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Peerless' Colombian Coffee Tops Taste Test

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Chronicle Staff Writer

Oakland's Peerless Coffee lived up to its lofty billing in a recent blind tasting of 13 popular Bay Area brews held at the California Culinary Academy in San Francisco.

A panel of six local coffee experts brought together by The

Chronicle judged Peerless — like the rest of the competing samples, a medium-roast Colombian coffee — to be "bright, clean and delicious" with a "good balance of complex flavors," "lively color" and "subtle finish."

By far the best-rated cup, Peerless was trailed by Has Beans, Capricorn, Thanksgiving, Royal Ground, Freed Teller &

Freed, Caffe Trieste, Spinelli, Uncommon Grounds, Starbucks, Mr. Espresso, Caffe Roma and Peaberry's — samples representative of the greater Bay Area's coffee overflow, which is distinguished by an estimated 50 coffee roasters.

Besides flavor, what else pushes Peerless — which roasted its first bean in 1924 — to the

head of the pack?

"We spend a lot of time hand-selecting beans," says Warren Muller, director of commodities and quality control at Peerless, which roasts over 3 million pounds of coffee beans a year and counts Stars and the Ritz-Carlton as clients. "It makes a

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difference."

(Though Peerless sells its coffee retail from just one small shop at company headquarters — 280 Oak Street in Oakland — the roaster provides thousands of restaurants, hotels and gourmet food shops around the country with its beans. Local sources for Peerless coffee include de Farley's in San Francisco, Pantry in San Francisco and Berkeley, and Sweet Amy's in Menlo Park.)

In addition to Peerless, the judges also applauded the cups of Colombian produced by Has Beans ("different than the rest," "complexity in nose and finish"); Capricorn ("good flavor," "delicate"); and Thanksgiving ("sweet and mild," "most intense, complex aroma").

Had it not been for the seductive coffee aromas wafting from the bar of the cooking school's sedate Caramel Room, the coffee experiment could have passed for a wine tasting, given the spit buckets on the tables and the exaggerated slurping noises made by the judges as they drank their way through the samples. (Slurping pulls vapors into the nose and spreads the fluid evenly across the tongue to make nerve endings responsive to sweet, salty, sour and bitter notes, say professional coffee tasters.)

Coffee purveyors were invited to submit packages of their "American" (or medium roast) Colombian coffee beans within 24 hours of the samples being uniformly ground, measured and prepared by culinary students at the CCA. (The popular Peet's sells no medium-roast coffees.)



The tasting featured 100 percent Colombian beans because "almost every coffee purveyor offers them, and Colombian coffee is probably the best-selling," says Robert Hensley, president of the Coffee Training Institute in Burlingame. Even though the beans were similar, says Hensley, who offered advice prior to the tasting, "small differences in degrees of roast make major differences in taste characteristics."

Colombian beans are also more consistent in quality and are grown year-round, which make them better candidates than house blends for comparison. Among other factors, house blends are subject to substitutions and seasonal availability, say coffee industry insiders.

And because the tasting focused on the home coffee drinker, identical Krups-brand electric drip machines — rated No. 1 by Consumer Reports — were used to brew the coffees. All were made with bottled water.

A panel of independent slippers, all experienced coffee drink-

ers, brought to the table a wide range of authority.

The tasters included importer Erna Knutsen, president of Knutsen Coffees in San Francisco, and the 1991 recipient of an award for outstanding contributions to the industry from the Specialty Coffee Association of America; Kenneth Davids, author of "Coffee: A Guide to Buying, Brewing & Enjoying," and a forthcoming book on espresso; Daryl Ross, the proprietor of Caffe Strada in Berkeley, which sells 3,500 espressos a day; Thomas Cara, the man behind the eponymous espresso shop on Pacific Avenue in San Francisco, who's credited with introducing the city to Italian espresso machines shortly after World War II.

Rounding out the group were Nick Peyton, maitre d' at the Ritz-Carlton Hotel, and Quinn McKenna, a manager of One Market restaurant. Both are entrusted to seek out an exemplary cup of coffee for their respective restaurants.

Judges closely followed guidelines used by professionals in the coffee industry. The brews were either slurped or spooned from medium-thick coffee cups and each beverage was evaluated on a scale of 0 (poor) to 2 (excellent) in seven categories: aroma, acidity, body, intensity, sweetness, finish and balance.

Fourteen points was the highest individual rating possible; Peerless' score ranged from six to 19.4.

HOW LOCAL COFFEES STACK UP

Here are the results of the blind coffee tasting conducted recently at the California Culinary Academy. Judges' comments follow.

The group tasted Colombian, medium-roasted coffee and examined seven coffee characteristics. The highest possible score is 84 points.

1. PEERLESS (62.5 points): "sweet, balanced, subtle finish, good balance of complex flavors, lively color, bright, delicious, a nice clean cup"
2. HAS BEANS (51 points): "different than the rest, complexity in nose and finish, solid coffee, fuller than some others, tasty"
3. CAPRICORN (50.5 points): "good flavor, delicate, light in body, bitter, woody"
4. THANKSGIVING (48.5 points): "middle of the road, most intense, complex aroma, light, clean, sweet and mild coffee"
5. ROYAL GROUND (45.5 points): "winey, nice balance, seems full-bodied, perhaps a bit flat, dull, flat, simple, liked it"
6. FREED TELLER & FREED (39.5 points): "great aroma, starts out full, but leaves you wanting more, in general OK, pleasant, a little flat, thin, insipid, sweet"
7. CAFFE TRIESTE (38.5 points): "good acidity, good body, complex, OK but flat, mild, papery taste, thin flavors, dull, smoky/burned flavor subdominant"
8. SPINELLI (38 points): "decent full body, well balanced, clean but not interesting, mild, too simple and flat, ordinary"
8. UNCOMMON GROUNDS (38 points): "middle of the road, acidic but not enough 'fruit' to balance, pleasing and inviting, mild, not interesting"
9. STARBUCKS (37 points): "OK, little aroma, not a knockout, a little flat, a little complex, a little flavor"
10. MR. ESPRESSO (33 points): "non-distinct, nice, thin, pleasant but uninteresting, weak, good place to start if you like instant, sweet, short, small taste, a bit lacking in acidity, flat, slight finish"
11. CAFFE ROMA (28.5 points): "good body, subtle, lacks acidity, liveliness, aroma OK but let's you down, not complex, bitter off flavor, acceptable, not exciting, doesn't invite the second cup"
12. PEABERRY'S (23.5 points): "not full-bodied, very bland/would throw out if given to me, woody, papery, thin, bad finish, leaves me cold and a little sad, ordinary"

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Other judges were Nick Peyton, maitre d' at the Ritz-Carlton Hotel, and Quinn McKenna, a manager of One Market restaurant.

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