

IN THE BAG



When it comes to coffee labelling, does useful information ever become too much information? Tristan Parker explains how to decipher that encrypted label

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Despite industry professionals putting forward a compelling case for including microscopic location and production details, there's a lot of information to grapple with on some coffee labels:

processing method, region and farm, varietal, altitude, roast date, tasting notes... How useful are these details for the operator and for the customer drinking their regular morning latte, and when did this level of information start to creep on to labels?

Unsurprisingly, opinions differ on the timeline, but the general consensus is that detailed origin information started to appear on labels around ten years ago and has snowballed since then. "Previously, this information would be a USP. Now, at the top level, it isn't," says Howard Barwick of green coffee importers Olam Specialty Coffee. "It's a way for specialty coffee roasters and

industry people to differentiate themselves from commoditised coffee."

ORIGIN AND TRACEABILITY

This is perhaps the most important information that you will find on a label and can include anything from the region within a country down to the name of the farm, cooperative or individual smallholder. Sound excessive? Not to everyone. "It should be as traceable as possible, to give credit to the producers of that region, or the single producer involved," says Barwick. "I think that's just good custodianship throughout the chain."

Alex Zeal, co-owner of The Epiphany café in Bristol, takes a similar view. "The origin is always going to be most important thing. It decides everything and gives you an impression of the coffee before you've even opened the packet or tasted it." >

PROCESSING METHODS EXPLAINED

- **Washed** The skin and fruit mucilage (pulp) are removed through soaking in water and fermentation before the coffee is dried. The most common method used for specialty coffee, due to the ease in keeping consistency.
- **Natural** A simpler method where the fruit mucilage is not removed before drying. Seen as inferior to washed, but more people are trying the natural method due to its lower cost and potential to create intense flavours.
- **Honey/Pulped Natural** Halfway between washed and natural. The skin is removed, but the pulp is left intact during drying.

PROCESSING

A hugely important factor in the final cup, the processing method is “probably the single biggest variable that can impact a coffee before roasting,” says Caspar Steel of Atkinsons Coffee Roasters in Lancashire. Methods differ between countries, due to climate variations, resources and tradition, and within the three main methods (see the box on page 17), any number of variations may be integrated. Other processing methods exist, but on a much smaller scale, usually within one country or region, such as the Indonesian ‘wet-hulled’ (*giling basah*) method used in Sumatra.

TASTING NOTES

These are seen as more of a general guide, rather than a definitive descriptor. As Mat North of Bristol’s Full Court Press and UK coordinator for the Specialty Coffee Association points out, “Tasting notes come from the roastery – the coffee will be very different when you make it in a cafe and serve it.”

VARIETALS

“This is where people start comparing specialty coffee to the wine industry,” says North. The sweet, balanced quality of Bourbon is still a reliable go-to within the industry (“Bourbon is one of the foundations of modern Arabica as we know it and a huge part of the family tree,” says North, “and it’s still an excellent coffee.”), along with the more complex, sought-after and highly priced Geisha. But



the importance placed on varieties will vary from importer to roaster to cafe operator. “Although varieties are a really good guideline, they’re not the be-all and end-all of the quality of a coffee,” says Zeal.

ROAST DATE

How recent should this be and when should you be brewing? Depending on whom you speak to in the chain, opinions differ. Cafe operators tend to prefer using coffee that’s as fresh as possible, whereas roasters may give a wider margin. “We try and sell coffee within four weeks of roasting,” says Steel. “On the label it says use within three months, but we wouldn’t recommend drinking coffee that’s three months old.”

ALTITUDE

Is higher better? Generally, yes, but as Barwick points out, ‘effective altitude’ is perhaps a more accurate term. He says, “You can get immaculate coffee grown at 1,300m [above sea level], which will be at a lower temperature than places growing at 1,600-1,700m, simply because the microclimate is ‘effectively’ higher.”

Ultimately, the level of information required for a bag of specialty coffee differs from cafe to cafe. Very few customers may request information on origin or whether they’re drinking a washed or natural coffee, but that doesn’t mean the details are wasted on others. “The responsibility for getting the information across to people lies with us as shop owners,” says North. “It’s on us to communicate that succinctly and in a way the customer understands.”



WHAT TO LOOK FOR AND ASK YOUR ROASTER

- Trust your roaster and be willing to give their recommendations a try if they are in line with your overall expectations.
- Ask how old the crop is, says Mat North. “If it gets past a year old, there’s a chance you’re buying stale coffee.”
- Flavour is going to be the deciding factor, so before buying, consider what kinds of flavours you want to be serving to your customers.



POPULAR VARIETALS

- Geisha and Bourbon (particularly orange, pink or yellow Bourbon) are still the on-trend options, but look out for Pacamara and Maragogipe as well.
- Hybrids such as Catimor (a cross between Timor and Caturra) are being developed for disease resistance (for example against leaf rust in Central and South America) and higher yields.
- Arabica still dominates as a species, but some predict Robusta use increasing as it can grow at low altitudes and in harsher conditions.



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