



Many coffee shops in Shanghai now offer cupping workshops to educate the public about the differences between various types of coffees.

Cuppers strive for perfect coffee taste



The roasting room of the Caravan Coffee Roasters in London, which roasts a total of 2,500 kilograms of coffee beans every week



A coffee farm visited by Freda Yuan during a trip to Colombia last June

Zhu Jing

When you get your regular coffee from your favorite local shop, you expect consistency in its taste.

Freda Yuan and Zhang Shiwei would surely agree. For them, a typical day begins with sipping and slurping coffee. They hunt for any differences in coffee, pinpoint possible bad tastes and correct the variance to get to the flavors beloved by customers.

From Taiwan, Yuan is now a quality control manager at the Caravan Coffee Roasters in London, as well as the winner of the 2017 SCAE UK Chapter Cup Tasters Championship in November. She does "cupping" — or coffee tasting to monitor tastes and flavors — usually tasting up to 40 cups a day.

"We roast beans every Monday to Thursday. So my job is to test the beans roasted a day before to ensure they reach the standards we set," explained Yuan.

Every week, the three-outlet coffee chain roasts 2,500 kilograms of coffee beans in total. Roasters use specialized equipment and computer programs to monitor the roasting of the chain's beans. If there are any imperfections in taste of the final coffee, she will look at data from this equipment to try to correct them.

With Q-grader certificate from the Coffee Quality Institute, the only internationally recognized certification system for Arabica coffee cuppers, Yuan also helps with purchasing unroasted beans — known as green beans in the coffee trade — during harvest season. "I assess green beans from suppliers; identifying, qualifying and articulating coffee characteristics from cupping," said Yuan.

Yuan's cupping results will influence which unroasted beans her shop purchases.

While many Q-grader certificate holders work as buyers who go to coffee farms, others work as roasters at coffee shops, according to Zhang.

"I think a good barista should also know whether they make a cup of good

coffee," said Zhang, "it's important to taste the coffee, detect problems and try to fix them."

Zhang gained her Q-grader certificate a year ago. She has been teaching at the Mellow Coffee Institute in Shanghai as a senior lecturer since then.

"When it comes to things like brewing competitions, baristas will work closely with roasters to get the best roasting level for the beans to use in the competition."

Zhang is now preparing for the upcoming final of the 2017 China Brewers Cup Championship next week in Shanghai.

Based in Jinshan District where the coffee brand has its roastery, Zhang needs to taste around 100 cups a day. "All the roasted beans have to pass a cupping session before being delivered to stores for sale as well," she introduced.

Zhang quit a promising job with a local bank in her hometown in Guizhou Province, southern China, and earned nine professional certificates in the past three years, including WSET Level 2 Award in Wines and Spirits.

"Coffee and wine tasting are very similar," explained Zhang. "Actually, the coffee flavor wheel originated from wine tasting."

Many coffee shops in Shanghai have started to offer cupping workshops to teach customers about various aspects of single original coffee, from farming, processing, roasting to brewing and tasting.

"Cupping is like a journey," said Yuan, "you need to take it slowly, carefully and properly. With someone to guide you through, you will find cupping very interesting, just like a tea ceremony or wine tasting session."

"It will help you build up a system, where you learn about certain tastes, flavors, aromas, fragrances from a coffee origin to look for while you sip the coffee," explained Zhang. "For example, African coffee is stronger in acidity. If the coffee tastes like plum or tomato juice, it might be Kenyan beans. If it smells floral and tastes citrus, it should be Ethiopian."

But the Q-grader certification is about



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Freda Yuan
2017 UK Cup Tasters Champion



Zhang Shiwei makes a hand-drip coffee at Mellow Coffee Roastery in Jinshan.

much more than producing great-tasting coffee. Certificate holders like Yuan should also aim to help coffee growers produce better beans. “I hope every coffee farmer will get fair payment for their hard work,” said Yuan. “It takes great care and work to grow and process good-quality coffee beans.”

“We’re told that the ultimate purpose of the Q-grader program is to help farmers improve their growing skills and teach them cupping,” said Zhang, “In return, customers will be able to access high-quality coffee...”

As Zhang explained, green beans account for 60 percent of a coffee’s taste while roasting accounts for 30 percent and brewing skills for the remaining 10 percent. “As a barista, what we can do is really limited.”

“Most farmers are living in poverty. They are struggling to make money to feed their kids and family, or just to survive,” said Yuan, “I hope eventually... I can help them.”

“When I studied in Pu’er, Yunnan Province in my Q-grader program back in 2016, we visited a couple of coffee farmers who had never tried their coffee beans,” recalled Zhang. “We then roasted the beans from the farm and made them a cup of hand-drip coffee. “They took a sip and said, ‘Oh, that’s how our coffee tastes.’ I guess I’ll never forget that moment.”



Freda Yuan tastes a cup of coffee at work.

Interview with Freda Yuan

Yuan works for Caravan Coffee Roasters as a quality control manager. She is also an Authorized SCAE Trainer in Sensory with Q-grader certificate.

Q: What was it like when you became the 2017 UK Cup Tasters Champion?
A: It was my first cupping competition. I was actually stunned at the result.

Q: How many cups of coffee do you taste every day?
A: I do around 150 cups of production cupping every week, then sample cupping from 5 to 30 cups per time depending on the season. I am now practicing for

the upcoming competition. This adds an extra 48 cups per week. (Each practice is around 24 cups, and I do two practices each week.)

Q: Which origin of coffee do you like best?
A: I don’t have any preference for coffee origins because I evaluate each coffee individually and objectively. In this way, I can truly see the value of each coffee with no preconception.

Q: How can people improve their abilities to detect different flavors in coffee?
A: Drink, eat and taste consciously. This

means so much in sensory training. Also being able to describe what you have tasted can create a stronger sensory connection.

Q: Please name your favorite dessert to have with coffee.
A: This is a tough question because I have a sweet tooth. I really like brownies and chocolate chip cookies!

Q: Which are your favorite coffee shops in London?
A: I like to go to Prufrock to try Scandinavian roast coffee, Origin Coffee Roasters for decent UK local roast coffee and Lyles’ for a balanced brew coffee.

DIY: Cupping at home



1. Prepare and set.



2. Grind coffee beans.



3. Pour in hot water.



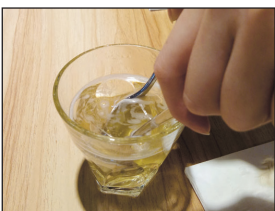
4. Infuse for 4 minutes.



5. Break the crust.



6. Scoop away grinds.



7. Clean spoons.



8. Time to taste!

What you need:
2 cupping bowls (or small bowls/cups)
2 different coffee beans (set a criterion: origin, roast level, or process. e.g. beans from Ethiopia with 2 different roasts or light-roast beans from 2 different African countries)
Water
Cupping spoons (deep round tablespoons)
Tissue for drying spoons
Extra cups for crusts and to spit out the coffee
Extra cup of water to rinse spoons
Timer and scales

How to cup:
1. Prepare and set for your cupping.
2. Grind coffee beans as coarse as granulated sugar and make a mark on one bowl to differentiate. Smell the coffee grinds from the bowl.
3. Pour nearly boiling water (around 93°C) over the grinds. (coffee:water=8.25g:150ml) or ratio of 55g :1000ml depending on the cup size.
4. Allow to infuse for 4 minutes while you can smell the aroma of coffee.
5. Break the crust on top three times, from one edge to the other, and stir the bowl gently, allowing some of the grinds to sink.
6. Scoop away any leftover grinds on top with two spoons.

7. Clean the spoons.
8. Start cupping when the coffee temperature drops to 70°C or so.

Slurp and have fun!

Tips on slurping:
Bring the spoon close to the mouth and inhale (suck powerfully, as loud as you can). Draw the coffee to the roof of the mouth to tickle the tongue. Fall into the back of the mouth. It will create a so-called coffee vapor to stimulate the part of your sense of taste (your sense of smell actually). Then roll the coffee around the mouth and begin to look for tastes you can compare it to.

Note:
Prepare a chart of the coffee flavor wheel and some paper and pens to jot down notes on each sample.

Cupping workshops

Café del Volcán
Date: March 30, 7pm-9pm
Entry: Free (booking required via WeChat)
Address: 80 Yongkang Rd

Seesaw Coffee (Yuyuan Rd)
Date: April 12, 26, 7:30pm-9pm
Entry: Free (walk-in)
Address: 1/F, 433 Yuyuan Rd