

Navigating Appellation

Can Producing Countries Guarantee the Quality of Their Regional Coffees?



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By Rivers Janssen

Guatemala, a country similar in size to the state of Maine, has several distinct coffee-growing regions, each distinguishable by a unique microclimate: Cobán is cloudy and dark; even during the dry season rain is common. Its coffees are, according to the *Asociación Nacional del Café de Guatemala* (ANACAFE), “known for their handsome large roast, mellow flavor, and heavy body.” Antigua coffees—grown around the former capital city of Guatemala—receive far less moisture than Cobán coffees, although they have a long ripening period in the cool climate, resulting in a “quintessential balance of body, flavor, acidity, and aroma.” The regions of Huehuetenango (“spicy and sharp”), Atitlán (“exceptionally clean”), and Fraijanes (“distinctive nutty flavor”) all produce noteworthy beans with singular flavors.

Through its support of regional distinctions among Guatemala’s coffees, ANACAFE has, intentionally or not, taken the first step toward appellation. That is, the coffee association is attempting to identify certain microclimates and regions that produce unique-tasting coffees and pass that information onto consuming countries. The country is marketing its coffees by creating an expectation of quality. Coffees in each region ideally share two attributes: high caliber and a commonality of taste.

Now that Guatemala has established its best coffees as among the world’s finest, some people are hoping the country will promote its coffees on a more detailed level. Is it enough for ANACAFE to map Guatemala’s growing regions and hope its quality regional coffees enter the marketplace with respect? Or should Guatemala, along with other producing nations that grow high-quality coffee, try to adopt a controlled appellation system, similar to the ones already in place in wine-producing nations?

Appellation isn’t a word that’s been bandied around the coffee industry much. It’s used within the wine industry to both specify the flavor and growing processes used for a region’s wines and to ensure that a wine grown outside of those specifications cannot misrepresent itself and reap the benefits of consumer expectation. If Burgundy wine of a certain vintage develops an enviable reputation of quality and

demands a high price, other winemakers have plenty of motivation to pass their wine off as Burgundy. A legal appellation system is intended to prevent such cheating.

France has the most detailed wine appellation system, and it is often cited as the model for other countries to follow. It takes several factors into consideration, including sunshine, rainfall, soil type and structure, exposure, and elevation. “In this scheme, it is the location of the vineyard, along with the selection of the grape



varieties best suited for it, that matters most,” says Matt Kramer in his book *Making Sense of Wine*. “The winemaker here is more servant than master.” The French have taken great pains to research which grape varieties produce the best wines in specific climates, and for winemakers to label their wines as originating in these areas, they have to follow these rules. It’s highly restrictive—some say unfair—but it’s given French wines unparalleled consumer recognition and respect.

Coffee-producing countries, by contrast, have never had true appellation systems. Coffee is still regarded primarily as a commodity, especially by the larger players both within and without the specialty industry. And although some gourmet coffee lovers have created a limited awareness of coffees such as Ethiopian Yergacheffes, Yemen Mochas, or Costa Rican Tarrazus, there are few systems in place to ensure that the coffees are genuine or that they’re high quality. An appellation system might not guarantee that quality, but it would give producing countries a more efficient marketing mechanism toward that end.

Coffee appellation is certainly in its infancy, if even out of the womb; Europe, after all, started experimenting with wine appellations several hundreds of years ago, and the current incarnation is still evolving. And most people agree that coffee appellations would be fraught with problems that only time and cooperation could iron out. But the fact that it's merely being talked about is a boon to many in the industry.

“What we're trying to do is move coffee away from people thinking of it as a commodity,” explains Ted Lingle, executive director of the Specialty Coffee Association of America (SCAA), “and to correctly position coffee as a family of differentiated beverages. And the most successful model that we have in an agricultural industry is wine and grape production.”



Ron Wiegand, wine editor of *Appellation Magazine*, spoke at the SCAA annual conference two years ago on the subject of coffee appellation. He believes that over the long term, appellation would lead many producers to grow higher-quality coffee and could help regulate the misinformation that some producers and roasters pass off on consumers, such as the use of names like Kona, Kona style, Java, and Mocha for coffees and blends that contain little or none of the aforementioned coffees.

“Regardless of what industry people are in,” says Wiegand, “when it comes to securing a higher price for something that has a recognized pedigree—in this case a geographic name that implies high quality—they’re going to fudge.”

Within Guatemala, for instance, it's fairly common for non-Antigua coffees to be marketed as Antigua, says Michael Glenister, president of AmCafé, a New York specialty coffee and tea importer. That's because many coffees are shipped from

other parts of the country to be milled in the former capital city. “Countries like Guatemala realize that this is causing a problem because it sort of devalues the reputation that areas have for different qualities,” he says.

Guatemala isn’t the only country studying the issue. SCAA Administrative Director Don Holly says Jamaica has established a limited appellation system with its Blue Mountain coffees; the true Blue Mountain coffees come from tipica trees and are washed, fermented, and dried according to standards mandated by the origin country. If coffee growers don’t follow those standards, they cannot call themselves Blue Mountain producers. Brazil and Colombia have also expressed interest in differentiating their coffees for the specialty market.

Eduardo Kopper, a member of the Costa Rican Coffee Institute (ICAFFE), even contributed a column for the SCAA newsletter *In Good Taste* on the potential merits of an appellation system. The column concluded that a system of “origin denomination” would be difficult to implement and supervise under the country’s current legislation. However, it also mentioned that Costa Rica is extremely proud of its regional coffees, and that it does have the infrastructure in place to ensure that its coffee bags are at the very least marked with the correct region.

It’s well known that Kona coffees often contain little or no Kona; legally, Kona blends are only required to contain 10 percent Kona if they’re sold in Hawaii, less if they’re sold on the U.S.

mainland. Another source of confusion occurs in Brazil, where coffees are routinely named after the ports from which they are shipped (“Santos,” “Rio,” and “Bahia”), not the regions in which they were cultivated.



Protecting regional trademarks was certainly the idea with wine. The French appellation system that we know today evolved from a need to eliminate fraud within wine-producing countries. During a catastrophic 30-year period in the late 19th century, the vineyard area of France declined by 64 percent. Consumption, however, doubled over that same period. As a result, wines labeled as Burgundy or Bordeaux but actually originating in Algeria, Italy, Spain, or God knows where else swept across France. Winegrowers' protests came to a head in 1911, when Champagne winegrowers rioted in the streets of the small town of Aÿ, looting and smashing the stocks of every house suspected of purchasing wine from outside the Champagne borders.

The French, however, recognized that certifying origin alone wouldn't guarantee quality. After a series of false starts, a law was finally passed in 1935 establishing a national appellation agency. It eventually set up "legally defined appellation boundaries, along with a codification of grape-growing and wine-making practices appropriate to the area," says Kramer. It was a monumental task; the government drew 12,000 maps charting areas of appellation, which, according to Kramer, number around 380 in France alone.

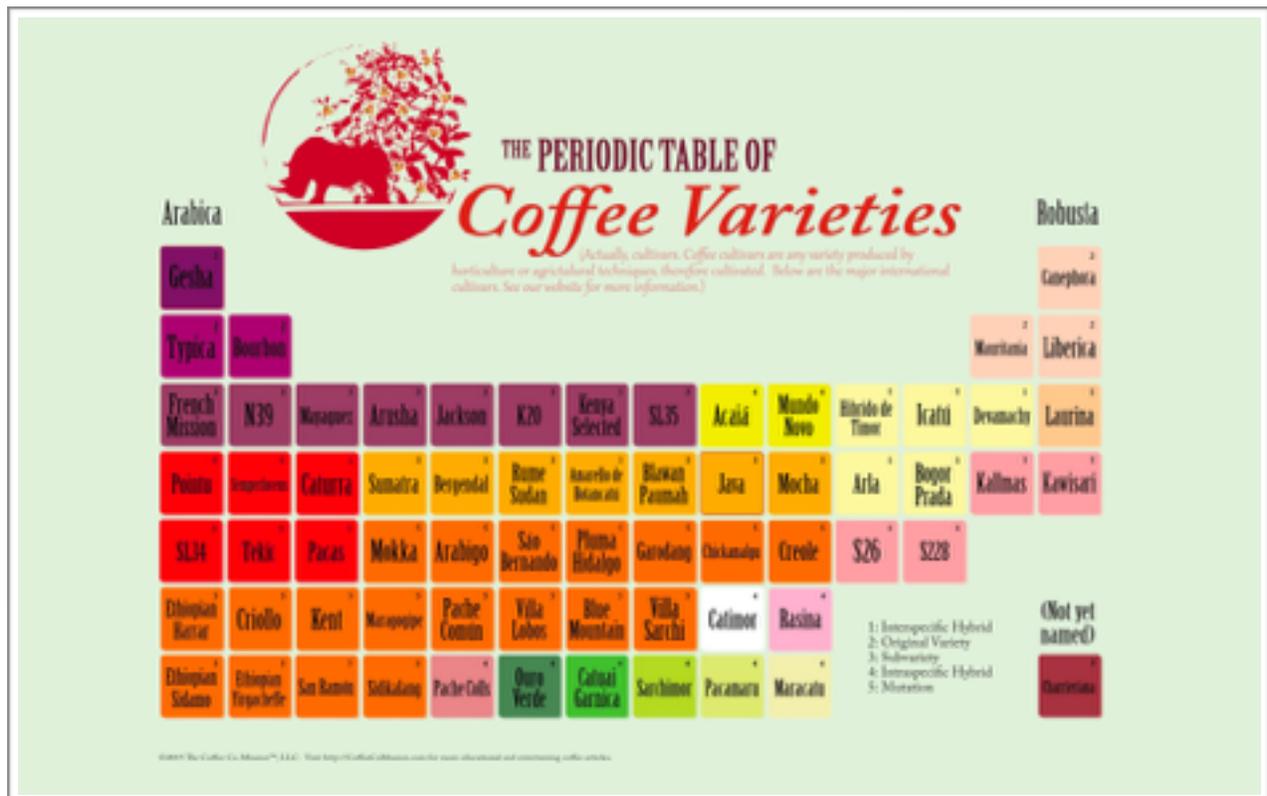
One of the ironies of U.S. coffee roasters discussing appellation is that they would have little to do with creating the systems. Coffee appellations, like wine appellations, could only originate in producing countries and could only be inspected and monitored by local governments. In addition, countries like Guatemala and Costa Rica would have to establish knowledgeable cupping panels that could demonstrably prove the different flavor profiles of their coffees. No one will respect an appellation system if all the coffees taste the same.

On top of that, the countries would have to determine how high their standards should be. Should they target the top five percent of their coffees as being fit for appellation, and assume the rest will fit into the commercial commodity structure? Should they try to lower the bar and include as many coffees as possible, meaning quality might not improve but more farmers can take advantage of the appellation?

Kevin Knox, coffee buyer for Allegro Coffee Co. in Boulder, Colorado, says it has to be the former, because an appellation isn't worth creating unless it's dedicated to improving the caliber of the cup. "I think it would drive quality up," he asserts, "especially if one of the parts of the system is mandating certain types of Arabica coffee that they could use. And you could go a long way towards preventing the spread of higher-yielding hybrids and open sun coffee that we know leads to deterioration in cup quality.

"I think it might be a 20- or 30-year project to really get this going," Knox continues," but all it would take would be one country, maybe Guatemala through ANACAFE, maybe Costa Rica through their specialty association, going ahead and trying to do this and doing it conservatively; identifying two or three coffees that just have indisputable regional character."

Holly looks even further down the road at the possibilities. "Maybe it's magic and happens right away, and maybe it happens over a 50-year period," he says, "but over a period of time, the consumers and the entire chain behind them gain a certain respect for that particular coffee because its quality is effectively ensured."



Producers might foresee an appellation system only in the distant future, but some coffee farms have already adopted a few tricks from the world of wine. Farms with an established reputation often eschew traditional commodity markets and deal directly with roasters. They emphasize quality; if it's good stuff, it's worth the extra cost. La Minita—a coffee farm in Costa Rica—is one of the best examples of a quality estate coffee. “The appeal and the merchandising of the coffee is based on the cup quality and the preparation rather than romancing the environment or the sun or how great the workers are being treated,” says Knox admiringly. “The main appeal was that it's the best coffee from its country regardless of the price.”

Knox also mentions an El Salvador project funded by the European community as an example of quality marketing. Knox says the coffees are guaranteed to be grown at a minimum altitude, usually 4,500 feet, to have a very low defect count, and to be processed on the farm. “There are exact specifications that come with each coffee as to how it's grown and how it's processed,” he says. “So they have a lot of integrity to the system and they're getting high prices for the coffee.”

Not all estate coffees follow the same path. Some are merely clever at marketing; their coffees aren't that good but their four-color brochures are exemplary. But the ones that do it right are molding a path for the future of the specialty market.

“I think the more that people base their specialty coffee efforts on merchandising the cup and the cup quality,” Knox declares, “the more room there is for something like an appellation system down the road.”

An appellation can be defined in several distinct ways. It can be, as Guatemala has already established on a limited level, a regional division of coffee flavors. In this case, the country would acknowledge its varied microclimates and the effect each has on a coffee's taste. And although it wouldn't necessarily tell a producer how to grow his coffee, it would at least ensure that coffees from outside the appellation weren't fraudulently labeled.

Or an appellation system can be extremely complex. Countries could tell their farmers that to be called a genuine Guatemala Antigua, the coffee needs to grow from the boubón or tipica varieties (for example) at a minimum of 3,000 feet, and it must be processed in a specific way. The farm can have no more than X coffee trees per hectare and cannot use specific chemicals. And, of course, the farm must fit within the mapped borders of the appellation. This is the model that U.S. roasters concerned with quality prefer; its stringency is modeled after European wine standards. The French call it “controlled appellation.” And it would be far more difficult and intrusive to establish than a mere regional distinction.



As much as the latter model makes sense, however, complicating factors exist. Small farmers often don't have the resources to process coffee themselves; once the coffee leaves their farms, it's sent to processing plants where it's pulped, washed, and hulled with hundreds of other coffees. And with a defined appellation, there would be an even greater temptation for

producers to cheat by passing off their average coffees as quality.

Producing nations would therefore need to establish solid controls to ensure that coffees grown by controlled appellation standards will not be mixed with other coffees, a hurdle that advocates of organic coffee also face.

“An appellation system would be, one, only as good as the control mechanism, and two, would only function in favor of producers and consumers provided there was no abuse of it,” says William McAlpin of the La Minita estate in Costa Rica.

In addition, most of the world's coffees are grown in poor countries by small farmers who are far removed from the marketing juggernaut of wealthy nations.

And unlike many winegrowers, producers have no control over the coffee once it leaves their farms. It's a common theme within the coffee industry that a producer can spend eight months growing the most beautiful coffee in the world; it can take less than 24 hours to screw it up completely.

“We’re in a different place in terms of the coffee industry,” says Ric Rhinehart, coffee and tea specialist with Café Au Lait, a roaster/retailer in Carson, Calif. Rhinehart isn’t opposed to appellation but sees some difficulty selling the idea to producers. “It’s not a local product. It’s a product that comes from some other faraway place. It’s processed again by some roaster somewhere, brought to the consumer, and then it’s processed again by the consumer. It’s not a finished product when it gets to you. There are ways to make good wine go bad, but you have to give it some effort. It’s inordinately easy to make good coffee go bad.”

In other words, the strongest appellation in the world doesn’t guarantee that the average consumer’s morning cup will be any good. In addition to concerns that consumers won’t respect a specific appellation, political problems are also inevitable. McAlpin worries that U.S. interests would push most diligently for an appellation system, forcing their concerns on producing countries and resulting in a sort of cultural imperialism. Other people worry that growers will be resistant—for every farm that fits comfortably under a controlled appellation, there will be many that won’t.

“The problem is that you’re dealing with many countries where this isn’t such a simple thing,” says McAlpin. “Political or economic favoritism exists in certain countries. And as bureaucracies write more and more rules and regulations, the opportunity for abuse increases.”

Wiegand, however, doesn’t demure from his path. “These are all the same kinds of things that took place within the world of wine and the wine industry,” says Wiegand. “Sometimes [the laws] are overapplied and they have to be changed, but the fact is, I think they’re a boon to the producer and to the consumer.”

Consumers, however, would have almost as much work ahead as producing nations. While there are a few people who don't respect origin coffees because their quality isn't guaranteed, there are far more who have no idea what good coffee tastes like.

"I think [appellation] is probably a long-term vision for the coffee industry just because the awareness of single origin coffee altogether is so minimal at this point," says Knox. "The number of people who are drinking straight unblended coffees from those types of climates that are roasted light enough to still preserve any kind of varietal character is a tiny percentage of the populace."



Further, the specialty coffee industry, by virtue of its rapid growth, has had to ease up on some of its quality standards. "There's a big level of interest from the major players to dumb down the proposition," Rhinehart states. The large coffee chains, which once bought only the very best coffees, now have so many stores that there's not enough high-end supply to fill their needs. "Starbucks has become the de facto arbiter of taste in coffee and they are, by necessity, having to lower the bar," says Rhinehart. "They certainly can't keep the same high standards."

"I think the industry will have grown out of its infancy and into the kindergarten stage when we talk about not who has the best or darkest or strongest French

roast,” says Knox, “but when you hear people talking as they used to—and I say this somewhat wistfully—10 years ago about whether a Kenya or a Costa Rica is a better choice for the first cup in the morning... When do you hear people in a coffee store talking about coffee flavor now?”

And it’s endemic to the entire industry. Many roasters buy from brokers without knowing anything about the coffee, and they buy for price rather than quality. That only reinforces the idea of coffee being a faceless commodity. “I see an extraordinary number of people who, as coffee roasters, have been unwilling to learn about their product,” says McAlpin. “Unwilling or incapable of learning.”

George Howell, the former owner of the Coffee Connection and a dedicated explorer of the world’s outstanding coffees, says that the specialty industry has largely lost its direction in the past 10 years, and that less than 20 percent of the coffee calling itself specialty today is really special. “The rest is simply commodity coffee in new clothing,” he says.

“When you’re just merchandising based on a product being exclusive rather than it being excellent, it’s not sustainable in the long run,” says Knox.

A controlled appellation system is meant to push the industry in the other direction, to set quality standards and encourage producers to meet those standards. Consumers are a vital part of that push. When consumers tell retailers that they expect quality, the retailers tell roasters, roasters tell brokers and producers, and producers have a stronger motivation to grow high-quality coffee. An appellation system ideally gives producers a quantifiable way to meet consumer demand for quality.

The next several years will show whether a controlled appellation system will come to pass in the near future. Wiegand looks expectantly at Hawaii as one of the first indicators. Following the Kona Kai fiasco, Kona coffee is a bit of a mystery to the public, and Wiegand believes it would be to Hawaii’s benefit to certify both the name and the growing standards.

Wiegand also says it's essential that U.S. roasters not confuse the consumer with misleading blend names and vague information; the purpose of appellation is to clarify, not mystify. "If it says Kona style, simply require these individuals to say precisely and legally how much Kona is in the blend. And if there's zero, it's called fraud. If there's one percent, that should be blasted in big letters so that all the consumers can read that this so-called [Kona] blend ... has only one percent Kona beans in it."

Even if an international appellation system were to materialize soon, it would probably take several decades before it grew into something meaningful. Just as the wine industry continues to tinker with its own appellations, coffee-producing nations would likely make several mistakes that would need smoothing. But the goal of an appellation system is merely to identify, protect, and improve the world's greatest coffees. And few coffee lovers can find fault with that.