



Cupping Isn't Just for Coffee Anymore

Trust your taste buds. Don't choose syrups based on reputation, popularity or price alone. Who knows what works best with your coffee better than you? Conduct your own syrup tasting experiment, or use the results of ours. Your customers will surely thank you. (By [Alexis Rubinstein](#))

No matter which sector of the coffee industry you may be in, you most likely understand the importance of cupping. It is the process that allows an individual to form a personal connection with and understanding of the product. It is the process that exposes you to new tastes, aromas and consistencies. But most importantly, it is the process that elevates you from a coffee "pro" to a coffee "guru," with a level of knowledge and expertise that can only be matched by fellow cuppers. Equally as important to coffee cupping however, is the taste testing of different syrup options that

are the foundation for some of the most lucrative coffee-based drinks in the business.

The Experiment

Syrups are an extremely important, often underestimated ingredient in the recipe for coffee success. Most of us are familiar with the industry's leading brands, we have established favorites in our mind and have probably been using the same manufacturer for quite some time. But as syrup companies continue to evolve and change over the years with the finical tastes of the consumer, their recipes can very often change as well; possi-

bly leaving us with an Irish Crème that tastes nothing like the Irish Crème that was previously hand-selected. Or perhaps your loyalty to your syrups began in a time when there were far less competitors to speak of...and now you're wondering, "is there something else out there better suited for my coffee?"

One way to be sure you are using the syrups which you feel best highlight your product is to conduct a controlled tasting experiment. Here at *Tea & Coffee Trade Journal*, we chose representatives from five areas of the field: Ellie Matuszak, vice pres-

ident of training and operations for Coffee Solutions; Heather Perry, director of training and consulting for Coffee Klatch as well as the 2007 U.S. Barista Champion; Sherri Johns, president of the Ultimate Barista Challenge and WholeCup Coffee Consulting; Anna Gutierrez, Southeast territory leader for Dillanos Coffee Roasters; and Nels Storm, manager of product development for Caribou Coffee Co. Each participant received the same syrups to test and the same Dillanos coffee to use, ensuring the most accurate results across the board. Mont Blanc supplied their chocolate “sauces,” Stasero, DaVinci Gourmet and Torani donated samples of their vanilla, raspberry, hazelnut and chocolate selections and Barista 22 (the new syrup line from Dillanos Coffee Roasters) supplied vanilla, raspberry and hazelnut.

Once the syrups and coffee were received, we needed to focus the analysis and provide detailed instructions on how to conduct the experiment. The five testers were directed to pour 6 to 8 oz of Dillanos coffee into one cup for every syrup supplied (20 in total). Then, 0.5 oz of syrup were poured into each cup of coffee. The cups were numbered, and a corresponding list was created to match the number of the cup to the flavor and brand of syrup used. This was to ensure a blind taste testing (our testers could have recruited an assistant who could have aided in this process). They were instructed to taste all of one flavor of syrup before they moved on to another flavor. For the purpose of this experiment, and for the most helpful feedback in general, our testers were specifically instructed not to use a general comparison of “I liked this brand of chocolate better than this brand.” Keeping notes that reflect such data will be of no use to you or your employees in the future when you revisit the “choosing your syrup” challenge. However, if you were able to log comments such as “syrup A had a much more deep flavor, while syrup B seemed light and fresh,” you can almost instantly match the correct syrup to a new blend or roast profile. To help with identifying the different flavor profiles in each of the syrups, the testers were supplied with a list of key words often associated with each fla-

vor (see figure on pg. 44). With their cups poured, their list of helpful terms at hand and their palate cleansed, our testers were ready to begin.

The Results

As there were no formal instructions on how the data should be collected, each tester’s analysis was different in format, although all equally fascinating. Some took notes in paragraph format, writing almost stream of consciousness style as their brains and taste buds processed the different flavors. Others relied on the key terms to describe the subtle taste nuances and to distinguish one manufacturer from another. As long as you are comfortable and confident with recognizing the different taste profiles, the method used is just a matter of choice.

Hazelnut Heaven

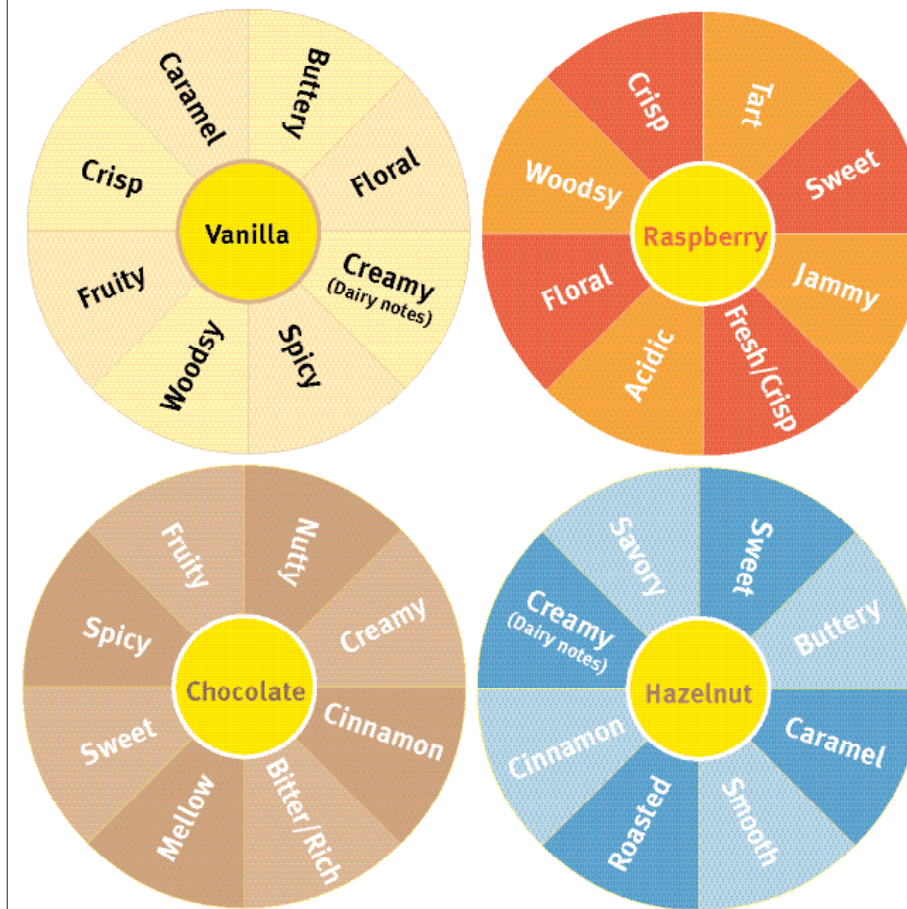
Heather Perry believed that “overall, the hazelnut syrups were all very different.” She continued, “Torani and DaVinci were similar in the sense that they both had a sweet component to them, lending flavors or caramel, while Barista 22 had a pure hazelnut taste as was not sweet at all. In fact, I could see somebody wanting to add sugar to a latte with Barista 22 Hazelnut because it did a great job of flavoring the drink without adding a sugary aftertaste. The Stasero also had a roasted nut flavor which made it the creamiest and most buttery of the bunch.” Based on Perry’s results, it would seem that each manufacturer offers a hazelnut-flavored syrup that could easily fit well with various coffees — sweeter syrups for more acidic coffee, a syrup with a roasted nut note to complement a deeper roasted coffee, etc. Sherri Johns was able to communicate the differences with carefully selected descriptors. “Torani’s hazelnut was buttery, roasty, sweet, pleasant, subtle, viscous, rich aromatics, creamy and bordering woody.” The hazelnut syrup from Stasero, Johns described as “floral, spice, nut, tart, woody and toasty with rich aromatics. Barista 22 is fruity, sour, musty, tart with a flavor of aged nuts and DaVinci gave hints of buttered popcorn, honey, lime citrus notes and complex flavors.” Nels Storm seemed to have a similar hazelnut experi-

ence. He believed, “DaVinci had a soft, buttery aroma with a high sweetness and a smooth caramel flavor and aftertaste; Barista 22 offered a distinct hazelnut aroma with an almost tart flavor initially followed by a buttery finish; Torani was most noted for its creamy texture with a buttery caramel flavor; and Stasero had a high spice aroma with a roasted nut flavor and heavier texture.” Ellie Matuszak “found the Stasero to have a toasted/baked taste that complemented the pleasing roastiness of the Dillon’s blend from Dillanos Coffee Roasters. The DaVinci hazelnut had a softness that I felt brought out the coffee’s natural sweetness and body,” she said. Matuszak also felt that the Torani hazelnut was sweet and creamy and the Barista 22 had a straightforward hazelnut taste.

“It’s very interesting how different flavor characteristics come out of the different flavored syrups when being compared side by side,” said Anna Gutierrez. “Normally, you would order a hazelnut or vanilla latte made with either of these syrups and describe it as a hazelnut or vanilla taste. However, next to each other and as you jump back and forth between the same flavor made by different brands, you start to recognize interesting flavor characteristics...some good, some bad. You can also pick out that some of the syrup companies have a very true-to-taste flavor while (others don’t). Unfortunately, hazelnut was the toughest one with the widest range in flavor.” With that said, Gutierrez described Barista 22 as “caramely,” DaVinci and Torani as creamy and Stasero as “kind of a sour, nutty taste.”

Rooting for Raspberry

“Like with the hazelnut, all four manufacturers had very different interpretations of raspberry,” explained Perry. “What is interesting about raspberry is you don’t necessarily think of eating a fresh raspberry with coffee, and some manufacturers agreed and went for more of a cooked raspberry flavor, pulling out more of the depth of raspberry flavor rather than the initial tartness we sometimes think of.” Perry goes on to describe the syrups individually: “Torani’s was more of a jammy raspberry filling (reminded me of eating the filling out of a



raspberry pie), with a nice acidity to balance out the sweetness, almost as if it had a little lemon juice to balance out the sugar. This complemented the coffee nicely. Barista 22’s syrup was very fresh, with a really unique herbal and floral quality. Almost like an herbal berry tea with a hint of mint. Not sugary at all. DaVinci raspberry was woody, creamy and was overall very smooth and managed to provide flavor while not overwhelming the coffee. Stasero was tart, fresh and crisp. Would be great in an Italian soda. Would be great for someone who wants muddled fresh raspberries in their coffee.” Overall, Perry’s experience proved “none of the flavors came out sugary, which was a nice surprise.” Nels Storm believed Barista 22’s highlight to be “its fruity aroma,” while DaVinci was credited with a “high sweetness and tart, juicy, strong fruit flavor,” Torani was explained as having a “sweet aroma of jam/jelly and an acidic, tart, fruity flavor and finish,” and Storm felt Stasero’s raspberry syrup had a “mild, sweet aroma.” Sherri Johns found a variety of different flavor profiles in the selection of raspberry syrups, from Torani’s “snappy, jammy, fresh, pleas-

ant and lively taste” to Barista 22’s hints of “green fruit and cucumber” and DaVinci and Stasero’s “sweet and tart” complexities. Anna Gutierrez called “Barista 22- jammy and full-bodied, DaVinci- very light with sweet berry notes, Torani- true raspberry taste; sweet and chocolatey and Stasero- woody and citrusy.”

Vanilla Varieties

The word “vanilla” itself seems to be a favored describing word for wines, ports, flowers, teas, coffee and even chocolate. But when someone describes their glass of chardonnay or Hershey’s bar as having hints of “vanilla,” what does that really mean? Vanilla is a multifaceted flavor that must be dissected of all its attributes before it is fully understood. It is these attributes that make up the differences in the vanilla syrup options. “You knew from the start the vanillas were going to taste different because visually they were all so different,” revealed Perry. “Everything from a clear to a deep golden hue was present and the visual differences came through in the taste.” Perry explained, “Torani was buttery and had a clean and sweet flavor and would be great as

a sugar replacement. Barista 22 was crisp with flavors of gentle cinnamon spice and vanilla flavors. This cut through the coffee really nicely without being too sweet and is great for someone who wants flavor. DaVinci had a woody flavor, almost like the outside of a vanilla bean, with a creamy consistency. This is the syrup for someone who wants a gentle sweetness. And lastly, the Stasero vanilla syrup was creamy, not spicy but had a warmth that reminded me of spices. Great for someone who likes melted vanilla ice cream.”

“Of the vanilla syrups, I found the Stasero to have a toasted marshmallow taste, which was a pleasing complement to the vanilla bean taste,” recalls Matuszak. “The DaVinci syrup was a softer and nuttier flavor. The Torani vanilla tasted like caramelized sugar and went well with the sweetness of the coffee, and the Barista 22 offered a slight unique almond taste.” While Storm seemed impressed with attributes such as “DaVinci’s dark, caramel aroma, Barista 22’s floral notes, Torani’s buttery, caramel flavor and Stasero’s sweet aroma and spicy flavor,” he stressed that while the flavors were good, not all of them had tastes he would necessarily “distinguish as vanilla.” The subjective vanilla taste profiles were also challenged by Gutierrez, who classified the Barista 22 vanilla syrup as, “buttery and able to let the coffee flavor stand out. DaVinci’s syrup was chocolaty and had some underlying floral notes; Torani was caramely and smooth and Stasero was sweet and creamy.” Johns picked up on the “mild, floral, delicate and balanced tastes of Torani’s vanilla syrups; the good body with buttery and caramel notes for Stasero; Barista 22’s rich body and bright and crisp flavor; and a spicy and complex taste from DaVinci with a sweet finish.”

The Chocolate Challenge

As with most side-by-side judgments, you must make sure the products in which you are comparing are similar. No apples versus oranges here. So when I was first informed that Mont Blanc is a manufacturer of “sauces” rather than “syrups,” I was confused as to how to incorporate them into this experiment. The thicker, fudge-like sauce is a comparable option to the more commonly known syrup. Whether your costumers will prefer it, or your coffee will stand up to

it, will be a matter of experimentation and personal opinion. Recognizing these differences, Gutierrez felt it best to taste test the sauces separate from the other products. “I felt it was best to do the comparison of the Mont Blanc chocolates completely separately from the chocolate syrups that were part of the tasting since the syrups cannot be the same consistency nor have the same depth of flavor as the sauces. Also, the Stasero chocolate is in a bottle and technically a syrup, however it was very close to the consistency of a runny sauce. Also, the Barista 22 was more of a sauce consistency as well.” She continues, “The Barista 22 chocolate was rich and creamy, the DaVinci had a nutty taste, Torani’s chocolate was sweet and fruity and Stasero was mellow and sweet. Mont Blanc supplied four different varieties of their chocolate sauces: Ghana single origin, semi-sweet chocolate, sweet chocolate and sugar-free chocolate. Gutierrez associated the Ghana single origin with a “green olive and citrusy taste and a rich and smooth texture. The semi-sweet was milky and smooth, the sweet chocolate was woody, sweet and rich and the sugar-free has a clean mouth feel and cherry flavor.”

“The chocolates ran the gambit from sweet to bitter and thick to thin,” explains Perry. “Torani’s had almost a liqueur-like flavor and reminded me of a Tiramisu with the rum aftertaste. Mont Blanc was the thickest and was like a melted down chocolate bar. It was what you think of when you think of chocolate and was rich and had a delicate bitterness and nuttiness. DaVinci and Stasero were both really interesting and had a fruitiness about them that I am still trying to pin down.” Johns describes the different varieties of chocolate syrups and sauces with words that could make anyone’s stomach growl. “Torani was sweet, subtle, spicy, milky, balanced, creamy with hints of fruit and vanilla. Stasero was very pleasant, with a bittersweet real chocolate taste and a thin finish and DaVinci was spicy, tart, complex and winy with a good finish.” Johns also tasted the four varieties of Mont Blanc chocolate sauces separately. Of the Ghana single origin, she felt there was a “berry tartness with a fudge flavor.” The semi-sweet was much like bakers chocolate with “pepper and floral notes and a medium body.” The sweet chocolate vari-

ety had “layered, complex flavors and was sweet, mellow, fudgy, creamy and milky” (and happened to be her favorite Mont Blanc sauce), and the sugar-free had “spicy, earthy and complex” attributes.

“Overall, it was an interesting experiment,” said Johns. “I have done tastings before such as this when selecting a syrup brand for clients, based upon their coffee profile and drink recipes. Tasting is a process that I would strongly encourage anyone serving

and buying syrups and flavorings to go through. Be consistent as you would be in cupping, make sure your syrups measure up and complement the menu, not complicate it. Try the most popular syrups in your most popular bar drinks, iced and hot, and ask staff to get in on the tasting acting as well.” There doesn’t have to be one superior brand or clear-cut winner; each syrup offered something the others didn’t. Tastings will help determine which syrup is right for you. 7

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