

What Value Robusta?

The move to higher quality coffee by consumers is an identified trend. What constitutes a Gourmet Coffee?

Many Coffee Roasters would answer Arabica coffee exclusive of Robusta

The controversy continues...read on:

If there has been one singular trait that has defined the specialty coffee industry, it is the use of Arabica beans rather than Robustas. The difference between the beans produced by the two species of coffee trees, *Coffea arabica* and *Coffea canephora* (as Robusta is referred to by botanists), is one of the first topics covered by those educating coffee-business freshmen in the subtleties of specialty coffee. It's a great matter of pride for many roasters, retailers, brokers, farmers, and processors to provide customers with 100% Arabica beans. Why, then, are an increasing number of roasters using Robusta beans in some of their espresso blends?

The cynical answer, of course, is cost. Robustas are trading at \$1,600 per ton or 73 cents per pound. Arabicas, meanwhile, are three times as much and at this writing are pushing higher.

But there are other reasons for the increasing use of Robusta that have more to do with changing the character of the espresso than reducing the cost of its ingredients. For many, however, the issue of price as well as its reputation in the specialty trade of being synonymous with mass-produced, inferior coffee makes using Robusta in specialty espresso blends a touchy subject, as passionately debated as politics.

"Oh no, oh no. This is horrible. You're not really asking this," says Scott Rao of Rao's Coffee Roasting in Amherst, Massachusetts, when asked whether his company plans on using any Robusta.

To use or not use Robustas, judging by most reactions, is a very personal decision that is not made lightly. Most roasters that do use Robustas only decided to do so after conducting a good deal of research, engaging in heavy contemplation, and spending numerous hours at the cupping table.

"I've never used Robustas before, it just seemed wrong," Rao says. "But I've been experimenting with different espresso blends and what I've found is that about 10% Robusta in the blend does wonders."

This statement may be surprising to some, downright sacrilegious to others, but the use of a small percentage of Robusta beans in espresso blends has some avid proponents, including just about all of the roasters in Italy, whom American roasters are taking the Robusta cue from.

One of the most vocal proponents of this practice is David C. Schomer, owner of Espresso Vivacé, and author of *Espresso Coffee: Professional Techniques*. Schomer is a stickler for details when it comes to blending and brewing espresso. On a recent trip to Italy, Schomer was talking to a roaster there, telling him, excitedly, about his 100% Arabica espresso which already had a strong following in the Seattle area. Schomer says that the reaction of the Italian roaster was not what he expected. "He said, 'That's all very good, it tastes fine, but in Italy we add a little Robusta to improve the crema.'"

Crema

A thick, uniform crema is generally recognized as the telltale sign of the relative quality of an espresso extraction. Noticing the lack of crema is often the first step in troubleshooting an extraction. Perhaps the water pressure or temperature from the machine is not right, or the grind is too course. Perhaps the barista misjudged the tamping pressure. All of these are topics widely covered in even the most rudimentary espresso education. But the crema itself, and its function, are more elusive. According to Schomer and other Robusta proponents, it serves much more than just a visual function.

"The crema traps in the volatile flavors, the fine aromatics, the lighter gaseous flavors that register on the palate," Schomer says. "The crema serves as a vessel for them. It keeps all the flavors, that would otherwise escape immediately, locked in."



Established 1992

What many roasters are looking to do by adding Robusta is improve the life and the quality of the crema. The Italians add anywhere from 10-40% Robusta to their espresso blends. So far, Americans have been using the lowest end of that range.

With the Robusta in the blend, Schomer says, "instead of lasting for 30 maybe 45 seconds, the crema lasts from one and a half to two minutes. That's the right amount of time to serve the espresso to someone at a bar and allow them to enjoy it before the crema and the flavors it locks in dissipate."

But not everyone agrees. "How long do you need your crema to last? 45-50 minutes?" asks Steve Ruiz, green coffee buyer and quality control manager for F Gaviña & Sons, Inc., a large Los Angeles-based roaster. Though he's joking, it's only to underscore the passionate feelings that roasters have on both sides of the "to use or not to use" issue. "You'll get blood flowing here if you mention [using Robusta]", Ruiz says with a slight chuckle.

"Are you going to include this in the same article with the virtues of using only skim milk to get a froth for your cappuccino, because both ideas have about as much validity?" Ruiz continues. "The Italians don't think that you can get crema without using Robusta, but of course you can. Pedro [Pedro Gaviña, who shares buying duties with Ruiz] and an Italian man visiting us almost came to blows over this. The man said you can't possibly get crema without Robusta. Pedro said come on downstairs, I'll make you one."

"I think the price of coffee is the real motivator," Ruiz says. "Are they necessary? No. Is it cheaper? Yes. That's your story right there. It's a short one."

Proponents contend, however, that price is not the motivating factor behind using Robustas. "We actually end up paying more for a premium Robusta," Schomer says. Most proponents feel that even if they do get a break on price for the Robustas, it's not going to be as big a break as people think it is because a premium, well-processed Robusta can be comparable in cost to the low-grown, low-quality Arabica many roasters use for their espresso blends; the amount of time spent hunting down a decent Robusta that will work in an espresso blend more than cancels out any actual cost savings incurred; and the Robusta only makes up 10-15% of the blend anyway.

Searching for Robusta

"Have you seen the way Robustas are processed? There's no quality control, no care in the processing," says Elmer Hooker, a salesman at Crossroads Espresso, who succinctly sums up one of the reasons he doesn't recommend blends containing Robustas. In this statement, he sums up the difficulty most in the North American specialty coffee industry have in coming to terms with the use of Robusta in espresso blends. The Robusta experience is rarely a good one.

George Vukasin, Sr. owns Peerless Coffee Co., an Oakland, California-based custom/wholesale roaster. His company falls in the middle of the Robusta debate. "Yes, most Robustas are crummy," he says. "If someone came in asking for an espresso blend, what I would recommend is 100% Arabica." But many of Peerless' customers have required that they use a small percentage of Robusta in certain blends which Peerless custom roasts for them.

"We are a custom roaster and blender, and we're pretty large, certainly the largest in this category," Vukasin says. "But we're different in that a larger company would have their blends that they do and customers choose from those. We also have standard blends that we offer, but we will sit down with the client - we'll talk, go over what we have, what they want, and then custom roast to their specifications."

Sometimes that means using Robusta. The reasons are varied. "If they're Italian, it's simple; if they're not, then they've done a lot of research or talked to equipment manufacturers who say a good coffee will have some Robusta in it," Vukasin says. "Or they go to Italy and find out that they put in anywhere from 10-40% Robusta, and feel it must be necessary. It's not necessary. But in my opinion, it certainly doesn't hurt it." "Most people are anti-Robusta because the Robusta they've had, especially if it's a cup of all Robusta, has been truly horrible," Vukasin says, adding that it doesn't have to be that way, that there are decent Robustas available if one looks hard enough. "What we look for is a neutral Robusta. If you get a well-processed, neutral Robusta, you can blend it with some very nice coffees," he says.

Schomer agrees. "The trick is to find the right Robusta. In Italy, they spend most of their time trying to track down fine Robustas. It took me four and a half years."

So will Schomer share what the "right" Robustas are and how to get them? "No. I worked too hard on that," he says. "That's the problem for the poor green broker. The better the green beans, the more secretive the roasters are about where to get them."

Vukasin is secretive as well, but is willing to at least give general regions of the world as starting places for those looking for Robustas to experiment with. "We have found some neutral, properly processed Robustas in some African regions and Indonesia," he says. "They're very difficult to find. Most brokers aren't even aware of them. Green coffee brokers have not exploited the depth of this, which is good for me," he adds.

Some roasters, however, feel that fine, premium Robusta is so elusive because it actually doesn't exist. Tim McCormack, owner of Zoka, a microroaster in Seattle, and a man who spent many years at the cupping table at Caravali Coffee before opening his own business, is skeptical about using Robusta in blends. "I've cupped Robustas separately and in blends and have tasted many Italian blends with Robusta in them. I understand the arguments for using Robustas: that they have a higher fat content which lends itself to producing a better crema, that they have sweetness and so forth. But in my personal experience, I've never tasted one I liked. They are dull and woody," he says. "I've heard there are neutral Robustas but haven't tasted one myself."

McCormack adds that Robustas, by their nature, might not be well suited for the dark roasts most roasters of espresso favor. "The West Coast style, if there is such a thing, is certainly a dark roast, which does not lend itself to Robustas and viceversa," he says. "They demand a different roast. Certainly, a dark roast doesn't add anything to a Robusta. That may be one very good reason for the specialty coffee industry's disdain for Robustas in general."

But McCormack and others who don't use Robustas in any of their blends, and have no plans to even consider it, often don't feel it's definitely wrong to do so.

"I don't disdain its use," McCormack says. "A Robusta might be a legitimate part of a blend if that's what the blender feels is right, but I don't think they improve a blend."

"Robusta has become a pariah species in the North American specialty coffee industry," McCormack adds. "It's a little outlandish the way it's treated. It might have some very legitimate uses, and for some people it definitely does. They may be perfectly useful coffees for various purposes. But not for mine."

Flavor

The main question that remains is what does using Robusta do to the flavor of the espresso?

There's definitely a tradeoff between flavor and texture," says Rao. "Getting the right Robusta is a real trick. I've only found one that adds the body and crema I want without altering the flavor noticeably." That seems to be the general guideline. Neutrality where flavor is concerned. The Robusta that roasters are looking for is one that adds the crema and body they want without damaging the flavor too much.

The percentage of the blend that the Robusta represents is also an important factor in the flavor of the final beverage.

"When I first found the Robustas I was looking for, I put them in at 17%, but the flavor characteristics weren't right for me, so I backed off to 14%," says Schomer. "That seems to be perfect, very subtle. Now it's all crema." Schomer says that all of the other factors have to be correct to even be able to tell what a Robusta may or may not be doing for a blend. "Until you are a very good barista, it's hard to tell what your roast is doing in the machine," he says. "The preparation factors have to be controlled."

To get a sense of how a Robusta can affect a blend in real terms, this writer cupped two espresso blends. One of the blends was the same as another but with the addition of 10% Robusta - a very nicely processed Guatemalan washed Robusta, one that is being used in some espresso blends.

The Robusta did two things that were readily apparent to this cupper. First, it cut the acidity quite substantially. It also replaced the sharp and sweet aftertaste of the Arabicas with one that was a distinctively mellower, grassy Robusta note at the back of the palate. This was not entirely unpleasant, though very different from espresso blends most Americans enjoy. The lower acidity mellowed the cup, but the finish was definitely affected. This seems to be in keeping with the flavor profiles of Robustas in general. Keep in mind, however, that this was an espresso blend with which this writer is familiar, and does not represent the careful research and continual fine adjustments done by most roasters.

In the end, it's really just a matter of opinion and knowing what the differences between candidates for your espresso blends are. To be adamantly against the use of Robusta just because it's the "specialty coffee thing to do" ...mistakenly believing that only the uneducated would even think of using Robusta ...would be as wrong as adding Robusta to an espresso blend simply because the Italian roasters do it.

According to Peerless' Vukasin, the dozen or so customers that he can think of off the top of his head (who have come to him requesting that he custom roast an espresso blend that includes Robusta) "are really knowledgeable people who are looking to serve the best espresso they can."

Sometimes the best espresso that a roaster has ever tasted contains some Robusta. When they find that out, they often start experimenting. Some find that Robusta works. Others find it definitely doesn't.

Rao is considering using Robusta because of just such a scenario. And through his experiments, he has found a way to use a smaller percentage of Robusta than other roasters to get the same effect.

"Basically, I'd been exposed to someone's espresso in Seattle that I thought was great," Rao says. "It was heavy, with a good crema. I liked it even better than mine, so I knew I had to try to create a better espresso blend for myself. It turned out that it had Robusta in the blend. So I started experimenting. First, I tried different Arabica varieties alone to see how they perform as espresso." Rao found that for him there was a hierarchy of what works best for espresso. "Robustas do add crema and body the best," he says. "Then come the natural Arabicas and lastly the high-grown washed Arabicas. With that information, I started experimenting with blends."

He found the blends did improve in body and crema when he added a small percentage of Robusta. But wanting to limit his dependence on Robustas, and keep the flavor profile of his espresso, while at the same time adding extra body and crema, Rao also continued to fine-tune the rest of the blend the Arabica selection.

In a certain (and unnamed) Brazilian Arabica, Rao says he found a coffee with a "great, distinctive flavor" that also helps add body and crema. "I found one coffee an advantage over other Arabicas, in that using it lessens the amount of Robusta needed to get the same effect of body and texture, so you can keep the flavor," he says.

For Rao, and indeed for most roasters, the formulation of blends is a highly individual pursuit. It's one that, like politics or religion, some people are uncomfortable talking about. "It's silly really, but it could tarnish your name," a roaster who wished to remain anonymous said.

Others, like Mr. Espresso's John DiRuocco, were reluctant to give an opinion, but did so because they felt the topic deserved debate. "Using a quality Robusta in a responsible manner can add another dimension that Arabicas don't offer," DiRuocco said. By responsible, he meant a Robusta level of under 20%. He also stressed the importance of using only quality Robustas.

The current rise in coffee prices, however, might lead to more openness and discussion. More experimentation is sure to take place as roasters become more price-sensitive. And if Arabica prices continue to climb, some in the industry feel we might see a change in the way we define specialty coffee. It could someday signal an end to 100% Arabica being a key definition of specialty coffee. Whether this is a good development or not is highly debatable.

It's a lively debate. Indeed, it almost has the trappings of a political battle. There are those who feel a true espresso must contain Robusta. Then there are those who feel just as passionately about the opposite. Take, for instance, the view of Timothy J. Castle, author of *The Perfect Cup*, who had the following opinion: "I personally don't understand Robustas in espresso - they muffle acidity, they add harshness even at 5-10%, and they completely obliterate any notion of a lingering and pleasant aftertaste. Whatever contributions they make in body do not offset what they take away in these other categories."

Crema, the most often heard excuse for using Robustas, is a self-fulfilling prophecy - the more Robustas used, the more durable the crema. It needs to be, because it will take longer to choke the thing down. The idea that a thick, rubbery lid of Robustaspawned crema will somehow seal in and preserve aromas must be true because once the Robustas are added, the fragrance and aroma are so sealed in and protected you can't taste them anymore."

But even Castle indicates there is no real right or wrong, just matters of taste and opinion. "For anyone to proclaim that such-and-such is the perfect espresso is specious from the start," he says. "Artistic ideals, and culinary ideals in particular, are constantly evolving and rarely does any one particular style achieve permanent recognition as the best. We all get to vote, but no one gets to decide."

As it is in politics, the same goes for coffee: The arguments for both sides can be persuasive. It's always best to do your own research, and most of all be well-informed before you go and cast your vote."

Notes from The Coffee Roaster Pty. Ltd.:

We believe that the above article is one of the more objective and comprehensive treatments of whether Robusta coffee beans should be included in Gourmet Coffee Blends.

The Coffee Roaster Pty. Ltd. chooses to use only the highest quality Arabica coffee beans and exclude Robusta coffee beans for the following reasons:

- ★ Arabica coffee produces a richer, more complex and attractive taste than Robusta coffee.
- ★ Our coffee is always delivered fresh from roasting; hence, Robusta is not needed to enhance the coffee beverage crema.
- ★ We use the highest quality packaging for preservation of the coffee which provides maximum crema retention.
- ★ Our low acid blends are achieved using tasty high quality low acid Arabicas such as Indonesian Java, Sumatran, etc. This method allows the attenuation of acidity without sacrificing flavour.

We retain the opinion that Robusta coffee contributes most to coffee blends that are not protected by proper packaging and/or spend days, weeks or months in the distribution chain. The high vegetable oil content of Robusta coffee allows the product to degrade during distribution yet still produce a "correct" looking beverage with a thick crema.

It is no coincidence that Robusta coffee is substantially less expensive. It's use allows greater dollar margins for the roasters that choose to use it.

The Coffee Roaster Pty. Ltd. will continue to exclusively use the Highest Grown Arabica Coffee for all our coffee blends. ...Life is too short to drink bad coffee!