

DRINK

The complexity of coffee

BY MITCH BARBER

There is something to be said about the aromas and particular flavors in a black cup of coffee. In search of the fruitiest, sharpest and most pleasant-tasting coffee notes, SN&R turned to experts at Temple Coffee Roasters, Peet's Coffee and Identity Coffees, as well as Alpen Sierra Coffee in Nevada, where a Sacramento expat owns a wholesale company. So forget about the condiment bar at your local coffee shop for the moment. You won't need to add sugar, honey or cream to these cups.

Temple Coffee lists three straightforward flavor descriptors on each 12-ounce bag of coffee it sells. There's the Costa Rica Finca Tirra, for example: "Pearl sugar, peach, cherry preserves." Not just sugar. Pearl sugar. Not just cherry. Cherry preserves. Skeptical yet?

Consider this: If you take a fruity sun-dried Ethiopian coffee, the seasonal Ethiopian Super Natural at Peet's comes to mind, and inhale its aroma next to a handful of blueberries, they'll smell strikingly similar, and the taste will follow suit.

However, tasting notes aren't always this ostentatious. Shelly Runkle, shift lead at Peet's Coffee at Alhambra and Folsom Boulevards, has been tasting coffee professionally for 11 years. She indicated the importance of a control coffee, similar to the control variable in a science experiment. The control coffee brings out the brew's distinct flavors, such as the earthiness in a bean from the South Pacific using a nutty coffee from Brazil.

She describes aged Sumatran beans, which sit for as long as five years in burlap bags before being roasted in the most romantic way.

"They're pleasantly musty. Like ... a familiar closet, or an old wood chest," Runkle said.

At Identity Coffees' Midtown location, barista Kevin Z.'s craziest descriptor for coffee is unabashedly straightforward: "sweaty cardboard!" Z.'s coworker, roaster and barista Jess Mill, noted that flavors such as acetone and potato are prime indicators of defects while coffee tasting.

In regards to the delicious, yet eccentric notes that vary from palate to palate, Ashley Stockwell, a supervisor at Identity's West Sacramento location, mentioned that there are a lot of candy descriptors out there such as waxy, cherry bubblegum or Watermelon Jolly Rancher.

Speaking of candy, Temple Coffee's S Street location manager Daniel Choe described his most memorable coffee tasting note as, "Sour Patch Kids ... the green one, a more apple-y taste."

A fan of more conservative profile language, Christian Waskiewicz is an old gun who roasted for Boulevard Coffee in Sacramento in the 1980s and now owns Alpen Sierra Coffee in Minden, Nevada.

"I don't go too wacky [with descriptors]. I keep it relatable," he said.

He added that orange-citrus might be the most exciting term he uses.

In lieu of comparing apples to oranges, Camilla Yuan, head roaster at Temple, refers back to blueberries, and how different they taste compared to the flavor of a bright, orange-y bean,

"It's a different type of sweetness compared to an Ethiopia [variety]." □

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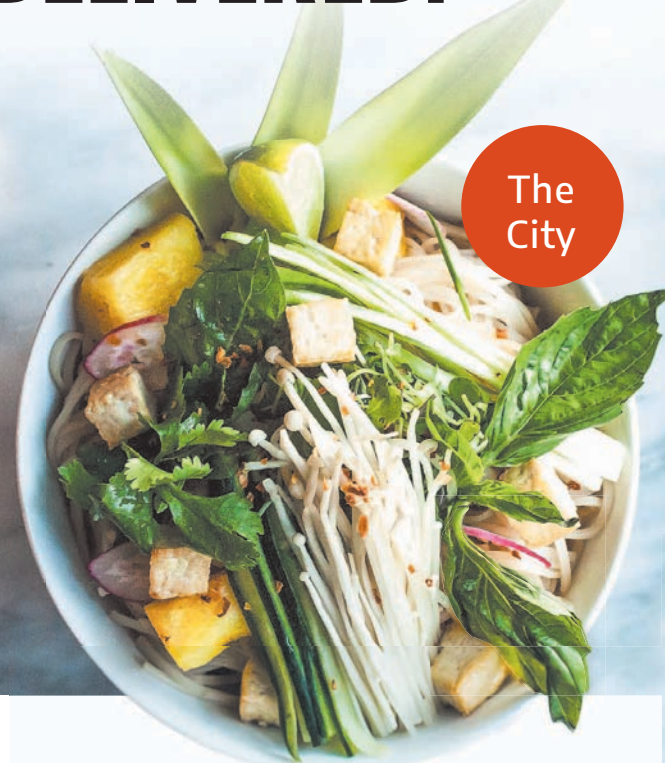
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