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## **Raising the Barista** *Espresso has evolved into a competitive art*

By Lisa Lance

Coffee can be the jump-start to your day, an excuse to meet up with friends or fuel to push through an all-nighter. When you order your favorite cup of caffeine—be it a cappuccino, espresso or the latest mocha-frappa-latte concoction—do you ever stop to think about the skill that goes into creating it?



Coffee preparation professionals, otherwise known as baristas, have the opportunity to showcase their skills each year at competitions held across the country. At the regional level, St. Louis baristas compete against others from the Midwest, which includes Missouri, North Dakota, South Dakota, Nebraska, Kansas, Minnesota and Iowa. The winner of each regional advances to the semi-finals of the United States Barista Championship (USBC), and the winner of the USBC goes on to compete in the World Barista Championship.

The competitions are open to anyone, but most participants are baristas working for local coffee houses. Alex McCracken, a barista at St. Louis-based Kaldi's Coffee Roasting Co., competed in his first regional competition in January. He took fourth place and went on to compete in the 2006 USBC, which was held in April in Charlotte, N.C. (Unfortunately, no St. Louisans placed at nationals. Top honors went to Matthew Riddle from Chicago's Intelligentsia Coffee & Tea, who went on to place third in the world.)

Why did McCracken want to compete? He said that most baristas are not trained very well and have misconceptions about the proper preparation and quality of coffee. "We want to uplift coffee and coffee origins," he said. McCracken estimated he made thousands of drinks in preparation for the competitions; he now trains other baristas at Kaldi's.

The competitions are sanctioned and run by the Specialty Coffee Association of America (SCAA), based in Long Beach, Calif. Michelle Campbell, director of community and events for the SCAA, said the first competition was held in 2001 as a barista certification program. Over the years, a more formal competition evolved.

Each competitor has 15 minutes to make four servings each of three drinks: an espresso, a cappuccino and a signature drink. There are standards for the

espresso and cappuccino, but the signature beverage is entirely up to the barista. The only rules for the signature drink are that it must be espresso-based and may not contain alcohol or any illegal substance. Past signature drink ingredients have included maple syrup, toasted almonds, lemon zest and coconut. McCracken said he's seen drinks served in anything from a martini glass to the traditional demitasse cup he favors for his espresso amandine.

The competitions have seven judges: two technical, four sensory and one head judge who oversees the whole process. All judges must pass a USBC certification workshop and attend a calibration session before each competition to ensure their palates are all in synch.

Some judges are past competitors and many are retail owners. "I was invited to become a judge because of my experience in the industry," said Dan Janson, east-central regional sales manager for Espresso Specialists Inc. of Seattle, a sponsor of the USBC. He previously worked for St. Louis' Ronnoco Coffee and has taught SCAA barista training workshops. He competed in the first SCAA barista competition in 2001 and has served as a judge since 2003. He compared judging to teaching, and said he enjoys helping the baristas understand what they need to do to improve, and then seeing them come back and perform better the next year.

The technical judges watch every move the barista makes and evaluate his competition area and technical skills. They award points based on cleanliness and knowledge of the equipment used in drink preparation. "There's only one way to make an espresso, and only one way to make a cappuccino," Janson said. "Either they do it correctly or they don't."

For example, the espresso machine's portafilter – the handle that holds the coffee – must be wiped off in three places; missing a step can affect the equipment or the taste of the beverage. This attention to detail may sound extreme, but it's essential for a high score. "It's not over the top," said Andrew Timko, director of coffee at Kaldi's and a USBC-certified judge. "It's all necessary for an extraordinary coffee experience."

The sensory judges evaluate the beverages for taste, presentation and overall impression. In terms of taste, the judges appraise the balance of flavors and temperature of each drink, as well as the raw materials used. Factors in a strong presentation include consistency of drinks, the use of proper serving cups and creative expression.

Participating in a competition "allows baristas the acclaim of their profession to be something to be admired," said the SCAA's Campbell, who noted that competitors often become the best baristas in their stores. The competitions can also be beneficial for the average coffee-drinking customer, as many of the judges are retail owners who use the competition rules and score sheets as tools

to train employees.

Timko hopes the competitions will help to raise the status of the barista to a more professional level, and believes the competency of the barista is what makes or breaks a great beverage. Great coffee can be grown in perfect conditions and processed well, but “if it doesn’t get to the end user in a perfect state,” he said, “it was all for naught.”