

What's Special About Specialty Coffee?

The term "specialty coffee" refers to the highest-quality green coffee beans roasted to their greatest flavor potential by true craftspeople and then properly brewed to well-established standards. Specialty coffee is not defined by a brewing method, such as the use of an espresso machine.

The definition of specialty coffee begins at the origin of coffee, the planting of a particular varietal into a particular growing region of the world. But the definition cannot stop there. The concept of specialty includes the care given to the plant through harvest and preparation for export.

Specialty coffee in the green bean phase can be defined as a coffee that has no defects and has a distinctive character in the cup. It is not only that the coffee doesn't taste bad; to be considered specialty it must be notably good.

The next phase is roasting, and there is a lot of opportunity here to continually define specialty. Every coffee in combination with every roaster has a potential to express itself in a way that will be most satisfying for every customer. Bringing out a coffee's distinctive character is the roastmaster's challenge and if they come close to succeeding then it is still specialty if it started out in the green form as specialty.

In roasted coffee, most agree freshness is part of the definition for specialty. If the coffee is not highly aromatic then it no longer deserves to be called "specialty."

Then there is the brewing phase. There are many different methods, and all are capable of brewing beverages that can qualify as specialty coffee, but only if done correctly. The right recipe of coffee to water, the right grind suited to the method and the coffee's physical characteristics, the proper water temperature and contact time, a good preparation of the coffee "bed" or "cake" are all fundamentals that must be satisfied to produce a specialty cup of coffee.

Specialty coffee is, in the end, defined in the cup. It takes many steps to deliver that cup into the customers' hands. Each of those steps can uphold the classification of specialty if quality has been maintained throughout all the preceding steps.