

Cup of Excellence: Its Impact for Coffee Producers and Specialty Coffee

By Darrin Daniel, Executive Director, Alliance for Coffee Excellence

Since 1999 Cup of Excellence® has been an innovative, educational and life changing program for coffee farmers.

Utilizing a stringent competition and selection process the Cup of Excellence has fundamentally changed the entire high quality coffee industry and in fact has created and supported advances in farming and premiums to farmers that would have been impossible without it.

In its infancy the transparency to the farm required by the program ensured that winning farmers directly received the premiums they so honestly deserved and that had been held most often by middlemen. But as the program expanded both buyers and farmers globally understood the sustainability value of transparency. Where there is no Cup of Excellence program there is less motivation for transparency. Cup of Excellence continues to push recognition to farmers of every size and gender in countries where it operates. These individual farmers then can enjoy building direct and long-term relationships with those buyers that appreciate the coffees they produce.

Smallholder farmers gain the most from Cup of Excellence since historically they had the least education in recognizing their own quality and much less power in demanding fair value. Most coffees were blended- higher qualities were mixed with other lower quality coffees in order to push to a medium quality.

The competition process pushes this quality analysis to a level that is stringent, neutral, blind and without any commercial bias. Since the competition process is free and open to all farmers it has given thousands of farmers the tools needed to improve their coffees, experiment with varieties and processing, build economic relationships with the marketplace and financially motivate farmers and their families to stay on the farm- in fact young educated people are returning to the farm with degrees in agronomy, marketing, and sensory analysis. For a sustainable coffee industry, especially one fraught with climate change and economic hardship it is critical that there is a financial motivation for innovation to remain on the farm.

The educational value of the competition goes well beyond the coffee score as it builds technical knowledge and skill that remains in-country for cuppers, roasters, event planners and organizers and builds a shared international vocabulary to describe quality that remains with the thousands of volunteer cuppers making up the national and international juries.

Darrin Daniel took the helm of The Alliance for Coffee Excellence as its Executive Director in early 2017 and is growing the auction programs for both COE award winning and semi-finalist coffees and the exciting expansion into Private Collection Auctions. ACE's headquarters is now based in Portland and it shares a fully certified quality lab with the COE program.

Mr. Daniel's discussion will look at various examples of the impact of the Cup of Excellence for producers. The competition and auction continues to foster a history of direct trade relationships as well as building premiums and leveraging prices for farmers as a result of the organization's efforts over the past twenty years. We will look at examples from Ethiopia's Cup of Excellence program as well as other case studies of impact and quality development in the supply chain.