ability to do so will depend both on the knowledge that you have surrounding the coffee and on a cup score or experience unbiased by that knowledge. One could as easily express a taste purely for coffee politics on the basis of, "What is this, do I like it, and why?" The key to expressing taste is being clear in making these distinctions. No cupper is infallible. The best cuppers are confident in their experience, and are both comfortable with and knowledgeable about their limitations.

One may say the same of price—also applied as a label. Remember a few years ago how it seemed the only characteristic the mainstream media could report about the Clover brewer was its \$11,000 price tag? The mainstream press immediately extolled its brew as the best to be had anywhere. How many leading coffee shops still use a Clover today?

Food and coffee are marketed far too often not on their intrinsic values, but on just about anything else that we can invent to create the perception of value (at \$25 a cup, how likely is it for a geisha coffee to taste mediocre to eager consumers who just opened their wallets?). We have detailed stories about how our food was grown and where, at what altitude, in which soil and with what certification. We have embellished descriptions of flavor profiles and cup notes. Sometimes such descriptions are representative, pertinent and true. Frequently it seems that they are not, instead being meant merely to mollify our pre-consumption demand that all the correct boxes be checked and ensure that we do not check up on them ourselves. The challenge in facing both pertinent and superfluous information is that each can obscure our ability to taste at all and, thus, suppress and quietly exchange any expression of taste we might make with a regurgitation of some pre-given bias.

While taste does express a certain sort of bias, marketing may broadly be considered as anything that furthers this bias—that is, anything that is added to the already crowded contemplation of taste.

Taste takes account for and gives place to bias, whereas bias moves to exclude any critique of taste. For the coffee with a better political index than cup score, it is bias to use that political index to distract from or obscure the cup score. It is taste to weigh the political index and the cup score on their own merits.

The Final Taste

As coffee roasters, buyers and tasters, we must do more than just read the labels that we create. Today's coffee professionals are the makers of taste for future generations of coffee drinkers. As such, we must learn to taste and to have taste. We must learn to express taste and have taste expressed to us. We must learn how to relate to our worlds tastefully and work to make the world a tastier place.



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