

Specialty Coffee Association's Cupping Protocol

Global study demonstrates diverse perceptions and applications of specialty coffee's common language

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Introduction

The Specialty Coffee Association's Cupping Protocol is a globally recognized industry tool used across the value chain to assess coffee quality. The Cupping Protocol, which describes the procedure and criteria to prepare a coffee sample and assess its quality through cupping (tasting), results in a final score out of 100 points, known as a "cupping score."

Though used by thousands of coffee professionals daily, there has been little effort to broadly understand the Protocol's current level of adoption and uses by various actors, and its efficacy for those uses. A research project was performed to answer these questions and better understand the Protocol's perceived strengths and weaknesses.

Materials/Methods

Data was collected from both an online survey and semi-structured interviews. Surveys were disseminated in English, Spanish, Korean, Traditional Chinese, and Simplified Chinese via the Specialty Coffee Association's social media network. Semi-structured interviews were conducted via video meetings with key specialty coffee stakeholders.

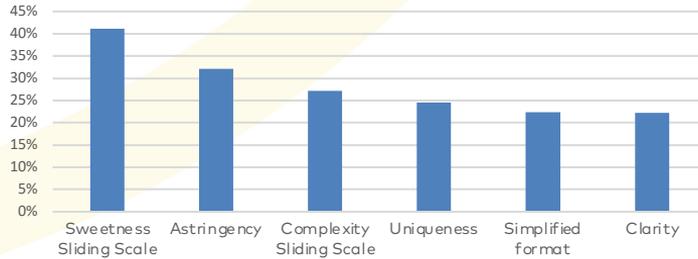


Figure 1: The SCA Cupping Protocol would be improved by ADDING any of the following elements (check all that apply)

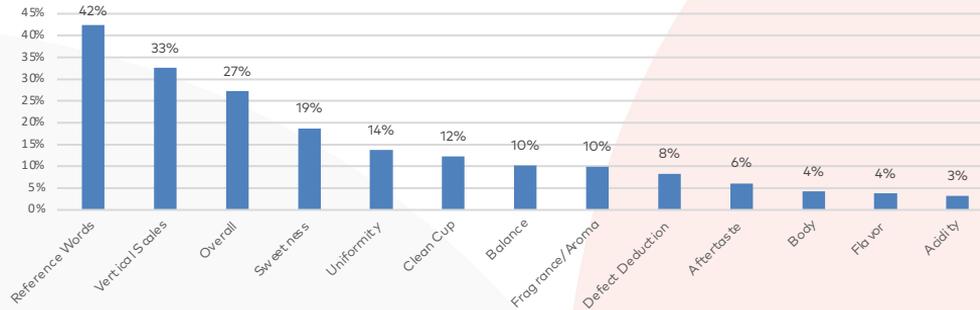


Figure 2: The SCA Cupping Protocol would be improved by REMOVING any of the following elements (check all that apply)

Conclusion/Perspectives

The Cupping Protocol is widely used and in general regarded as useful tool across a variety of activities for various stakeholders. The cupping score was found to be an important, but not singular, predictor of coffee price. Though it is clear the SCA Cupping Protocol provides an important role as a common language for the coffee industry, respondents identified a need for improvement to make the Protocol a more practical and scientifically-based assessment tool.

Most represented countries

Country	Number of Respondents
United States	165
Taiwan	148
Mexico	77
Korea	69
Colombia	46
United Kingdom	43
Costa Rica	32
Guatemala	27
China	24
Greece	23
Peru	23
Indonesia	20

Results/Discussion

Data from 1575 survey respondents and 47 semi-structured interviews revealed several key trends.

Cupping results (score and descriptors) are important for buying and selling coffee; the SCA Cupping Protocol results are frequently used in contracts and price-setting negotiations in coffee transactions, though it was clear that factors outside cupping results influence a coffee's value.

Though there was strong variance in the reported level of its objectivity, on average the Protocol was rated more objective than subjective and is considered by most respondents to be a strong tool in creating a common language for the coffee professionals.

Finally, from a technical perspective, aspects of the Protocol that were commonly cited as problematic included: sweetness, reference words, overall, clean cup, body, and complexity. Data from the semi-structured interviews revealed that many found the current reference words are inaccurate and expressed that they should be updated, rather than removed to provide better guidance. Similarly, body was identified as unclear concept, and suggestions were made to either improve the definition or replace the term with mouthfeel. On the other hand, 40% of respondents suggest adding a sliding scale for sweetness.