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The Specialty Coffee Association (SCA) Announces New White Paper on the Value of Specialty Coffee Cuppers

April 11, 2023 — On October 6, 2022, the Specialty Coffee Association (SCA) announced the appointment of a task force comprised of cuppers, institutional partners, and leaders in the coffee community to help build a robust system for specialty coffee cuppers and graders. At present, the task force is comprised of more than 40 members, a mix of volunteering individuals and invited organizational representation. The SCA is proud to announce their first contribution: a brand-new white paper entitled "The Value of Specialty Coffee Cuppers: Perspectives, Roles, and Professional Competencies."

In the past, cupping was sometimes seen as such a specialized skill that only one or two people in a business might cup coffee regularly, and trained cuppers were sometimes seen in the coffee trade as having an enhanced ability to perceive coffee and adjudicate quality. In recent years, this has changed as our understanding of coffee sensory science has advanced. In parallel, cupping has become a more inclusive practice, offering a way to spread understanding of a coffee and its value throughout an organization, or along a supply chain.

"While the SCA works in the evolution of cupping, as a tool within a system to assess coffee value, what about those who carry out the sensory assessment—coffee cuppers—and their present and future roles?," asked Dr. Mario Fernández Alduenda, SCA Technical Officer and task force liaison. "It is easy to recognize the coffee cupper plays a key role in our industry. What is not that easy is to define that role accurately in the context of an evolving, diverse, and complex industry."

SCA Chief Executive Officer, Yannis Apostolopoulos, who helped implement the task force last fall, adds, "During this process, we asked ourselves about the vision for the 'cupper of the future' and considered how their role, functions, competencies, and skills would have to evolve to meet the present and future challenges of the industry. This white paper, developed with the support of a task force of coffee cuppers from diverse countries, reflects on all of these questions and highlights the importance of the professional coffee cupper—more relevant today than ever."

In describing the various roles cuppers currently hold within coffee's value chain, the value of these roles, and the competencies required to successfully operate as a cupper in each context, the SCA outlines its view that cuppers are highly skilled, not just as "tasters" (although this skill is foundational to the role), but as subject matter experts who may discover, support, ensure, and communicate the quality of coffee while acting as key market linkages within the coffee value chain. By calling attention to the wide range of roles cuppers currently occupy—and the vast range of relevant supplemental or complementary competencies currently required to fulfill them—the paper's goal is to offer a clear path of professional development for those seeking to work in the specialty coffee sector.

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"The Value of Specialty Coffee Cuppers: Perspectives, Roles, and Professional Competencies" white paper is available in English and Spanish at sca.coffee/news.

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About the SCA Coffee Value Assessment (CVA)

After three years of research and development, the SCA is evolving the tool the global industry uses to discover value in coffee. The Coffee Value Assessment System offers a complete, "high-resolution" picture of a specific coffee across four assessment types, completed separately to avoid bias—and it will soon be available to "beta test" as a part of an early-adopter program, launching at the SCA's Specialty Coffee Expo in Portland, OR.

Driven by the SCA's sustainability agenda, which emphasizes equitable value distribution throughout the supply chain, the system aspires to be a powerful tool to help measure and facilitate value assessment and distribution. It simultaneously integrates advances in sensory and coffee science, making it compatible with scientific research for the first time, as well as learnings from a large user-perception research project conducted with the specialty coffee community.

Despite its broad reach within the coffee sector, the 2004 SCA cupping system had not been thoroughly investigated or substantially updated since its creation—and the SCA is committed to improving its tools to improve market access and equity throughout the specialty coffee supply chain. The new Coffee Value Assessment System, an evolution of the 2004 SCA Cupping and Grading Protocol guided by the results of a user perception survey of 1600 cuppers worldwide, has been in testing with groups of cuppers in Europe, Latin America, and the US in 2022. Learn more at sca.coffee/value-assessment

About the Specialty Coffee Association (SCA)

The SCA is a trade association built on foundations of openness, inclusivity, and the power of shared knowledge. The SCA's purpose is to foster global coffee communities to support activities to make coffee a more sustainable, equitable, and thriving activity for the whole value chain. The SCA acts as a unifying force within the specialty coffee industry and works to make coffee better by raising standards worldwide through a collaborative and progressive approach. Dedicated to building an industry that is fair, sustainable, and nurturing for all, the SCA draws on years of insights and inspiration from the specialty coffee community. Learn more at sca.coffee.

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