



Veteran barista competition and Cup of Excellence head judge Scott Canary presided over the Isla Hawaii Private Collection Auction in February.

Innovative Yeast Fermentation a Favorite Processing Method of Top Finishers in Best in Hawaiian Coffees Auction

THE ALLIANCE FOR COFFEE EXCELLENCE (ACE), which runs the world-renowned Cup of Excellence, recently wrapped judging of the first-ever Isla Hawaii Private Collection Auction. Most notable among the winning coffees were unexpected flavors and pioneering fermentation and processing methods that helped the coffees shine brilliantly. Sixteen lots were selected as winners and moved onto the auction round in March (as of press time, the auction had not yet transpired.) The winners represent 11 farms, six processes, five varieties, and two organic-certified coffees. Additionally, 12 of the winners used yeast fermentation.

“As head judge I was able to cup these coffees multiple times, and each time I had my eyes opened for what was possible in Hawaiian coffee,” says longtime CoE head judge Scott Canary, who oversaw the Isla Hawaii Private Collection Auction. As per CoE’s strict COVID precautions, judges cupped separately and discussed their impressions virtually—Scott from his coffee lab at his retail/roaster, Carrboro Coffee in North Carolina. “These unique process coffees exceeded my past experience of Hawaiian coffee. ... These are the complex fruit flavors every tourist wishes they could take home with them from their trip, from juicy stone fruit to tangy tropical fruits, all sweet and very transparent in their character.”

The first-place coffee, a washed, yeast-fermented SL34 coffee from Kona Farm Direct, scored 88.38 points. Producers Kraig and Leslie Lee fermented the coffee with a wine yeast strain selected to enhance the coffee’s acidity and tropical fruit character. “We’re thrilled to see processing innovations and newly planted varieties rewarded by judges around the world,” Kraig says. “We hope this auction will allow our global industry to experience the quality and diversity of coffees possible from Hawaii.”

Juror Hitomi Shima of Maruyama Coffee in Japan agreed the coffees delivered terrific flavor. “The coffees were delicious with a balance of fruit and nut flavors,” he says. “In particular the taste of macadamia nuts was clear.”

The notable use of yeast fermentation among the winning lots only continues to promote the theory that yeast fermentation in specialty coffee processing is far from a passing trend; it’s a sign of the future of what our industry can be, particularly in the face of climate change.

“Specially selected yeasts have many benefits that include better control and management of the fermentation, more consistent quality, biocontrol by avoiding the growth of spoilage microorganisms, expression and revelation of aromas, and reduction in water use where wet processing is used,” explains Margaret Fundira of LaCafe.

Not just any yeasts can be added to coffee processing to produce these kinds of results, though, Margaret says. “The use of yeast during fermentation, like in any foodstuff, has benefits [which] better control the process, and in consequence, the quality of the end product. But, to reach this goal of overall quality, the yeasts have to be adapted and selected for the coffee environment, which is really specific versus other fermented food or fermented beverages.”

Many of the winning lots in this auction used yeast fermentation, and the success was based on the independent producers’ ability and dexterity with using the yeast to yield the results they sought. And as Scott explains, reaching the desired results not only takes careful work by the producer to achieve it, but a willingness to accept risk. Scott says, “Producers who already have successfully controlled their other process stages (and perhaps have already investigated the other growing/harvesting/process variables to the extent they are able) can attempt to incorporate specific added yeast into the fermentation step, if they can afford the additional cost. At times we have found this, when done well, to add another dimension to an already quality coffee. I would argue it cannot create quality where there is none, but can enhance and add to the experience, often unlocking unique attributes and/or highlighting existing ones. We have seen this from time to time in other countries, too, where new coffee varieties and hybrids show a positive response to a different approach to their processing.”

Without a doubt, the use of yeast fermentation made a huge impact on the coffees selected by the ACE judges at the Isla Hawaii Private Collection Auction, but that’s not the only way the farmers there are expanding the vision for Hawaiian coffee. “Hawaii lends itself well to experiments in processing in the sense that there are existing limits imposed on growing variables that are either impossible or difficult to alter, like elevation, microclimate, and available growing area,” says Scott. “Production costs are also quite high for a variety of reasons, so great care must be taken when introducing additional costs.

“Here I think you see the potential benefit of pairing some standard alterations, such as type of process and coffee varietal, with a focused addition of yeast to unlock some very interesting and delicious profiles that might have otherwise remained hidden.”

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