

Building A Coffee Career: Perspective from a Cup Tasters Champion

BY FREDA YUAN



Seven years ago, I was suffering and battling with bulimia and depression. Life was miserable rather than enjoyable. My emotions were up and down, sometimes happy and sometimes sad. It was so extreme that I hit a wall several times a day. At that point, I was trapped. This experience was replayed over and over again, and I thought I would never recover.

It all changed when I started to work in coffee. I found a passion—in sensory, in coffee.

When I first started working as a barista, I was amazed by the fact that I could taste the character of a coffee. Realizing that I was able to taste and perceive differences in flavor increased my confidence, and it slowly helped me to deal with the struggles I was facing.

While pursuing my coffee career, I volunteered in different aspects of the coffee chain to figure out what I really want to do in the industry. When I determined that I would like to get involved in green coffee buying, it became clear that I would need to invest in my education. Therefore, I challenged myself to take a Coffee Quality Institute's Q exam in 2015. With only a

few trainings beforehand—and limited access to coffee when I was in Taiwan—I managed to pass the exam that summer.

Passing the Q exam was only the beginning of my coffee career. There is still so much to learn. I started to get involved with a lot of cuppings and events, and established a Q grader calibration club last year.

As a Q Grader, I am calibrated across the globe with other coffee professionals—however, that doesn't mean I know everything there is to know about sensory evaluation. Taking the SCA Sensory course increased my knowledge, as well as improving my communication with colleagues, which has been very helpful for my work. If I notice a problem in my day-to-day production quality control, the language of sensory evaluation needs to be understandable and transferable to my colleagues, to ensure that everyone is on the same page. In the meantime, I also took Green Coffee to the professional level, as I wanted to improve my green coffee, agronomic, import/export, and buying knowledge.

I have to admit, becoming an AST in sensory wasn't my intention. I needed another certification to prove that I am good enough to be employed, as I needed a visa to work legally in UK. However, it has become the best gift for me, since I share my passion with other people and we taste together. The more I get involved with SCA sensory training and Q grading, the more I understand that education is key. My next step is to become Q grader instructor, to train and educate coffee professionals.

Last November, I won the UK Cup Tasters Championship. It was an anxious, yet exciting moment, as I didn't really expect to win the competition. My intention was simple: to compete with myself, and myself only. However, winning also brought me to another place in life—a confirmation that I am good at tasting and I am on the right path.

Now, you might wonder how does one practice for a competition like Cup Tasters? My daily work involves evaluating 40 cups of production coffees, nearly everyday, Q grading samples, and QC for Caravan current offers. In total, I taste around 100 cups of coffee per day. Apart from work, practice is essential—and I am very lucky to have a coffee mentor and coach training with me all the time. We compete every round, and the award is a pint of beer afterwards!

Beyond coffee, I also attend a lot of wine, tea, and whisky tastings to broaden my sensory spectrum. Or, I'll simply eat a pink grapefruit and enjoy that zingy sweet moment. If you ask me how to be successful at tasting, I would say be mindful, enjoy, and explore different tastes and textures. Staying in the present has proved so much to me—not just in life lessons, but also sensory aspects. Looking back, my depression was a tough thing to go through, but I wouldn't change a thing as I wouldn't be where I am right now otherwise.

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