

## Coffee lessons from Fonté Coffee's master roaster (formerly Starbucks' head roaster)

Posted by [Melissa Allison](#)

In the lineage of coffee masters, Steve Smith is just two degrees away from Alfred Peet, and it shows.

Ask Smith whether he roasts light, medium or dark, and, like Peet, he is ready to teach.

The master roaster for Fonté Coffee Roaster in Georgetown gets out a pen and paper and draws three lines showing how roasting develops a coffee's acidity, body and aroma, and describes how roasters use heat, time and their experience with the weather and various types of coffee beans to bring out the best qualities in any particular batch.



Acidity falls as coffee is roasted, while body and aroma gradually build until they peak and begin falling, too. Roasters aim for a sweet spot where the three intersect, and that place varies depending on the bean and what aspect of the coffee a roaster wants to emphasize. Coffee that's meant to bring acidity to a blend, for example, might not be roasted as long as the same coffee would be if it's not going to be blended.

From light to dark, Smith lists the range of roast profiles -- cinnamon, institutional, American, city, full city and French (or other European country) -- and explains the nuances of those labels, including how different beans require different roasts and why some companies prefer to have highly calibrated machines to do the work rather than artisan roasters.

Many reject roasting labels altogether. In general, he said, Fonté does a full city roast, and by the time he gives me that answer I have a full context for understanding it.

Much of what I learned while cupping coffee with Smith yesterday (top photo) will be lost by tomorrow, obliterated by new deadlines and too much caffeine. But I'm glad he -- and so many other Seattle coffee people -- have the interest and patience to share what they know with the rest of us.

Unlike many Seattle roasters, Fonté operated for years without a cafe in which to showcase its product. The company started as a small chain in 1991 that eventually had several cafes in Los Angeles, Chicago and Anchorage. Then owner Paul Odom (second photo, with a 240-pound Probat roaster) decided the roasting business would be simpler and more profitable.



He hired Smith, who had been Starbucks' head roaster and was trained by Jim Reynolds, who was trained by Alfred Peet. For the past decade, Fonté has been too busy filling orders for hotel and restaurant customers like the Four Seasons, Wynn Las Vegas and Houston's on Park Avenue South in Manhattan to make much of a splash in Seattle.

But earlier this year, Fonté opened an elegant cafe on First Avenue across from the Seattle Art Museum that is run by big names like former U.S. Barista Champion Bronwen Serna and former Herbfarm sommelier Tysan Dutta.

It serves as a showcase for clients visiting from out of town, and they hope as a boost for Fonté's online sales.

Smith figures Fonté roasts less in a year than Starbucks does in a single morning, and Odom said he tries to do business with clients who understand what they are getting. They cost more than Sara Lee and other commercial roasters, and unlike the big names, they don't have bags of roasted coffee sitting around waiting to ship.

That can raise eyebrows at companies that are used to coffee-on-demand, but Odom said restaurants and hotels whose chefs and food buyers taste the difference -- and like to wow heads of state and other luminaries with their coffee -- are fun to work with.

Some of the most fun is finding and roasting small batches of coffee, like a rare lot of La Esmeralda Geisha whose proceeds it recently said it would [donate to the Pike Place Market Foundation](#).

Smith also had a Guatemalan coffee on the table yesterday that was a Cup of Excellence award winner. In coffee circles, that's known as "COE." I knew it was a big deal and had even tasted some before, but in typical fashion, Smith expanded on what I knew, mentioning that some growers never even tasted -- or "cupped" -- their coffee before COE offered a financial incentive.

To demonstrate how coffee production is evolving, he pulled out a bag of the Guatemalan COE that was shipped in a newfangled foil package rather than the traditional burlap sack.

"You don't have to do that for me," I said.

"I want to smell it, too," Smith said.

Most green coffee smells like cardboard or, at most, hay.

This COE had the aroma of fresh-cut grass, very fresh indeed for fruit that had traveled so far.