



RIGHTEOUS COFFEE

PART I

By Mike Ferguson

DEVELOPING & DEFINING SCAA QUALITY STANDARDS

“The nicest thing about standards is that there are so many of them to choose from.”

-Ken Olsen, founder of Digital Equipment Corp.

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hen the founders of the Specialty Coffee Association of America (SCAA) spent 1982 meeting, talking and arguing about what the association should do and be, they made two very important decisions: 1) they decided not to name their group the Specialty Coffee Advisory Board, thus saving us all from being a part of the SCAB, and 2) they decided the association’s role would be that of “coffee cleric” rather than “coffee cop.”

Far from being opposites, the cop and the cleric have more in common than in contrast. The founders of the SCAA were not framing a polemic; they were coloring a shade of difference. The difference between a cop and a cleric is in part the nature of their authority. One is based on human laws, the other on preceding higher law. For specialty coffee clerics, coffee excellence is the higher law. Quality will win the day in the human heart, mouth and marketplace. But the SCAA’s founders had few “holy writings,” upon which they could all agree, about coffee excellence. They had no shared path to righteousness.

The word “clerical,” comes from “cleric” because the clergy have been at times, in many different societies and religions, virtually the only people in a community who could read and write, and so they kept and copied the records and books, both holy and profane. The young specialty coffee movement had its prophets, such as Erna Knutsen, Alfred Peet and many others, but it needed excellence to become codified. How does one attain righteousness? What are the standards?

To imagine the SCAA founders and charter members as hard-working clerics and scribes attempting to bring about some sense of common purpose and record a system of beliefs is not far from the truth. Most of them worked very hard for precious little return on their investment that could be measured on the bottom line. Today, with more than 3,000 members, we are often asked “what’s in it for me?” when someone is thinking about joining. It is a fair question to be sure, and hopefully most members find real, hard-dollar value in belonging to the association. But we also hope that part of the reason a company joins and stays is because they share a common desire with the original 33 members of the association to support the SCAA mission and see an ongoing development and propagation of standards for excellence, the spread of righteous coffee.

Trade associations promote many types of standards. The SCAA has award standards, ethical and business practice standards, skill and competence standards, competition standards, and technical standards. And the list continues to grow as our industry segment expands, requiring not only clearly delineated maps to quality at every point in the supply chain, but the need for players to differentiate how they participate. When asked if it is important to them that the SCAA become the standard setter for specialty coffee, 94 percent of members say yes.

RIGHTEOUSNESS, TECHNICALLY SPEAKING

Some lines of differentiation are more arguable than others, keeping alive the healthy tradition of debate within our industry. Like rabbi debating the meaning of lines from the Torah, we argue about defect counts for Sumatran coffee, then go to dinner together. The standards that are intended to be the least debatable are the technical standards. Like the coffee we sell, the specialty coffee industry is a highly diverse gathering of priorities and personalities, but at our core are common-ground technical standards, some discovered, defined and disseminated, others waiting somewhere along that continuum.

Three out of four SCAA members (about the same number that work with coffee directly) identify technical standards for roasting and brewing, certification of specialty coffee, and espresso beverage standards as important to their company. More than half of our members indicate that certification standards for specialty coffee roasters and green graders are important to their company (again, about the same number of members in the green and/or roasting segment of the industry). In keeping with the importance of standard-setting, the SCAA board of directors has included wider adaptations of SCAA standards as a goal in the current strategic plan.

As our industry and our association continue to grow, the process of setting standards begins to resemble more the passage of a bill through congress than it does a delivery from above. Though the process—which, to some extent, is still evolving—may feel cumbersome, it is necessary. Standards are useless if they are not accepted, and acceptance depends not only on how well a standard stands up to an objective review of the facts and/or the science, but the degree to which those who are expected to adopt the standards believe that their point of view was represented in the process of creating the standard. At the same time, standards cannot be watered down by the market-based agendas of the stakeholders. The burden of this balance falls largely on the SCAA Technical Standards Committee.

All SCAA standards have their genesis in our mission and values. The SCAA mission is “to be the recognized authority on specialty coffee, providing a common forum for the development and promotion of coffee excellence and sustainability.” The SCAA holds these values while pursuing the mission:

- commitment to quality
- spirit of cooperation
- dedication to continuing education for our members
- sensitivity to the environment
- consciousness of social issues
- encouragement of sound business practices and ethics
- promotion of the value of specialty coffee to consumers

Though not solely responsible, the Technical Standards Committee is the primary caretaker of our credibility for the “bookends” to the SCAA’s mission statement, authority and excellence. They are responsible for technical implementation of the first value statement, commitment to quality. They accomplish this by seeking to establish methods for measuring quality at every processing point in the coffee chain, and by publishing measurable standards for quality. We will review all SCAA published standards in part two of this article in the next issue of *The Chronicle*.

RIGHTEOUS GREEN

One aspect of standard-setting is developing and/or identifying common terms. It is helpful for the industry if we are all using the same words and definitions when referring to coffee types, grades, methods of processing, and methods and metrics for evaluation. For example, in recent years, the Technical Standards Committee has completed an updated version of the green coffee classification poster, and last year it published the *Green Defect Handbook*, which goes into much greater detail than the poster. After field-testing several versions, the committee has also in recent years introduced an updated version of the SCAA cupping form, which has become the foundation for yet more standards around grading competence and roaster certification.

The Technical Standards Committee is also concerned with issues surrounding correctly identifying origin for green and roasted coffee. They also seek to understand and confirm with measures processing methods that result in coffees that specialty roasters value.

RIGHTEOUS ROAST

With the emergence of an active and organized Roasters Guild, the lead for developing standards around roasting has shifted away from the Technical Standards Committee. The Roasters Guild has put a great deal of effort into developing a roaster’s certification, a designation that encompasses use of and proficiency in several SCAA tools and standards. Developing a comprehensive certification program is a huge undertaking, and to date, the program has only incorporated existing standards. As new standards related to the roasting process emerge, the Technical Standards Committee will be involved in the development in partnership with the Roasters Guild.

RIGHTEOUS BREW

For many years, the SCAA has promoted standards for brewing coffee. These can be found in *The Coffee Brewing Handbook*, an SCAA publication written by Ted Lingle and based on extensive research from a variety of sources. The handbook is endorsed by the Technical Standards Committee as the SCAA standard for brewing coffee, however, the committee has determined that further research is needed to determine if additional or adjunct standards are necessary for dark roasts. The committee is now conducting original research in this area.

In addition to researching brewing standards for dark-roasted coffee, the Technical Standards Committee has several other projects in development or in progress, such as a water quality handbook and codifying highly variable best practices for espresso, including hotly debated topics, such as extraction ranges. With the emergence of national and international barista competitions, standard-setting for espresso can quickly become a highly charged topic, and the committee will have their work cut out for them. Whereas in past years, resources required the committee to rely almost solely on third-party research, they now have an opportunity to conduct some original science. In part two of this article, we will catalog existing standards in more detail, and then review what standards are on the horizon. ☺

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