

NEW YORK EVENT EXPLORES YEAST'S IMPACT ON COFFEE FLAVOR, LIFE SPAN

CAN ADDING YEAST to green coffee during the processing stage change its flavor for the better? How would a yeast-free coffee taste compared to the same coffee with yeast added? And can adding yeast to coffee extend its shelf life?

These were just a few of the questions posed to the crowd at Living Coffee, a February cupping event organized by Gotham Coffee Roasters and Coffee Project NY, and hosted by the latter at its Queens location in Long Island City, N.Y. About 40 people—including roasters, baristas, coffee competitors, and coffee enthusiasts—filed into the café on a winter Friday to taste for themselves the impact of yeast fermentation on coffee.

Fermenting coffee with yeast is a fairly recent phenomenon, but it's one that has quickly been growing in popularity. Leading the way has been LALCAFÉ, which makes a line of yeasts for coffee production through a collaboration between Lallemand and Scott Laboratories; the two companies previously joined forces on yeast solutions for the wine industry. The LALCAFÉ yeasts are designed to improve coffee growers' control of the fermentation process, and in turn improve the quality of the final product.

LALCAFÉ's Intenso yeast won the Best New Product awards at the Specialty Coffee Association Expo and World of Coffee show in 2018, which helped introduce the idea of coffee yeasts to the specialty-coffee industry. Margaret Fundira, product manager at Lallemand who runs operations and education for LALCAFÉ, says of their current customer base, "We are mostly dealing with the early technology adopters and the innovative producers that are looking for solutions to improve their coffee processing."

The February cupping centered around coffees from one such innovative producer: Girma Eshetu, owner of the Girma Eshetu Estate in Western Ethiopia. Girma embarked on a project with Brooklyn, N.Y.-based Crop to Cup Importers in which he treated five lots of coffee with LALCAFÉ's Cima yeast product in five different ways: 30-, 40-, and 60-hour underwater yeast fermentations of freshly pulped parchment; a hybrid method called Second Soak starting with 12–24 hours of traditional fermentation followed by adding yeast and fermenting for another 24–36 hours; and a method called Cherry Hopper featuring a 24-hour soak of cherries underwater with yeast prior to pulping.

In addition to the yeast-processed lots, Girma treated three control lots with his standard process. "We agreed to purchase the coffee regardless of the outcome, and we trusted that Girma would follow the instructions for the experiment to a T," says Maya Bluestone, a trader at Crop to Cup. By having the yeast-affected coffees as well as the control lot, the goal was to ascertain whether different treatments during coffee fermentation could improve cup quality and/or the longevity of stored green coffee.

As the cuppers dug in at Coffee Project NY, the consensus feedback was that all eight coffees on the table were tasty, and that the different yeast fermentation methods yielded subtle differences in the cups. Andrew Richter, head roaster and green buyer of Gotham Coffee Roasters—and the organizer of the event—says the most exciting coffee seemed to be the Second Soak lot that combined the two fermentation methods. "I heard a lot of positive things about that one," he says. "It was a hybrid process that combined wild (standard) fermentation and yeast inoculation. I think it was everyone's favorite."

Andrew says the crowd was eager to taste the results of the flavor



In an effort to understand how adding yeast developed specifically for coffee processing might change a coffee's profile, Gotham Coffee Roasters and Coffee Project NY joined forces with Crop to Cup Importers for a large cupping through several experimental lots from Girma Eshetu Estate in Western Ethiopia that were processed using LALCAFÉ yeasts.

experimentation, which is also why Gotham Coffee Roasters was game to help organize the event. "I was so excited when I first heard about this experiment," he says. "One of my passions in coffee is research and experimentation, and I feel like I don't see enough of it. There are a lot of anecdotes, and people speaking from authority, but there is so little that is backed up by even crude science. To hear about an importer commissioning a detailed experiment like this, and committing to buy up the lots regardless of the results, was really exciting. I wanted to help put that out there and get people talking about it."

Another element of the experiment that got people talking was the yeast fermentation's potential effect on improving the shelf life of coffee; the project aims to find out whether yeast fermentation can help prevent degradation while coffee is in transit or housed in warehouses. Andrew says that on the cupping table, the yeast-inoculated coffees came off as decidedly fresher. "What stood out to me was the lack of age in the yeast-inoculated lots versus the standard processing," he says. "The potential for producers and importers to improve shelf life [through yeast fermentation] is really huge."

Maya of Crop to Cup says their team has also found the yeast-inoculated coffees to taste fresher after cupping through the various lots several times, and they are now further exploring yeast fermentation's effect on coffee aging. "As an importer, we often struggle with going a little long on positions, or having a coffee fade sooner than it should—it's a huge risk, and we are always exploring ways to lessen this risk," Maya says. "With what we now know about water activity and its relationship to drying, I think this could be another data point as the industry works to understand how to achieve more consistent quality and longevity in coffee."

While the New York crowd was excited to taste the results of yeast-fermented coffees at Coffee Project NY, LALCAFÉ is happy to see more coffee professionals discover the effects of this method. "We see the interest increasing as we improve accessibility of the products in the different origins," says Margaret of LALCAFÉ. "Over time, fermentation control using selected microorganisms will become the norm. We are very excited to be part of this new way of coffee processing."

—Chris Ryan