

A person is pouring water from a kettle into a pour-over coffee dripper. The water is captured mid-pour, creating a thin stream. The dripper is placed on a glass carafe. The background is a blurred coffee shop setting.

# Towards a Definition of Specialty Coffee:

## Building an Understanding Based on Attributes

An SCA White Paper





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**A persistent challenge facing the specialty coffee industry is a fundamental one: how do we define "specialty coffee" in the first place?**

**This question—which may seem to be a very basic one—has vexed the industry since its very beginnings.**

Since the introduction of the term "specialty coffee," there has been a continuing difficulty in concretely defining its meaning. Definitions range from the tautological ("specialty coffee is special") to the narrow and highly technical ("specialty grade samples must have zero category 1 defects and no more than five category 2 defects"; "specialty coffee is coffee graded above 80 points on a 100 point scale").

These definitions have generally failed by being too vague to be useful, or too specific to be broadly applicable. A concise, comprehensive definition for specialty coffee has never been published by the Specialty Coffee Association (SCA), despite the fact the most commonly asked question of its leaders is: "What is specialty coffee?"

We believe that we have found a solution to this problem by using a framework to define specialty coffee in relation to its attributes (an "attributes conception" of specialty coffee). This conception leads to a precise, useful definition of specialty coffee, which will be explored at the end of this paper.

## Quality or Qualities?

Many definitions of specialty include the word "quality," like this one, from the Specialty Coffee Association of America:

"The term 'specialty coffee' refers to the highest **quality** green coffee beans roasted to their greatest flavor potential."

This uses one sense of the term *quality*, which the *Oxford English Dictionary* defines as:

*noun*

1. the standard of something as measured against other things of a similar kind; the degree of excellence of something.

This appears to work, except there is a problem: personal preference. This definition of quality implies both the need for measurement and the ability to measure, which can be difficult in products where preference is involved (such as coffee). The same issue stands, too, when attempting to articulate the "degree of excellence" in foods: a coffee that exemplifies excellence to one drinker may exemplify the opposite to another. However, there is another sense of the term quality, as in Oxford's second definition:

*noun*

2. a distinctive attribute or characteristic possessed by someone or something.

It is this sense in which we can describe a complex product like coffee more fully: it has a plurality of *qualities* (in the second sense), which combine to create an impression of overall *quality* (in the first sense). Could a holistic appraisal of coffee's qualities—otherwise known in academic literature as *attributes*—be a better way to assess the "specialness" of a coffee, and therefore its value in the marketplace? But what is an *attribute*?

Defined as "a quality or feature regarded as a characteristic or inherent part of someone or something," we can extrapolate that an attribute is a property that is characteristic of something—and a product can be thought of as a collection of attributes.

Luckily, there is a rich academic literature on attributes, including in coffee research.<sup>1</sup> Economists, consumer researchers, sensory scientists, and marketing researchers commonly use the concept of attributes when evaluating consumer products. Business and marketing researchers often focus especially on *determinative attributes*, or attributes that determine how a purchaser values a product. To conceive of a consumer product as a collection of attributes is extremely useful in a research context—it provides elements which can be measured and understood. Deconstructing a complex product into its constituents makes it possible to discern their relative importance and nature; an attributes-based framework facilitates this deconstruction.

## Grouping Attributes

Since attributes differ from each other, they can be organized into different groupings. For example, one way to divide attributes is to think of them in two broad categories: intrinsic attributes and extrinsic attributes.

Intrinsic attributes are a part of the material reality of the coffee: its form and appearance, its chemical makeup, and the sensory properties that derive from these material constituents. A coffee's roast level, for example, would be an intrinsic attribute, as would be its flavor and texture. Intrinsic attributes are sometimes known as material attributes.

A second category of attributes might be termed extrinsic attributes, which refer to information about the product. In coffee, this would include its place of origin, the name of the producer, and any certifications that the coffee might carry. Branding might also be an important extrinsic attribute, as would sustainability claims.

The distinction between intrinsic and extrinsic attributes is only one way to organize attributes; there are many other ways to organize and group the qualities that make coffee special.

### Intrinsic Attribute (material attribute)

within the coffee

cupping score  
physical appearance  
size/grade  
roast color  
descriptive profile

### Extrinsic Attribute (symbolic attribute)

about the coffee

origin  
certification  
name of farm  
brand



**Figure 1:** Attributes can be grouped in many different ways. One way to do this is to split them into two broad categories, "intrinsic," or material attributes contained within the coffee, and "extrinsic," or symbolic attributes (information about the coffee).

# Attributes Can Be Measured

Unlike a hard-to-define concept of "quality," well-defined attributes can be identified and quantified using a variety of methods. In this way, a product's attributes might be characterized, and used to compare products against each other. An example of this comes from Food Science and International Agriculture and Development researcher Allison L. Brown who used a quantitative technique called "projective mapping" to develop a consumer-research-based "attribute map" for chocolate products.<sup>2</sup> The resulting attribute map shows three clearly delineated market segments for chocolate, a more specific and detailed market segmentation than the National Confectioners' Association revealed in their research.

This ability to quantify attributes makes it possible to accurately measure product attributes and derive meaning from that information. In coffee, sensory attributes can be quantified using methods like sensory descriptive analysis, which

uses trained panels to accurately describe coffee flavor. It is this technique that led to the development of the *Coffee Taster's Flavor Wheel*, and is currently being used to reveal the sensory impacts of genetics, brewing techniques, and roasting methods on coffee flavor.

Other methods can be used to measure other attributes. For example, hedonic attributes such as "liking" and "preference" can be measured using standardized psychological and consumer research tools. Combining a descriptive approach to attributes ("what attributes does the product have?") with affective tests ("how are these impacts perceived?") is a fast-growing and powerful field in consumer research, leading to methods such as *preference mapping*. This leads us to the next benefit of an attributes-based framework to define specialty coffee: it's also possible to measure the value these attributes generate.



Figure 2: One of the outputs from Allison L. Brown's "projective mapping" to develop a consumer-research-based "attribute" map for chocolate products. Chocolate products are shown in italicized black, consensual words are shown in bold red, and non-consensual words are shown in grey.

Original graphic published in PLoS ONE 15(11): e0240177, "Understanding American Premium Chocolate Consumer Perception of Craft Chocolate and Desirable Product Attributes Using Focus Groups and Projective Mapping," by Allison L. Brown and Alyssa J. Bakke, and Helene Hopfer.



Figure 3: The Coffee Taster's Flavor Wheel (2016), a collaboration between World Coffee Research, the Specialty Coffee Association, and the University of California Davis, is a collection of sensory attributes.

# Measuring Value

Once we've identified a product's attributes, we can use economic tools to establish their value. For example, in economist Togo Traore's paper, "What Explains Specialty Coffee Scores and Prices," an analysis of various material (intrinsic) and symbolic (extrinsic) attributes' effect on Cup of Excellence prices reveals the relative value of attributes in the context of international coffee competitions.<sup>3</sup> For example, the intrinsic sensory attribute "fruity" was found to have the most powerful effect on auction price of all the sensory attributes, and had a more powerful effect than

the extrinsic credence attribute "certified organic." In this way, an attributes-based framework us not only to measure and characterize the value of various coffee attributes, but also to measure their value in the marketplace, a key focus of interest for the specialty coffee community.

## Application in Specialty Coffee

If a coffee is a collection of attributes—and we have determined that a coffee is “special”—then its sense of “special-ness” (distinctness, uniqueness, or specialty value) is derived from its attributes. Furthermore, if the antithesis of “specialty coffee” is “commodity coffee,” then it is clear that the difference is in its distinctive attributes: a “commodity” is so-called because it focuses on sameness and interchangeability, which intentionally minimizes distinctive attributes for the sake of commodification. Conversely, the specialty coffee movement has been about recognizing and celebrating distinctive attributes, whether they be flavors, countries of origin, roasting styles, etc. Therefore, we can conceive of the specialty/commodity relationship not as a duality, but as a continuum, with coffees becoming more “special” as they exhibit more distinctive attributes.

Through this lens, it is easier to identify specialty coffee by simply assessing its attributes, both intrinsic (absence of defects, flavor attributes, bean size) and extrinsic (origin, producer, agricultural style, etc). This framework makes obvious the importance of traceability and transparency, since these kinds of programs make more extrinsic attributes a part of a product. An untraceable coffee must be evaluated on its intrinsic attributes alone; a transparently traceable coffee may have dozens of extrinsic attributes on top of the intrinsic ones, potentially making the coffee much more valuable in the marketplace.

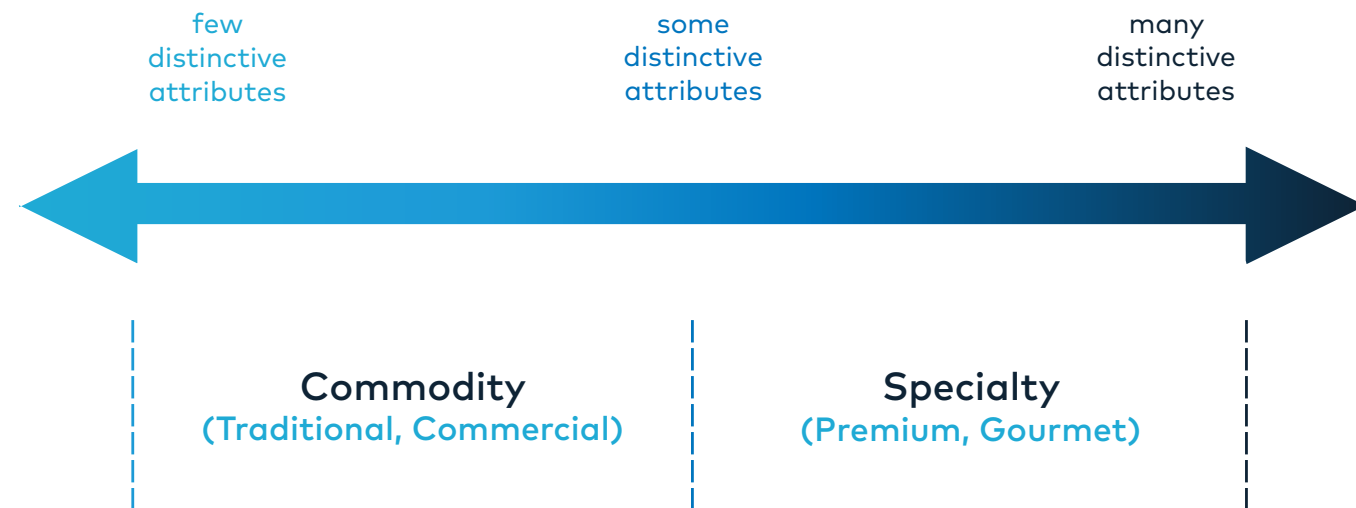


Figure 4: We can conceive of the specialty/commodity relationship as a continuum, with coffees becoming more “special” as they exhibit more distinctive attributes.

## Scoring Specialty Coffee Attributes

Because attributes can be quantified and measured, an attributes-based framework lends itself to scoring approaches, which are familiar in specialty coffee. However, instead of being limited to “quality” scores and defect counts, extrinsic attributes can be counted as well. This is a much more holistic approach to quality and value in the marketplace, and gives us a better idea of what drives value to consumers and producers alike. What this conception does not do, however, is prescribe a specific, narrow definition of “quality,” which some specialty coffee advocates have sought in the past. An attribute that brings value in the marketplace is an attribute that lends specialness to the coffee, and “counts” towards its specialty status. This conception stands in contrast to an ideology of “it’s what’s in the cup that matters,” since that approach devalues extrinsic attributes. What’s in the cup matters, as does the cup itself, and the way the coffee got into the cup. It all counts—and can be counted.

## Embracing Diversity

As attributes are valuable in and of themselves, an attributes-based framework puts less emphasis on universal quality norms and more emphasis on the way particular attributes might be celebrated in diverse markets. This is especially important as specialty coffee becomes a more global phenomenon—diverse cultures will naturally value aspects of coffee very differently. A coffee buyer in Korea, for example, might value a flavor attribute like *fruity* much higher than one in Germany. This might be true for any attribute or set of attributes. The value here is not only international: as well-developed coffee markets like Europe and the US become more diverse in their coffee offerings, norms around specialty coffee must be expanded to thrive. Different subcultures—even within a country like the US—will find value in different attributes. This framework provides a way to understand and embrace these differences, and including them in the specialty coffee movement can only make us stronger.

## The Attribute-based Definition of Specialty Coffee

With attributes in mind, we have developed the following definition of specialty coffee, meant to define the concept and also provide a framework for research, promotion, discussion, and fruitful exchange:

**Specialty coffee is a coffee or coffee experience recognized for its distinctive attributes, and because of these attributes, has significant extra value in the marketplace.**

We believe that the attributes conception explored in this paper lays the groundwork for a more inclusive, diverse, and prosperous specialty coffee community, supporting our values of working towards a more thriving, equitable, and sustainable coffee industry. This concept—and the definition of specialty coffee that results from it—focuses on what is valued by coffee lovers and the coffee trade and builds a framework that respects diverse consumer preferences while at the same time strengthening a producer's understanding of how to communicate and increase the value of the coffees they produce.

Finally, and importantly, the attribute-based definition of specialty coffee celebrates and includes all of the specialty coffee cultures of the world, as diverse and varied as they may be, honoring the idea that there may not be absolute value judgments for such a complex and widely-loved product as coffee.

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