

Coffee Tasting Terminology

This list may seem a little daunting, but remember that what you are looking for in a good cup of coffee is essentially body, aroma and flavour. Choose a coffee that you like and see what you can detect. Alternatively, try coffee where the taste is not as it should be, and compare it with a good brew to try to see where the differences lie.

Cupping Terms

- **Breaking the Crust:** Breaking apart the cap of coarse grounds on the top of a cup, after the coffee has brewed, to begin the tasting.
- **Cupping Spoon:** a spoon, about the size of a soup spoon, but perfectly round, used to sample coffee during a cupping session.
- **Slurp and Spit:** The colloquial term for slurping the coffee from the spoon, tasting it, and then spitting it out. This is done when too many coffees are cupped to drink them all.
- **Triangle Cupping:** Used when one wants to make certain that two coffee samples are different. One tastes three cups of each; but with one cup from one group mixed with two from the other. The tasters have to pick out the odd samples.

Coffee Scoring Terms

- **Dry Aroma:** The aroma of the ground coffee.
- **Wet Aroma:** The aroma of the brewed coffee.
- **Body:** How heavy the coffee feels as it coats the tongue
- **Acidity:** The tanginess of a coffee on the tongue, along with its tart fruit flavours. Sourness and acerbitity, as opposed to tart or tart/sweet tastes are penalized.
- **Flavour:** The basic tastes (sweet, sour, bitter and salty) of the coffee, along with its aromatic impression.
- **Finish:** The flavours in the aftertaste
- **Cuppers Corrections:** Points awarded if a low acid coffee is fruity, or a low body coffee is buttery. Points deducted if a high acid coffee is sour, or a high body coffee is dry and grainy.
- **Transparency/Cleanliness:** a criterion for judging aroma, taste, and finish. The degree to which the flavours are clear, well defined, and not masked by dull bitterness.
- **Balance/Sweetness:** another criterion for judging aroma, taste, and finish. The degree to which the bitter and sour flavourings in the coffee are balanced by sweetness.

- **Complexity:** the final criterion for judging aroma, taste, and finish. The multiplicity of flavours.

Positive Flavours

- **Acidic:** Very desirable coffee quality, sharpness detected towards side of the tongue; denotes quality and altitude.
- **Aftertaste / Finish:** Flavour / mouth feel remaining after coffee has left the mouth, sometimes surprisingly different from actual coffee taste.
- **Aromatic:** Coffee with intensive pleasant fragrance (for example Hawaii, Colombia, Jamaica, Sumatra).
- **Bitter:** Basic flavour sensation detected at the back of the mouth and soft-palate, often as after-taste, sometimes desirable to a limited degree (as in dark-roast, espresso). Not to be confused with acidity.
- **Blackcurrant:** Flavour reminiscent of blackcurrant or berries; some acidity but with stronger undertones not found in citrusy, highly acidic coffees; not a negative term.
- **Body:** Signifies the perception of texture or weight of liquid in the mouth; thin or light body can feel watery, full-bodied means heavy like liquor, as in Sumatra, Java and most robustas.
- **Broth-like:** Pleasant flavour in some lighter East African coffees similar to clear soup, like bouillon, often accompanies slightly citrusy flavour.
- **Caramel:** Sweet flavour reminiscent of caramelized sugar, or, slightly different: candy floss (cotton candy).
- **Chocolaty:** Flavour reminiscent of chocolate which can be found in various crops (some Australian, New Guinean and Ethiopian, for example)
- **Citrus:** Flavour reminiscent of citrus fruits due to high acidity; very desirable, denotes quality and high-altitude growth.
- **Clean:** Pure coffee flavour, no twists or changes in the mouth, no different after-taste (Costa Rica sometimes provides good examples).
- **Dry:** A certain type of acidity and / or mouth feel, but not, as in wine, the opposite of sweet; often accompanies light, or even delicate coffees, such as Mexican, Ethiopian and Yemeni.
- **Earthy:** Aroma / flavour reminiscent of soil, organic, mushroomy, cellar-like (can be found, for example, in some Javan or Sumatran coffees).
- **Floral:** Coffee beans having a very fresh, floral, heady aroma, like that of floral-scented perfume.
- **Fruity:** Flavour / aroma often found in good arabica coffees, reminiscent of a wide range of fruits: citrus, berries, currants, etc, always accompanied by some degree of acidity; this is usually positive, but can indicate over ripeness or over-fermentation.

- **Gamey:** Unusual and interesting flavour, often found in dry-processed East African coffees (such as Ethiopian Djimmah), reminiscent of cheesy, but not sour or negative.
- **Lemony:** Flavour very like mild lemon found in very acidic coffee, such as that from Kenya.
- **Light, mild:** Light-bodied coffee, pleasant low-to-medium acidity. Some Mexican and Honduran coffees exhibit these characteristics.
- **Malty:** Coffee flavour very like malted barley, sometimes in combination with chocolate, sometimes alone.
- **Mellow:** Soft, with pleasant low-acidity.
- **Neutral:** Bland coffee, very low acidity, not derogatory, as implies no off-tastes; good for blending (often describes many ordinary Brazilian arabicas).
- **Nutty:** Pleasant flavour reminiscent of nuts, often peanuts (some Jamaican).
- **Rounded:** Cup balance with no overpowering characteristic, well-balanced; can also mean pleasantly smooth, without being sharp.
- **Smoky:** Aromatic flavour of wood smoke, very pleasant attribute sometimes found in certain coffees such as some from Guatemala and also occasionally some Indonesian arabicas.
- **Soft:** Coffee with low acidity, mellow sweetness, pleasant roof-of-the-mouth easiness (possibly similar to the feel of Italian red Lumbrusco wine); some Brazilian Santos for example.
- **Sweet:** Pleasant, mellow, agreeable; sometimes used to describe soft coffees, but also can be found in highly acidic coffees.
- **Tobacco-y:** Aroma / flavour characteristic of unsmoked plug (chewing) tobacco.
- **Well-rounded, well-balanced:** Cup giving impression of good mix of flavour, acidity, body and perhaps aroma.
- **Wild:** Term describing certain Ethiopian/Yemeni coffees - suggesting unusual, inconsistent and interesting; sometimes used with spicy; also exotic, tangy, complex.
- **Winey:** Combination of slightly fruity flavour, very smooth mouth feel and texture reminiscent of wine. Term should not be used indiscriminately to denote acidity; better reserved for coffees with genuine feel (more than taste) of wine, slightly rare but unmistakable (in some Kenyan as after-taste; found in some Ethiopian Harrars, Yemeni and various others).

Negative Flavours

- **Ashy:** Coffee with flavour / aroma of cold fireplace ashes.

- **Cerealy:** Flavour like unsweetened grain or oatmeal, sometimes found in under-roasted robusta coffee, bland and not particularly pleasant.
- **Cheesy:** Rather pungent flavour / aroma of slightly sour, curdled milk or cheese.
- **Chemical / Medicinal:** Coffee with unnatural off-flavours, real or reminiscent of tainting.
- **Dirty:** Coffee tasting as if the beans have been rolled in dirt or soiled.
- **Dusty:** Dry-earth taste and smell, exactly like dust, though not the same as dirty or earthy.
- **Grassy:** Green and astringent aroma with an accompanying taste like a new-mown lawn, sometimes found in coffees from Malawi and Rwanda.
- **Green:** Aroma / taste of unripe fruit or plants, as when green stems or leaves are crushed or broken; can denote under-roasting.
- **Hard:** Flavour, not to be confused with hard bean. In terms of flavour, hard signifies a brew lacking sweetness and softness.
- **Harsh:** Strong, unpleasant, sharp or edgy flavour; also used to describe Rio-y, iodine-like flavour.
- **Hidey:** Aroma / taste like animal hides, uncured leather, or, at best, new leather shoes.
- **Metallic:** Sharpness, acidity slightly gone wrong, Some Nicaraguan coffee, for example, can be overly metallic.
- **Musty:** Flavour of improper drying, mildew, generally undesirable.
- **Papery:** A taste / aroma exactly like dry paper, slightly similar to dusty.
- **Rancid / rotten:** The flavour of a spoiled oily product, as in rancid nuts or rancid olive oil; fairly disgusting; can cause involuntary gagging.
- **Rio-y:** Iodine, inky flavour from microbe-tainted beans. Prized for traditional brewing in Turkey, Greece and Middle East.
- **Rubber:** Aroma / taste reminiscent of tyres, garages, often detected in certain robustas, for example.
- **Sacky:** Coffee tainted by improper storage, flavour / aroma of hemp, possibly damp.
- **Salty:** One of four basic tasting categories occurs occasionally in coffee; also can denote presence of chicory in coffee blend.
- **Sour:** Undesirable "dirty socks" flavour of over-fermentation.
- **Spicy:** Aroma / taste of spice, perhaps sweetish or peppery, found in certain coffee, such as those from Java, Zimbabwe, Guatemala; or the more erratic Yemen and Ethiopian coffees.

- **Stalky:** This gives a flavour reminiscent of dry vegetable matter or other plant material stalks.
- **Stinky:** Rotten flavour indicating possible contamination by "stinker" bean.
- **Thin:** Term when coffee's body does not equal acidity or flavour; out-of-balance, watery, wishy-washy in mouth feel.
- **Turpentine-y:** Smell or taste reminiscent of chemical, possibly phenolic-like substance.
- **Woody:** Flavour peculiar to either dead (indicating old crop, coffee stored too long) or green wood flavour found in certain coffees, like fresh saw-dust; neither very pleasant.
- **Yeasty / Toasty:** Flavour reminiscent of either yeasty (unbaked) bread, or bread lightly toasted.