

# Decaf coffee: trends and opportunities

Traders such as Ruth Ann Church, President of Artisan Coffee Imports, which specialises in decaffeinated coffee, have spoken to C&CI before about how the specialty coffee industry treats the decaf market and decaf customers, but it seems roasters are still losing out by not paying enough attention to decaf. At the same time, she claims, the supply chain needs to do more to enable roasters to obtain sample batches.

Speaking to C&CI shortly before the Specialty Coffee Association of America (SCAA) annual exhibition and conference, Ms Church said roasters on both coasts of the US and in the Midwest had told her that some of the high end decafs they have tried to sell "just did not move." Prices for decafs on the US West Coast are currently at about US\$17-18/lb; on the East Coast and in the Midwest prices are about US\$3 lower than that, she said.

"Successful roasters identify the sector of the market they want to play in," she said. "In other words, they carefully select a specific target type of consumer, someone that they understand well. Then, to win and keep that customer, the roaster always shops for quality for a price that depends on the price ceiling enforced by their target consumer."

## Regular cupping

"Sometimes origins are also limited by the target consumer. One Midwest roaster I deal with says he has noticed that Colombia, Brazil and Ethiopia all seem to have 'cache,' but an amazing decaf from Kenya or Costa Rica (of the same price) will go untouched." To meet these customer demands, she says, roasters should cup a lot of samples. Don't assume a price/taste relationship and don't assume consistency year in and year out.

"Roasters do this all the time, right? Unfortunately, we all know that in a busy roasting company or café, standards sometime slip and the cupping and testing doesn't always get done like it should. Unfortunately, too often, decaf seems to bear the brunt of this. Even the best roasters cup a coffee with less frequency when they already have one that has an excellent track record, but it still gets a check-in once in a while."

**Perhaps the single most important challenge for the decaffeinated coffee market is improving quality without exceeding what consumers will pay**

Roasters and the supply chain both need to do more to ensure consumers get quality decaf at a price they are willing to pay



"It's important to focus on finding a taste profile that fits a broad range of requirements in your customer base," she told C&CI. "Due to the overall lower volume (15 per cent is typical), decafs have to be crowd-pleasers. So the profile that is sought out is usually sweet, well-balanced, medium acidity, with as much body and aftertaste as possible. The same goes for the roast itself; not too dark and not too light. In other words, not 'dark musty' and not 'super bright.' And 'quality taste' is not the same for every roaster."

"A further complication is what I call the requirement for brewing flexibility. It's a fact that many cafes and roaster/cafes want to limit inventory (which is a wise choice in most cases), by forcing the same decaf they use for brewed coffee to also serve as their espresso. In short, roasters demand a lot more from their decaf than they do from most of their regular coffees."

"The problem with this 'one-size-fits-all' approach is that the decaf coffee a roaster chooses may actually be less interesting to the roaster than the others he samples. If this touch of boredom leads to complacency, the decaf consumer will sense it and if they can find a better option, that means lost sales for the roaster. The trick is to maintain high quality and to explain in detail why it's a stand out to the consumer. This is where so many roasters and coffee shops fall short, and are left with the feeling that decaf customers won't pay for quality. With signage, labels on bagged beans, on websites, table top messages, anywhere and everywhere, a roaster can convey that they really do care about decaf customers and that they offer a quality decaf product."

As Ms Church also pointed out, there are other challenges to deal with too, not least supply chain issues. "There are issues in the decaf coffee supply chain that make the high-end roaster's job all the more challenging," she told C&CI. "Most roasters will tell you there are comparatively few high-quality decafs available to sample if you are, for example, searching for a 'mild but bold Central' for your flagship single-origin decaf."

## Supply chain issues

"This is a result of the fact that not all decaffeination processes offer sample batches. In other words, there is no way to decaffeinate, say 5lb (1,100g) of a coffee with the water process, before committing to decaffeinating 70 bags (or 9,200lb)." According to Ms Church, neither of the most well-known water-based decaffeinating processes are able to provide this service at the moment, "which is essential to roasters who are serious about taste."

This raises questions about how well the process is able to maintain taste, since testing that fact involves such a large outlay. "Who is going to do a 'test' batch of water decaffeination of a high quality bean if you can only 'hope' that the result will be 10,000lb of a coffee you can sell," she said.

"In an age of high level interest in microlots and the win-win relationships small lots of coffee can achieve, I have only identified one decaffeinator that can decaffeinate a microlot smaller than 60 bags," she told C&CI. "This fact forces mixing of lots and results in the loss of transparency and direct relationships that is ubiquitous in decaf coffees."

"These two issues in decaf coffee are so seemingly intractable that they are rarely discussed. The industry just seems to accept that it is so," she said. "I believe, however, that with market forces bearing ever more strongly towards having more choice, quality and transparency, the time is coming for innovation and new technologies to begin to break down these barriers." ■ C&CI



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