

Breeding for Speciality Coffee Markets: What Options Do the Coffee Breeders Have?

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SUMMARY

The dominance of Arabica coffee in the world coffee market is the result of superior cup quality of the *Coffea arabica* L. species when compared to the other species. In deed, the quantity of coffee consumed depend on the pleasure derived from consuming the beverage. Over time, the world coffee market has somewhat been stratified into market segments on the basis of quality; with various producer countries identifying with one of the segments. Recently however, a more specialised segment has been emerging under the buzz name “speciality” or gourmet coffee. The emphasis of the gourmet market is cup quality. The coffee breeders, on the other hand, have put a lot of efforts towards introgressing resistance to major diseases into commercial varieties while maintaining the high yields and good quality of such traditional varieties. The Colombian variety and cultivar Ruiru 11 are examples of results of such efforts.

Over and gain, doubts have been raised from the speciality cycles as to the suitability of newly bred coffees for the gourmet markets. This is despite the fact that such varieties have been developed under close collaboration with professional liquorers within the coffee trade who usually assess the research samples for quality characterisation. The question which arises is whether the time old quality criteria used by the veterans of organoleptic assessment of coffee quality are still relevant under the speciality coffee arena or whether new quality criteria have since emerged. From the breeding point of view, it would also be interesting to know whether the new quality criteria are quantifiable and to understand their sensitivity limits. For example, is the "Black currant taste" quantifiable, does it have a genetic basis or is it easily camouflaged by non genetic factors such as climate, agronomy and processing. In this paper, attempt has been made to delineate the response path which could be adopted by the coffee breeders in attempting to develop, disease resistant, high yielding coffee varieties whose bean and liquor qualities are tailor made to for the speciality coffee markets. The responsibility of the speciality coffee dealers in development of such varieties and the possible yield quality, resistance and environmental trade-offs likely to be incurred are also highlighted and discussed.