



# Cupping under pressure

By  
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**It is a beautiful spring day** in rural Waterbury, Vermont, but for the 12 students on this Friday afternoon, April 18, 2008, nothing exists except the coffee in the little white bowls on the tables here at Coffee Lab International, where coffee guru Mané Alves is teaching a week-long coffee cupping course. Those who pass all the tests will qualify as a Specialty Coffee Association of America (SCAA) Cupping Judge and, with the addition of a multiple-choice test of coffee knowledge, they might go on to be Q Graders, the elite but growing world-wide group of coffee specialists who can certify coffee of the highest quality. But few people pass all of the tests the first time around. Today is the last day of the class.

The room is dark other than dim red lights intended to make it impossible to tell one roast color from another. This is the fifth and final triangulation test. On each table, there are six groups of three cups each. Two of the three steeping brews are made from the same batch of beans, from the same origin. One is different. Through smell and taste, the students are supposed to identify which of the cups in the triangle contains that rogue coffee.

It isn't as easy as it sounds. Monday's triangulation test wasn't too hard, since it featured very different coffees—two of the cups might have held a brightly acidic Guatemalan grind, while the third was a full-bodied Sumatran. Each day, however, this test got progressively more difficult, and today's cups all contain fairly similar brews from Colombia, Bolivia and Guatemala. The atmosphere in the dimly lit room is tense, punctuated by sniffs and the characteristic sudden slurping sounds that cuppers make as they forcefully suck spoonfuls onto their palates along with blasts of air. There's also a funny whistling sound that Ed Canty of Green Mountain Coffee Roasters makes when he slurps. "Sorry," he says, "I know it drives some people crazy, but it's the best way for me to spray my palate."

If you get more than one of the six groupings wrong, you fail the test. People pause to drink some water to clean their palate. Someone chokes, having accidentally inhaled coffee into his windpipe. Another nervous student burps, breaking the tension momentarily. "Ah, now maybe I'll get it," he says. The test lasts for over an hour. As the coffees cool, their flavors subtly change. Maybe the difference will become more obvious. Slurp, spit, slurp, spit. Make notes. Finally, each student enters a final answer into the specialized PDA on which they record everything, and which holds the official SCAA cupping form. The lights are turned up. Alves goes over the results right away. There are groans and sighs of relief around the room.

Then it's on to the last olfactory lesson and test from the little vials provided by Le Nez du Café ("the nose of coffee"), produced by a French firm that pioneered smells for wine, then developed them for coffee. Today's lesson covers "aromatic taints" such as *earthy, straw, cooked beef, medicinal, and rubber*. Alves explains that these smells are not necessarily bad in minute quantities. "It's like venom; in small amounts, it can actually cure you," he says. The students smell each little vial, nodding, taking notes.



**Each coffee is scored for fragrance/ aroma, flavor, acidity, body, uniformity, and clean cup qualities.**

## Your Fellow Students

They have come from all over the place. Ed Canty works just down the road at Green Mountain, as does Stacy Bocskor, who attended briefly, just to pass her remaining tests (she scored a 96 on the sensory skill test, the best performance Alves has seen). Derek de la Paz is the quality control manager for Peace Coffee in Minneapolis, Minnesota. Brad Bradhorst is the roaster for Larry's Beans in Raleigh, North Carolina. Glenn Lathrop is the owner/roaster of Desert Sun Coffee Roasters in Durango, Colorado. Mary Tellie owns Electric City Roasting Company in Scranton, Pennsylvania. John Moore and Marcela Crescente (a Brazilian) represent Dallis Coffee of Queens, New York. John Gant is the head roaster for Gimme! Coffee, a New York espresso bar chain with headquarters in Ithaca, New York. Monika Firl, based in Montreal, Quebec, is head of producer relations for Cooperative Coffees, a consortium of 23 Fair Trade roasters in the U.S. and Canada.

Naci Ozgur owns a coffeehouse in western Turkey, where he has trouble finding high-quality beans, "I am not used to tasting coffees from different origins, with different characteristics," he says. "This course has opened new doors, but it's just a beginning for me." Yuan-Cheng Hu, who goes by Jake in the U.S., owns a coffee shop in Taiwan.

Although most of the people make their living from coffee, the course is also popular with people who just love coffee and want to sharpen their skills in appreciating it. Dennis Hopkins, a 28-year-old ultra marathon runner—that's 50 miles per race—took Alves' roasting course, which he discovered through Google, and is now back for more. He does roast coffee, but only at home (thus far) for his own pleasure.

By the time I show up on Friday, the group has clearly bonded. Despite the tension during the tests, they are rooting for one another, sharing stories, laughing at coffee in-jokes over lunch. "Going in, I was pretty intimidated," Firl admits. "I can usually find the best cups on the table, but I've never been able to explain or understand how I got there. It's kind of like getting dressed in the dark. I didn't trust my olfactory capacities. But at Coffee Lab, I found a delightfully [Click to zoom](#) together we agonized over the distinguishing elements between coffees."

Firl wasn't the only one who felt intimidated at first. "Some of the folks here are from companies that roast over a million pounds a year," Tellie says, while she is almost a one-woman show at tiny Electric City. "But my ability to focus on the coffee dramatically improved each day." Glenn Lathrop found the first day of immersion "a bit of overload," noting that he had not felt such pressure since his college days. "Through the week, I ranged the gamut from frustration and questioning to enlightenment and joy," he says, "sometimes all in the same five minutes."





*Intense* is the word that just about everyone uses to describe the experience. "The week was a barrage of intense exams," Brandhorst observes, "but the pace of it really helped me to reconnect with the flavors and sensations inherent in the beans."

No one has anything but praise for Mané Alves. "I think Mané is a great instructor," Brandhorst says. "What I like about the environment here is that it's all about the sharing of knowledge. Mané doesn't hoard his data like trade secrets." Tellie adds that he is "a wealth of information and obviously very passionate about coffee." Lathrop simply declares: "Mané is the *MAN*. He has an unequalled level of experience and knowledge, along with a sense of humor."

## Meet the Professor

Alves, who grew up in Portugal, worked in the wine industry before focusing on coffee. He runs Coffee Lab International ([www.coffeelab.com](http://www.coffeelab.com)), a consulting and training firm, as well as Vermont Artisan Coffee and Tea, a specialty roaster. He spends about half his time roaming the world, looking for the finest coffees, teaching the art of coffee cupping, and judging international contests. In 2004, Alves first taught the cupping course, which was developed by Ted Lingle, then the SCAA executive director, and Joseph Rivera, the SCAA scientific director. Until recently, Alves taught it primarily in Brazil and Japan, but beginning in 2008 he has begun to offer the course four times a year in Vermont.

Alves begins each course by cupping one coffee that he has scored around eight out of 10, which is "excellent," while a nine or above is "outstanding." He explains the process of smelling the freshly ground coffee dry (fragrance), then smelling it wet (aroma), letting it steep for four minutes, breaking the crust, smelling again, skimming the top, then cupping repeatedly over an hour-and-a-half as it cools. This calibration gets students onto the same coffee page, and within a few days, it is remarkable how their scores coalesce, narrowing to a group consensus. Each coffee is scored for fragrance/aroma, flavor, acidity, body, uniformity, and clean cup qualities, then given an overall score. All scores are entered into a PDA that Alves invented and named a Port-o-lab. He can load the results easily into his computer, where he can tabulate the results.



Students in Mané Alves' cupping class truly bond throughout the week-long intensive workshop, though the final test of their skills is executed individually, as evidenced when the author (at bottom) jumped in for a taste.



John Gant (left) of New York and Derek Paz of Minnesota tried out the Nez du Café vials in class.

## Cupping Curriculum

The first day, Alves introduces vials containing salty, sour, and acidic solutions of varying intensity. Trainees have to identify which is which, and at what level, one, two, or three, for each. Then they are given a mixture—perhaps with [Click to zoom](#)—and level one sweetness—and asked to identify it. Many people fail that test when it is given on Wednesday, so it is given again on Thursday. “I failed the sensory test the first three times I took it,” Alves reveals. He thinks that his youth in Portugal, where drinks are dosed with sugar, reduced his sensitivity to sweetness.

The first day’s Nez du Café vials teach and test for enzymatics, the odors such as honey, vanilla and apricot produced at the beginning of a roast. The second day tests for sugar browning, looking for subtle differences between roasted peanut and hazelnut—another notoriously difficult test that many people fail. Other challenges of the week include distinguishing between types of acid, such as phosphoric, citric, malic, and acetic, and identifying green bean defects, such as the sourness produced by bacteria, or fermented black beans, or broca infestation.

Finally, there is the roast identification test, using an Agrtron machine to determine whether the roast color fits within defined parameters. That comes next during my visit on Friday, and people are pulling out their hair. None of the samples seem to be quite right, though some are very close. At the direction of their fiendish instructor, all of the samples have, in fact, been over- or under-roasted.

Alves enjoys teaching the SCAA Cupping Judge courses (\$1,250 for the week), imparting his enthusiasm and knowledge to students, regardless of their prior level of expertise. But he has learned not to be quite so fiendish with his Japanese students, who take the courses incredibly seriously. They show up at 6 a.m. and stay until 11 p.m. if allowed. “The Brazilians are the opposite,” he says. They love to party, and Alves has trouble getting them to stop talking, which is a distraction during a serious cupping session. The students who come to Vermont seem to be in a mid-range—they are taking the course quite seriously, but they are also having a good time. learning to sample and rate some of the world’s best coffees. **b**