

Coffee Geographical Indications: Not an Easy Task

By Mario Fernández-Alduenda | Specialty Coffee Association

Coffee is widely recognized as one of the most complex food products, with a high level of interaction between genetics and terroir, which results in a strong link between the origin of the coffee beans and the resulting flavor. Although the level of interaction between the product and the terroir in the case of coffee is comparable to other complex products such as wine and tea, few coffee denominations of origin and other geographical indications (GIs) have achieved full potential.

Why is developing a successful coffee GI so difficult? There are three areas that anyone attempting the task should carefully consider: (1) the structure of the coffee industry, in which the coffee beans from different origins are roasted and are often blended at consuming countries, thus transforming recognizable flavor characteristics and homogeneous integrity of the product; (2) the diversity of legal systems among coffee-producing countries and consuming countries which makes coffee IG protection strategies extremely diverse and challenging, and (3) the lack of research and technical work to understand the nature of the link between the product and the territory, in the case of coffee.

The challenges do not end there – even establishing a clear and repeatable flavor of coffee is complex. Using conventional techniques, most existing coffee GIs are defined from the geographical point of view, rather than from the coffee flavor point of view. Sensory work, in most cases, is limited to “cupping” – the term used for coffee tasting, which results in a quality grade or a quality score but does not necessarily describe the distinct sensory characters of coffee. We may know coffee coming from the GI region is high quality, though the specific flavor profile or profiles coming from the region are seldom characterized. As a result, different coffees coming from the same GI usually express very different flavors, meaning the links between the product and the territory need to further be explored, as a prerequisite for the coffee GI to be successful.

Recent advances in science provide new tools that can create strong coffee GI possible. A leading candidate in the field is “Regional profiling” – the term used to refer to the research aiming to understand the links between coffee flavor and terroir. Regional profiling is a multidisciplinary activity which involves geography and geomatics to map and interpret the geographical factors impacting coffee flavor. It further incorporates soil science, agronomy, coffee processing methods, chemistry, and sensory science (to characterize the region’s coffees by chemical composition and flavor).

While elusive, the complex flavor of coffee is not undefinable. Incorporating modern practices in sensory science and chemistry can go far to establish a meaningful definition of a GI that adds value to coffee production for future generations.