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Sean Kohmescher (center) often holds single-origin cuppings at his Temple Fine Coffee and Tea in Sacramento, Calif.



S-O WHAT?

Some think single-origin espresso is the zenith of specialty coffee; others believe it's just a flash in the pot. We sort out the debate.

Story by AMY ZAVATTO

Photographs by GABRIELA HASBUN

COFFEE, LIKE MANY THINGS JUDGED BY NOSE AND TASTE BUDS, IS IN NO SMALL PART A SUBJECTIVE TOPIC, AND AS SUCH, DEBATING ITS MERITS CAN GET A LITTLE . . . FROTHED.

IF THAT TOPIC HAPPENS TO BE SINGLE-ORIGIN ESPRESSO, IT CAN GET AS HEATED AS A MOKA POT ABOUT TO BOIL OVER.

“It is old school versus new school,” asserts Sean Kohmescher, owner of Temple Fine Coffee and Tea in Sacramento, Calif., and a single-origin aficionado. “When you have a beautiful, expensive coffee, the last thing [you] want to do is mute the flavors [you] paid a lot of money for. You would not use a \$50 bottle of wine to flavor your meat, or a \$30-a-pound cheese to make macaroni and cheese.”

Proponents of single-origin espresso (often shortened to “S.O.” in coffee-speak) say it’s a new way to enjoy the beverage that allows one to experience the potential of great beans and the talents of the farmers, roasters, and baristas behind those coffees. Others liken it to trading in a full orchestra for a single kazoo.

FIND OR FAD?

You might think, “But wait, haven’t I been drinking single-origin coffee all along? Doesn’t that bag on my counter say it’s a Nicaraguan Las Golondrinas ‘El Cedro’?” Well, yes, but that’s your *coffee*. The bag you have for *espresso*? It’s probably a blend, which has long been the accepted method for espresso brewing. The theory is that you need to combine the strengths of many coffees to come up with the best flavor profile for one espresso. That’s because making espresso is a punishing process; the hot water shoots through the grounds with such precision and force that one kind of unblended coffee—in other words, beans from one crop in one region of one country—all by its lonesome can wind up tasting exaggerated. The citrus notes in a particular Ethiopian, for example, could become exceedingly sour. Or, alternately, the end result could simply be boring. But not to Kohmescher. “Mainly, people get into single origins because the more they get into coffee, the more they get into rare coffees and love the nuances you get from one,” he says, pointing out that for the past few years, many barista champions have won using single-origin shots. “Rather than creating it, you’re enjoying it at the best that it is.”

By “creating,” he means blending, something that he believes is vastly overrated. “Most blends are usually composed of lesser coffees with good coffees,” he says. “That’s how they keep costs down, especially the big chains.” Besides, he adds, when you’re grinding espresso to order (as a good coffee bar will do), there is potential for the intended blend to

become something different during the grind. “One of the biggest problems with the blend is, let’s say there are about 30 beans that get ground up for one shot of espresso. The likelihood, if you have more than three [types of] beans, that one of those beans won’t even get in there is really good.”

Others, however, aren’t so easily convinced. “As espresso, I’ve tasted some really interesting things as single-origin, but it never comes close to what a real espresso blend provides in a coffee,” says Ken Nye, owner of Ninth Street Espresso in New York City. “Blending is a very Old World method and it’s an art form. It’s very difficult to do, and very few people know how to do it for espresso, although everyone claims to. If you taste a really wonderful espresso blend, you’re not going to want a single-origin.”

As the 2007 United States barista champ, second-place winner of the 2007 World Barista Championship, and a young woman who spent most of her formative years working in her family’s coffee business (Coffee Klatch in San Dimas, Calif.), Heather Perry has strong opinions on the topic as well, and tends to agree with Nye. “Building an espresso blend is like a symphony,” she says. “You need the low notes, you need the bass, all of it. If you can find the rare single-origin espresso that provides this, that’s amazing. Single-origin shots have a lot of great potential, but right now they’re trendy. I taste a lot more bad single-origin shots that people do for impact purposes—meaning it blows your mouth away, but not in a good way.”

Perry recently helped coffee expert Kenneth Davids evaluate 21 single-origin espressos for his website, coffeereview.com. “The majority of them were not great espressos,” she notes. “They all had potential, but to me there were one or two that were really good, like La Mill out of Brazil. It was fat, it was chocolaty, it was sweet. It was a great, balanced shot.”

But, she adds, “90 percent of the coffees we tried were high-quality, specialty coffees that, if brewed as a pot, would have been fantastic. As an espresso, they were overwhelming and unbalanced. They just missed the mark.”

Some see single-origin espresso as part of a generational shift in the coffee community. “I could look at it in a couple of different ways,” says Davids. “One is the Italian influence, which has always insisted that you have to blend coffees for espresso. Now, younger espresso enthusiasts are doing their best to wean



S-O YOU KNOW

Here are a few evaluation tips for what to look for in a quality single-origin espresso:

1. BALANCE. Consider the general characteristics of a coffee that will provide balanced flavor and texture, which is what you’d look for in a blend as well. “A good espresso,” offers Matt Millette of the American Barista and Coffee School, “is a balance between acidity, bitterness and sweetness.”

2. ADD-ONS. Generally, a coffee that’s heavier in body is going to hold up better in milk. Also, you want to look for complementary flavors. “If you had something that was heavy and syrupy and chocolaty, you’d probably like that flavor in milk,” says Sean Kohmescher, owner of Temple Fine Coffee and Tea in Sacramento, Calif. “Some citrus notes don’t go as well with milk as others do. You’ll get some washed Ethiopians that will have be more of a lemon flavor, and with milk they don’t go together so well. It wouldn’t be much different from having lemonade and milk mixed together.”

3. PROCESS. While you don’t need to go overboard on esoterics, you might consider asking your local barista how that single-origin coffee was processed. “Dry-process coffee that’s dried in the fruit has a little better body and crema because some of the sugars in the fruit are present in the bean. Wet-process coffees remove most of the fruit [character] right away before drying,” says Kenneth Davids, who favors dry-process single-origins from Brazil and Ethiopia.

4. ROAST. While roast isn’t something you have any control over, it does factor into espresso flavor as well. “Roasting for single-origin [espresso] may require more attention to roast profile and degree,” says R. Miguel Meza, head roaster and green-coffee buyer for Paradise Roasters in Ramsey, Minn. “A very bright coffee that is a component of a blend might work well at a given roast degree in a blend, but on its own it could become overpoweringly acidic at the same roast degree/profile done as a single-origin. You really have to suit the roast to the coffee.”



SEXY SINGLES

What to brew? It's difficult to generalize about any agricultural product—the weather one season can produce a superior bean, grape or stalk, while frost, flood or drought the next can provide challenges that even the most skilled farmer will have difficulty overcoming. And then there's the fact that something grown in one part of a country can vary drastically from that same thing grown another part of that same country. With all that said, though, there are a few guidelines to help you to successfully explore single-origin espresso:

- 1. BRAZIL.** The common wisdom is that Brazil grows the best coffee for making a single-origin espresso. "Brazils are known for having a good body, chocolaty notes, possibly a little nuttiness, and some citrus," says barista Heather Perry.
- 2. SUMATRA.** "They have a fruity, musty quality that's like sweet, fresh earth," says coffee expert Kenneth Davids. "That character with the fruit at the right roast level is really beautiful and usually produces more crema."
- 3. ROBUSTAS.** Davids admits that this choice is extremely controversial for single-origin shots, but he's a fan. "If you bring this up with most coffee people, they say, 'What?!' It makes people stand on chairs and scream," he laughs. Most cultivated coffees you see on shelves or sip from your local café are of the arabica species. Robustas make up about 50 percent of the coffee produced worldwide, but they are often relegated to use in instant or commercial coffee. Even so, they can also add body to espresso blends—or, says Davids, stand on their own. "I think some of the finest Indian [robustas] make beautiful single-origin espressos," he asserts. "They can have huge body, a very viscous mouthfeel, and kind of a roasted-nut character with a lean toward chocolate and some fruity notes." However, he cautions, if the grind and brewing temperature are not just right, robustas served as single-origin espressos can taste woody.

themselves from anything having to do with Italy. It's kind of an attempt to re-create espresso outside the Italian context." Davids believes it's a way for baristas to make their own mark in the coffee world, the sort of growing pains experienced between parent and child—the latter of whom will do just about anything to differentiate themselves from the seemingly stodgy old folks.

And, indeed, single-origin fans can sound as enthusiastic as kids on a sugar rush. Many express sentiments like those of Matt Millette, director of the American Barista and Coffee School in Portland, Ore.: "I just think it's fun," he says.

In contrast, the skeptical Nye comes off more as the conservative grownup: "Creating a blend is so labor-intensive and requires so much cupping and such daily maintenance, even some of the most renowned roasters in the country are constantly struggling with it. I personally know bars that have chosen to use single-origin espresso because the blend sucks so bad, they don't have a choice. It's OK to admit that your blend isn't great at times."

SHOT IN THE DARK (OR LIGHT)

There's another muddle in the single-origin battle for the demitasse: These espressos can be tricky in cappuccinos and lattes. The theory is that with a blend, you have all the appropriate notes to make a nicely balanced final product when served with milk. A blend can combine the great body of one coffee with the chocolaty, nutty notes of another, and the appropriate amount of acidity of a third. When you add milk to this perfect mix, you get creamy, caffeinated perfection. With single-origin coffee brewed for espresso, you are at the mercy of that bean and the processes it's been through before getting to your cup.

"If you put [single-origin shots] in a milk-based drink, they just get lost," Perry explains. "There are a few single-origin espressos in which you can get away with it. Brazils have a tendency to be really solid on their own. But let's say you wanted to try a Kenyan. [It] would be extremely bright and acidic, but in milk it would either come out sour or you just wouldn't taste anything."

But Kohmescher argues that it's about education and knowing what you're pulling as a shot. "If it's really bright, citrusy single-origin espresso, no, it's not going to do well in milk," he says. "But if you pull a Sumatra, or something heavy and syrupy that's just as heavy as a blend, it will hold up in milk just as easily."

Davids agrees, but says there's potential for improvement: "If some of the roasters and farmers were designing coffees specifically to be consumed as single-origin espressos, that would make a difference." He cites a single-origin espresso from Zimbabwe he discovered recently. It was produced by a vertically integrated company, meaning the same people who own the farm in Africa do the roasting in

the United States, giving them more control over the final product. They dark-roasted some of the dry-process beans, light-roasted the washed beans and then blended the two for what is essentially a single-origin blend. “I thought that showed very well,” Davids says. “It had tremendous presence in milk, good body and mouthfeel, and good balance and interesting nuance.”

Davids also thinks single-origin espressos help introduce a well-defined sense of place in a way that blends simply can’t. Just as a 100-percent Merlot from Long Island is going to taste vastly different than a Merlot from Napa, the issue of terroir comes into play with beans. A single-origin espresso gives one the opportunity to taste not just good coffee, but the unique place from which that coffee hails. “Blends are more about balancing flavors than looking at where something is from—its terroir, its single personality,” says Davids. “It’s not that blends don’t emphasize the coffee, but they detach it a little bit from the global dialogue.”

Flavor and worldviews aside, integrating single-origin espresso into the daily menu of a coffeehouse can be tough. First, there’s the matter of educating the baristas serving it. “If baristas don’t know what they’re talking about, don’t know what they’re doing, and aren’t having fun with it and getting customers excited, you don’t really have a chance,” says Perry. True enough—a barista serving single-origin espresso must be ready for questions, just like a sommelier should be able to explain a wine list.

“I’d love to see coffee shops have a consistent espresso blend that they use, but also have the option to experiment with one or two single-origin coffees,” says Milletto. “I think

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— HEATHER PERRY, 2007 U.S. BARISTA CHAMP

any trained barista is going to be able to dial in a decent shot of single-origin espresso just as quickly as they would a blend.”

But there are other hurdles, including practical matters of equipment and time. For one, single-origin shots require

SOURCING YOUR SINGLE-ORIGIN

Even in the most coffee-savvy cities, single-origin shots can be tricky to find, so buying online is a good option. But will you lose anything from the roast in the time it takes to ship? “Over half of our online sales are espresso,” says Heather Perry. “We don’t want you tasting our espresso for at least six days. Drip coffee is perfectly good to drink within 24 hours [of roasting], but not espresso; it will have a gassy, almost astringent taste. We always tell people that for espresso, don’t waste money on faster shipping. If it gets there in six days, it’s good to go!”

Below are a few great mail-order-friendly roasters that will happily ship you single-origin coffee for espresso brewing:

PARADISE ROASTERS, 877-229-6336, paradiseroasters.com

PT’S COFFEE, 888-678-5282, ptscoffee.com

TERROIR SELECT, 866-444-5282, terroircoffee.com

a separate grinder to prevent “cross-pollination” of coffees, and some cafés—Coffee Klatch included—simply don’t have a grinder to spare. There’s also the issue of adding to the general indecisiveness among many coffee drinkers. “In the morning you’ll have someone standing there saying, ‘I don’t know which [coffee] to have; which do you recommend?’ And there are five or 10 people in line behind them waiting to jump into their cars and get on with the day,” says Davids. “You just can’t do that. People are not prepared for it.”

Still, Kohmescher is bucking the old guard, and with a good deal of success. In the two years Temple has been open, the café has always offered both a rotating version of a single-origin espresso on the bar as well as a blend. At this point, he says, Temple sells an equal number of the two varieties, even though the single-origins cost patrons 50 cents more per cup.

But while you can log onto just about any coffee blog and find an espresso evangelist taking a position on the topic, the one argument you might be able to win is that there’s not much reason for all the steam. “It’s not either/or,” says Davids. “I think small, boutique companies are doing more and more interesting espresso blends and discovering how to use certain types [of coffees] more skillfully, and that’s happening at the same time as the rise of single-origin [coffees].”

No matter how the debate resolves, single-origins seem to have made it to the big time. “James Hoffman, [a past] World Barista champ, won using a single-origin espresso,” notes Milletto. “That was a first and it was important. It was a big risk for him to do that. It just shows the growing popularity of experimenting with coffee. And really, it’s how you prepare it that’s the true test of what it tastes like.” ■