

**THE BEST OF BRAZIL: the Cup of Excellence Program qualification process in the Brazilian specialty coffee market**

**GUSTAVO NUNES MACIEL**

UNIVERSIDADE FEDERAL DE LAVRAS (UFLA)

**PAULO HENRIQUE MONTAGNANA VICENTE LEME**

UNIVERSIDADE FEDERAL DE LAVRAS (UFLA)

**ELISA REIS GUIMARÃES**

UNIVERSIDADE FEDERAL DE LAVRAS (UFLA)

**DANIEL LEITE MESQUITA**

UNIVERSIDADE FEDERAL DE LAVRAS (UFLA)

**FERNANDA NUNES MACIEL**

UNIVERSIDADE FEDERAL DE SÃO JOÃO DEL REI (UFSJ)

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## **1. Introduction**

Coffee is one of the most consumed beverages in the world and is recognized for characteristics that make it a differentiated beverage (Carvalho & Spence, 2019; Chang et al., 2021). Over the last 30 years, all the links in the coffee market chain have undergone profound changes under the great influence of new consumption preferences based on quality and the search for products of unique origins (Carvalho & Spence, 2019; Wilson et al., 2012).

In this scenario, the specialty coffee trade has been gaining space inside and outside retail establishments, with a wide demand by consumers who are looking for an experience that is not limited to a high quality product (Carvalho & Spence, 2019). Chang et al. (2021) emphasize that the sensory evaluation of specialty coffees can be difficult for consumers due to its complexity and the influence of its variety, cultivation and processing.

Due to this complexity and the need to promote specialty coffee markets, cupping competitions were developed from the articulation among farms, associations, cooperatives and national and international agencies (Wilson et al., 2012). Among them, the Cup of Excellence (COE) program has held competitions followed by an award ceremony and a virtual auction of selected coffees for over 20 years. Currently, more than 11 countries have annual editions of the COE (Alliance for Coffee Excellence, 2021).

In the history of the COE program, Brazil has assumed a prominent position for being the country where the competition originated and for being a major player in the world market. Since 1999, the Brazilian specialty coffee market has undergone changes, including actions aimed at promoting quality developed by the COE program. Among them, the development of its image in the international market as a great producer of quality coffee, the strengthening of the relationship between producers and buyers of specialty coffees and the encouraging of direct trade stand out (Alliance for Coffee Excellence, 2021).

The impacts of the COE on the Brazilian specialty coffee market derive from its different events, that is, the quality competition, the award ceremony and the virtual auction stage. In all of them, the perspective of market agencies and the constructivist dynamics of sociotechnical collectives integrated in the network are relevant subjects for analysis (Araujo & Kjellberg, 2016; Latour, 2005).

COE cupping competitions and awards ceremonies can be analyzed to provide greater insight into the qualification process carried out within the context of specialty coffee quality competitions. Following one of the lines of interest in market-making research (Callon, 2016; Cochoy et al., 2016), these events can shed light on how the interaction between hybrid collectives formed by humans and market devices changed specialty coffees' definition and evaluation process over the years.

When consulting the literature, the works involving the COE program (Donnet et al., 2008; Traore et al., 2018; Wilson & Wilson, 2014; Wilson et al., 2012) emphasize quantitative value calculations, but do not address how the bases for this calculation are built or how such devices were developed. Therefore, and following the recommendation of Wilson et al. (2012) to perform an investigative effort based on qualitative data on the COE, we expect to broaden the discussions on the qualification processes following a perspective based on Constructivist Market Studies (Harrison & Kjellberg, 2016), in the context of agribusiness

From this context, the aim of this research was to investigate the construction of the qualification process developed in the Cup of Excellence Brazil program and its influence on the country's specialty coffee market.

## **2. Market agencements, devices and qualification processes**

Market agencements are hybrid collectives composed of human and non-human entities that bring action to the market (Çalışkan & Callon, 2010; Le Velly & Dufeu, 2016). This line of investigation conducted by Michel Callon and colleagues focuses on understanding how markets are constantly shaped rather than static, through the analysis of market agency and the marketization processes (Çalışkan & Callon, 2010).

Within this connection and mediated by sociotechnical arrangements from a perspective of the sociology of market agencements (Le Velly & Moraine, 2020), market devices articulate actions, based on their ability to act or in the intervention for others to act (Muniesa et al., 2007). Market devices have a crucial role as “calculative agencies” (Callon, 1998) and in the intermediation between actors in the markets (Çalışkan & Callon, 2010; Kim, 2017). Callon et al. (2002) emphasize that calculations are not limited only to price and profit factors, but also to goods and their qualities.

The qualities attributed to a good are not given, but obtained after a qualification process that involves devices, and hybrid collectives and does not have an evident limit (Callon et al., 2002; Fuentes & Fuentes, 2017). The aim of this qualification process is to establish a series of characteristics that are stabilized, even temporarily, to make the good marketable in a given market (Callon et al., 2002). Therefore, the qualities of the goods are achieved from the result of an active realization and are subject to requalification (Ariztia, 2015; Callon et al., 2002).

Cochoy (2008) advances in the calculation processes with the term “qualculation” to refer to the calculative operations that extrapolate the quantitative/numerical operations. Le Velly and Moraine (2020) infer that both calculation operations are the result of a distributed cognition and that players operating in the market do not carry out their calculations alone, but use devices present in their socio-technical networks to classify goods.

Fuentes and Fuentes (2017) argue that although a collective is involved in qualification, the shared definition of the quality of a good is not a rule and attempts at requalification may be necessary. Therefore, the existing multiplicity of stakeholders (human and non-human) and calculative dimensions bring an unstable and dynamic context to markets (Araujo, 2007; Cochoy, 2008).

Latour (2005) considers as mediators those involved in the collective of humans and non-humans who are interposed between producers and consumers in a given market and that modify it. Le Velly and Moraine (2020) supported by Cochoy et al. (2016) add that the aforementioned market mediation means that exchanges and processes of negotiation are not a simplistic encounter between supply and demand, but a set of socio-technical arrangements that will perform the context in which they are inserted.

The understanding of market agencements from a historical perspective is based on the marketization program proposed by Çalışkan and Callon (2010). This analytical framework allows marketing researchers, from the perspective of market historians, to identify five different types of framing: (a) pacifying goods, (b) marketing agencies, (c) market encounters, (d) price formation and (e) market design and maintenance.

Bringing elements of the analysis framework into the discussion, the identification of the qualities of a good must be refined before it is negotiable so that market players have expectations regarding its characteristics (Çalışkan & Callon, 2010; Le Velly & Moraine, 2020). In some market contexts, such as agricultural specialty markets, the projection of quality standards is necessary for the development of a new market and indispensable for the construction of qualification agencies.

## **3. Specialty Coffee and the Cup of Excellence**

The term specialty coffee can refer to a gourmet coffee that is processed from exceptional beans grown in climates conducive to production (van der Merwe & Maree, 2016). In addition, the differentiation of specialty coffees goes beyond the superior quality of the coffee beans, but also because it is available in micro lots, having special varieties, being a coffee of origin, having the history of cultivation, harvesting methods, among others (Guimarães et al., 2019; Quintão & Brito, 2015).

Specialty coffees, based on their physical and sensory attributes, offer a new perspective to the consumer and, combined with immaterial factors, such as the certification of origin, quality seals or awards, differentiate this product from commodity coffee (Guimarães et al., 2019). The emergence of this market in Brazil had as a key period the deregulation of the coffee market in 1989, a moment that led to changes in the sector's production processes and in the mindset of many coffee growers, who began to shift focus from quantity to quality (Santos & Ferreira, 2018).

In this context, actions such as quality contests have contributed to the dissemination of specialty coffees in Brazil and have changed the producers' conception of obtaining products with greater added value (Souza et al., 2002). The quality contests emerged in a scenario represented by the absence of a quality infrastructure that could promote the specialty coffee market (Wilson et al., 2012).

In quality competitions, one of the steps consists of the sensory analysis of the coffees, that is, those that can be experienced when consuming the product and are related to different sensory characteristics such as the variety of coffee, soil, agricultural cultivation practices, processing methods, among others (Donnet et al., 2008). Wilson et al. (2012) emphasize that historically sensory analysis of coffee were directed towards the assessment of negative attributes or defects; however, with the qualitative evolution in the coffee market over the last 30 years (Carvalho & Spence, 2019), the focus has shifted to the positive attributes that bring differentiation and exclusivity to the evaluated coffees.

For sensory analysis, evaluation protocols are used, based on a scale that is widely legitimized. In this case, the flavor wheel of the SCAA (Specialty Coffee Association of American), currently SCA (Specialty Coffee Association), serves as the standard for several quality contests around the world, bringing a multitude of flavors that are described and categorized in a systematic format (Chang et al., 2021).

Among the main protocols used in sensory analysis of coffee, whether for quality contests or any other activity for determining coffee prices in the coffee sector, is the SCA protocol and the Cup of Excellence protocol. A point of differentiation between the two is in their design; while the SCA protocol is used in the market for the evaluation of commercial and specialty coffees, the COE protocol is exclusively intended for the evaluation of specialty coffees.

Recognized as an important market maker (Wilson et al., 2012), the COE has national editions in 11 different countries in South America, Central America and Africa, with its first edition being held in Brazil. In the COE competition, the quality of the coffees are measured based on the "cupping", a process in which experts consider existing attributes in the beverage, such as aroma and flavor, based on a classification system (Traore et al., 2018).

The competition has different stages, the first consists of a pre-screening to select the samples that meet the requirements of this initial stage. Subsequently, two stages of cupping and scoring are performed by a group of national and, subsequently, national and international judges based on the COE protocol (Donnet et al., 2008). It is noteworthy that during the more than 20 years of COE competition, a cut-off score varied from 80 points to 87 points, taking into account the international stage (final round), on a 100-point scale.

The jury's score is recognized as one of the most important attributes of coffees that are certified by the COE, as it is a result of a blind test carried out by a group of judges from

different countries and experts in determining coffee prices (Donnet et al., 2008; Wilson et al., 2012). Donnet et al. (2008) see a highly significant relationship in the quality rating in the COE competition, as the assessment made by the competition's national and international jury, who are also buyers in many cases, will reflect throughout the entire market chain.

As suggested by Wilson et al. (2012, p.505), “cup evaluation is a standard practice in price determination across the coffee sector” and in the specialty coffee market, the COE, its competition and the evaluation given by the juries through their experiences and the test forms are shown as a relevant investigative scenario on the interaction between hybrid collectives that involve this market and its qualifying operations.

#### **4. Material and Methods**

This is a qualitative and exploratory-descriptive research developed from a case study (Yin, 2001). Data were collected from documentary research, semi-structured qualitative interviews and non-participant observation.

Among the documents contemplated are: (I) reports of some of the COE Brazil editions; (II) report on the Gourmet Coffee Project that was considered the embryo of the COE; (III) cupping forms and COE program rules; (IV) COE disclosure materials; (V) COE competition and auction results tables; (VI) documents available on the website of the Alliance for Coffee Excellence (ACE) and the Brazilian Specialty Coffee Association (BSCA). As a criterion during the document collection phase, the recommendations proposed by Flick (2009) for selection or disposal of a document - authenticity, credibility, representativeness and significance - were adopted. From the selection of documents, it was possible to carry out a historical reconstruction of the competition and to delineate questions for interviews with some experts.

In-depth interviews were conducted with selected actors who played a relevant role throughout the history of COE Brazil. The interviews occurred from October 2019 to January 2020. They were carried out in person and the interviewees were selected, firstly, based on documents about the COE and through the identification of some actors. Subsequently, through snowball sampling (Noy, 2008), the first interviewees were asked about other possible interviewees.

Thus, quality judges, creators of the COE and director of the institution that organizes the COE were interviewed. The possibility of interviewing individuals who worked in different ways in the COE allows the issue to be analyzed in this research from different perspectives.

Finally, non-participant observations were made by the researcher during the last in-person edition of COE Brazil, held in the city of Lavras, Minas Gerais estate, from October 15 to 19, 2019. On this occasion, it was possible to carry out direct observations throughout the days of competition and understand in practice how the COE competition worked.

From the collected data, the materials were organized and analyzed in a chronological and thematic way so that it was possible to build a historical structure that will be presented below. More specifically, Content Analysis was adopted in its qualitative, semantic and categorical strand of closed grid (Bardin, 2016), with the adoption of sentences as units of analysis.

#### **5. Results and Discussion**

##### ***5.1. The Brazilian coffee market and the search for quality***

The COE program started in 1999, and its conception took place during a global project that aimed at empowering farmers to gain more money for their superior quality coffee. This

initiative, called the Gourmet Coffee Project (GCP), was conceived by the International Trade Center (ITC) and involved the countries: Brazil, Burundi, Papua New Guinea and Uganda.

In the Brazilian context, the CGP, started in 1997, had the objective of overcoming a challenging reputation that the country faced in the international market. Many international players had a vision of Brazil as a country that had large highly technified rural properties that produced lots of “commodity” coffees. The productive image of Brazilian coffees can be related to the strong institutional regulation faced until the late 1980s and early 1990s via the Brazilian Coffee Institute (IBC), which, among its actions, reached an agreement between producing and consuming countries that sought a new appreciation of the product, the first International Coffee Agreement (AIC), a policy among producers to determine world prices, market quotas and the quality of the coffee traded. (Santos & Ferreira, 2018; Traore et al., 2018).

After the end of governmental regulation and from the beginning of the GCP, actions were conceived with a focus on working the issue of coffee quality in Brazil. For this, GCP raised resources that allowed the hiring of an international team formed by specialists from the United States, Japan and some regions of Europe, all of them with experience in the quality evaluation of specialty coffees in international markets.

In Brazil, the mission of the GCP was limited to produce and marketing high quality Brazilian coffees suitable internationally in sufficient volume and consistency to benefit producers and consumers. However, the first attempts to promote Brazilian coffees in the North American market reflected a reality that brought remnants of the period of market regulation. Gourmet Coffee Project consultants identified Brazilian coffees marketed by US importers that could be assessed upon analysis as moderately acceptable to completely poor quality. In addition, conversations with some professionals in the US coffee industry revealed a culture of low expectations for Brazilian coffees.

The plan and strategies for Brazilian coffees were restructured by the members of the Project, who decided to develop actions aimed at raising producer awareness in producing quality and tracking them by Brazilian producers and their quality coffees. Thus, the following were created: (I) the model farms program, whose objective was to provide the producer with specialized guidance, presenting a field methodology to leverage the quality of his coffees. (II) the exemplary coffees program, which aimed to identify outstanding coffees in the country and then sell them at higher prices. (III) the education program for producers and consumers, conceived with the objective of promoting the education of Brazilian coffee producers and buyers.

A common point in all these initiatives conceived in the Gourmet Coffee Project was the construction and/or use of devices that could articulate or intervene in actions to promote the quality of Brazilian coffees. In this sense, it is noted that in the model farms program, the set of experiences of the participating farms was used to create a Quality Control Manual, which aimed to establish a methodology to raise quality and formulate standards for the stages of cultivation, processing and determining quality standards.

In turn, in the exemplary coffees program, advertising actions were carried out in the form of articles and interviews in the specialized Brazilian press. In these promotional materials, newspapers of rural associations and cooperatives, the contents were created emphasizing the promotion of higher prizes for the selected coffees. As a result of the first campaign, three samples were selected, only one of which was available for sale and traded via the Japan Project. This transaction was traded at US\$0.45 above the New York Stock Exchange "C" contract due to valuation of exemplary quality designated in the negotiation.

The education program for producers and consumers involved different moments of exchanging information and knowledge that promoted Brazilian coffees. Between workshops, seminars and coffee tastings for producers and classifiers, the action encouraged the producers

to taste their own coffees and compare them with others, bringing a moment of discussion about a consensus on what quality would be.

Among the initiatives of the Gourmet Coffee Project, the priority was going to the US market for a new attempt to promote Brazilian coffees, this time with revised plans and with the three samples pre-selected via the Project. Thus, a set of Brazilian coffee tastings was created that could confront the coffees traded by North American importers and those taken by the Project's consultants. On this occasion, blind tests with uniform protocols were suggested for an impartial comparative evaluation.

Four cupping sessions were held and the three exemplary coffees took the first place for presenting attributes of a clean and sweet drink. Also at the seminars, the consultants presented slides about the Gourmet Coffee Project and its performance in Brazil in particular.

## ***5.2. The creation of a competition in Brazil and the construction of its protocols***

The return of the USA and the consequences of the Gourmet Coffee Project determined for those involved in the process to continue to value Brazilian specialty coffees. Based on this situation, the possibility of holding a competition for the quality of specialty coffees in Brazil was discussed, bringing an international jury of experts in the coffee market. In this competition, the aim was to discover and reward coffees that presented different qualities.

As one of the aims since the beginning of the program was to work with integrity and transparency during all processes with producers and buyers, the concern to ensure that the defined protocols and rules were complied with was always recurrent. From some reports of interviews and documental analysis, it was possible to identify the creation or maintenance of rules and protocols for the competition that were decisive for the result of what is used to this day, like dividing the competition in stages in order to improve the judgment of better quality coffees:

(...) we also noticed that coffees can be shared at the same table, when there are many qualities, you can also sometimes prejudge the not good for very bad and the good for very good. So, we also realized that you had to take one thing from the other and judge again, that is, judging by phase, by stages, which is what happens. So, each stage is a level, a contest construction. (Interviewee 01).

In Figure 1, there is a representation of the steps that make up the COE quality competition.

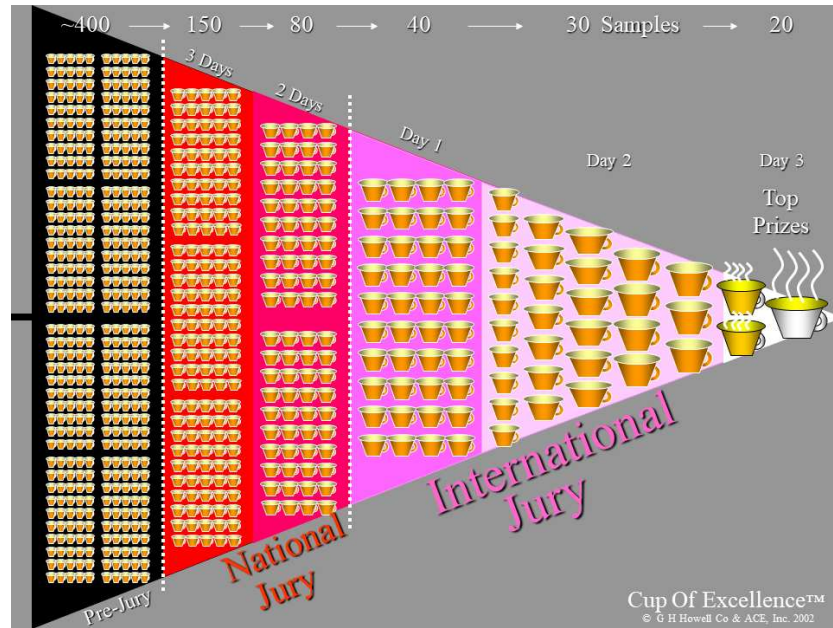


Figure 1 – COE cupping steps.  
Source: BSCA files.

In the first edition of the COE, “The Best of Brazil”, a total of 347 samples of national coffees from six different regions entered the contest. From this, the Project's quality consultant in Brazil together with a team of classifiers from BSCA restricted the number of samples to 71. In this pre-selection stage, the program did not have a cupping form and at the same time they needed to select the best coffees among so many samples sent. Therefore, an assessment was made that the number of stars referenced the recognized quality of the coffees. The following is an interviewee's report on this experience:

Then we had these samples, we didn't have a cupping form, we didn't have a lot of tools. So, the first time we selected it was more or less in that traditional method and the coffees that were better (...) some I put five stars, another I put four, some three, because I said: guys, there are some great coffees, but with different attributes. So, because when we received it, I managed to prove these 342, 347, something like that, and we brought it to half, I brought it in this methodology. (Interviewee 01).

Then, in the national jury phase, a new selection needed to be made, a phase that preceded the international jury and required stricter criteria for the sensory evaluation of coffee samples. Therefore, an SCAA cupping form was used, with adaptations suggested by George Howell, one of the Gourmet Project's integrators. In this test form, four attributes were evaluated: flavor, finish, acidity and body (Figure 2).












Name: _____		Date: _____		Session: _____								
SAMPLE	ROAST COLOR	<3> ← 0 → +3			1+ # = SCORE 1 = <3> to <2>		DEFECTS	FLAVOR	FINISH	ACIDITY	BODY	TOTAL
		FRAGRANCE DRY	AROMA CRUST	AROMA BREAK								
_____		_____	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____
_____		_____	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____
_____		_____	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____
_____		_____	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____
_____		_____	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____
_____		_____	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____
_____		_____	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____
_____		_____	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____
_____		_____	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____

Figure 2: Cupping Form for the first “The Best of Brazil”  
Source: BSCA Archives.

The final round of competition, held by the international jury, is initiated by “calibration”, a collective adjustment practices that judges perform to calibrate their numerical assessment by sampling two samples using the test protocol before the start of sessions.

Although the first cupping form has four attributes (flavor, finish, acidity and body) for evaluation, one of them was not possible to score by the jury, acidity. According to one of the interviewees, it was not possible to score “... because there was a lot of discussion about whether acidity was positive or negative” (Interviewee 01).

In the development of the COE forms, the contribution of one of those involved in the project from the beginning, Mr. Hidetaka Hayashi, brought a new concept to the assessment of acidity. In a context where no common agreement had been reached on whether acidity would be a defect or quality on the part of the judges, Mr. Hayashi, based on his experience in the oriental market, highlighted that, in Japan, consumers are very sensitive to acidity and, in view of this, it was necessary that, in quality contests, those involved learned to analyze acidity by quality and not by intensity. From this moment on, the assessment would not be the same and neither would the repercussion of this on the market, as can be seen in the excerpts from two interviewees:

And Hidetaka Hayashi, I would like to thank you once again for having the function of a key expression which is the sensitive acidity, right? I would like to thank you once again for having this. And that opened my eyes to the fact that we are not here to judge how much body and acidity was in the coffee, but the quality level of the coffee and this ended up taking Brazil to its potential. (Interviewee 02).

Acidity, with the help of a consultant named Hidetaka Hayashi, we were able to understand that acidity is a matter of quality and not quantity, as discussed, because quantity can be bad, now the quality of acidity should be discussed, so we distributed from 0 to 8 points the quality of acidity and not the intensity. The intensity we made a square that is not valid for note that if it is high, medium or low, why? Because it was interested in analyzing the quality of acidity and not the intensity and this same criterion served the body, right? This is an important attribute, whether it's slimy, if it's silky, or if it's the other way around, watery. But it has to be of quality. So, high,

medium or low intensity is just to be pointed out, but the most important thing is the quality of the body. (Interviewee 01)

The evolution of cupping forms and the search for competition protocols have been modified over time. The cupping form, for example, had an initiative to increase the number of evaluation categories in the year 2000, which was implemented as of the 2001 edition (Figure 3). In the new version of the cupping form, eight qualitative categories were considered (clean cup, sweetness, nerve acidity, mouth-fell-body, flavor, balance and overall).

From the analysis of some interviews and documents, it is possible to identify the strong agency caused by the juries and their previous sensory conceptions. A dialogue recalled by one of the interviewees can elucidate this moment.

In 2000, I already had the first sketch with the distribution of 8 categories, of which I was asked a lot: "What do you quickly observe in a coffee like this?". I said: "I distribute it, right? I see a lot of cleanliness, and, for me, sweetness is essential." Then he said: "Oh, but the aftertaste, it's ok... you can already see sweetness" But I said: "No, but there are two sweetnesses! There's her impact there, but there's also the sweetness you get sensory sense when you taste, right? the sweetness level, and there's that in the form." (Interviewee 01)

Name:	Date:	Session 1 2 3 4	Brazil	Cup of Excellence™ 2001	Coffee Competition	TOTAL						
<small>© 2001 Specialty Coffee Association</small>												
<b>SAMPLE</b>	<b>ROAST COLOR DEVIATION</b>	<b>AROMA</b> DRY CRIST BREAK	<b>DEFECTS</b>	<b>CLEAN CUP</b>	<b>SWEETNESS</b>	<b>NERVE ACIDITY</b>	<b>MOU/TB FEEL-BODY</b>	<b>FLAVOR</b>	<b>FINISH</b>	<b>BALANCE</b>	<b>OVERALL</b>	<b>TOTAL</b>
			x_x_2 =	0 2 4 6 8	0 2 4 6 8	0 2 4 6 8	0 2 4 6 8	0 2 4 6 8	0 2 4 6 8	0 2 4 6 8	0 2 4 6 8	
				0 2 4 6 8	0 2 4 6 8	H M L	H M L	0 2 4 6 8	0 2 4 6 8	0 2 4 6 8	0 2 4 6 8	
			x_x_2 =	0 2 4 6 8	0 2 4 6 8	H M L	H M L	0 2 4 6 8	0 2 4 6 8	0 2 4 6 8	0 2 4 6 8	
				0 2 4 6 8	0 2 4 6 8	H M L	H M L	0 2 4 6 8	0 2 4 6 8	0 2 4 6 8	0 2 4 6 8	
			x_x_2 =	0 2 4 6 8	0 2 4 6 8	H M L	H M L	0 2 4 6 8	0 2 4 6 8	0 2 4 6 8	0 2 4 6 8	
				0 2 4 6 8	0 2 4 6 8	H M L	H M L	0 2 4 6 8	0 2 4 6 8	0 2 4 6 8	0 2 4 6 8	
			x_x_2 =	0 2 4 6 8	0 2 4 6 8	H M L	H M L	0 2 4 6 8	0 2 4 6 8	0 2 4 6 8	0 2 4 6 8	
				0 2 4 6 8	0 2 4 6 8	H M L	H M L	0 2 4 6 8	0 2 4 6 8	0 2 4 6 8	0 2 4 6 8	
			x_x_2 =	0 2 4 6 8	0 2 4 6 8	H M L	H M L	0 2 4 6 8	0 2 4 6 8	0 2 4 6 8	0 2 4 6 8	
				0 2 4 6 8	0 2 4 6 8	H M L	H M L	0 2 4 6 8	0 2 4 6 8	0 2 4 6 8	0 2 4 6 8	
			x_x_2 =	0 2 4 6 8	0 2 4 6 8	H M L	H M L	0 2 4 6 8	0 2 4 6 8	0 2 4 6 8	0 2 4 6 8	
				0 2 4 6 8	0 2 4 6 8	H M L	H M L	0 2 4 6 8	0 2 4 6 8	0 2 4 6 8	0 2 4 6 8	
			x_x_2 =	0 2 4 6 8	0 2 4 6 8	H M L	H M L	0 2 4 6 8	0 2 4 6 8	0 2 4 6 8	0 2 4 6 8	
				0 2 4 6 8	0 2 4 6 8	H M L	H M L	0 2 4 6 8	0 2 4 6 8	0 2 4 6 8	0 2 4 6 8	

Figure 3: COE Cupping Protocol 2001  
Source: BSCA Archives.

For each preparation of the COE editions, especially in years when changes and updates to the test protocols occur, the program organizers hold seminars in which the new forms or any updates that have been adjusted in the protocols are explained to the national and international judges. To illustrate (Figure 4), below is a record of the year 2001, with an image of a table with qualitative explanations about the new categories inserted in the form.



Figure 4: explanation about 2001 COE cupping form  
Source: Silvio Leite Archives.

### 5.3. The internationalization of the COE and its influences on the market

With the internationalization of the program, the structural limitations on the part of the organizers and the need to create an institution that could manage and conduct competitions and auctions in their international editions was recognized. For this, the Alliance for Coffee Excellence (ACE) was created, a non-profit organization that had, among others, the attribution of establishing standards so that the event would take place in a uniform manner in different countries. It is worth noting that due to the internationalization of the program, in 2001 it was renamed “Cup of Excellence”.

The expansion of the COE program to other countries together with the integration among international judges allowed that information about markets could be shared and experiences among the cuppers disseminated. Below is an excerpt that emphasizes this occurrence.

The COE ended up being created to standardize the project rules so that we could develop the program and share it with anyone who wanted to be a part. So what we have here is a judge from Guatemala, (...) we send our coordinators to all corners of the world, cuppers share and learn from each other about the different markets, jurists share with cuppers. So, instead of having a program where Guatemala or Nicaragua and El Salvador competed with each other, and everyone would end up competing with Brazil, actually what happened was the fact that we had a program that had a lot of collaboration and a lot of data sharing. (Interviewee 3)

The exchange of information between producers, buyers, judges and other interested parties in the market takes place within the COE editions during the awards ceremony. In this stage of the program, samples of coffees that won the competition are disclosed and the producers and their region are presented to the public. At this time, the participating public is still informed of some data on the origin of the crop, the processing by which the coffee was prepared and its variety.

#### **5.4. COE quality and its impact on the qualification process of the Brazilian market coffee**

During more than 20 years of COE's history, a series of qualification processes have been carried out by different agencements with the main objective of bringing Brazilian specialty coffees to the forefront of the international market. Due to an image consolidated in a past that the country was seen as a supplier of coffee on a large scale, but with "commodity quality", new articulations had to be carried out as attempts to requalify the country's image in relation to the market and measures to promote the focus on production based on quality needed to be carried out with producers in the country.

Even at the time of readjusting the actions of the Gourmet Project, it is possible to observe the role of mediators (Latour, 2005) in the development of initiatives aimed at a new attempt to qualify Brazilian coffees in the North American market. At this stage, the role of international consultants who made standardization arrangements (Çalışkan & Callon, 2010) with producers in an attempt to pacify the quality issue in the coffees produced by them is highlighted, through the use of devices (Muniesa et al., 2007) such as the quality control manual and through the cupping forms used during the seminars that gave them the opportunity to recognize qualitative criteria that were demanded in the market.

At another time, the dissemination via newsletters in newspapers of producers' cooperatives and associations, it was possible to add a greater number of new coffees and new producers, some of which are still unknown. And from this initiative, three samples were put to the test of cupping in the US market with Brazilian coffees already sold by them, this market encounters (Çalışkan & Callon, 2010) being an important agencement that brought insight to Project Gourmet consultants to hold a quality contest in the Brazil, which would be the COE.

From 1999, with the first edition of the COE, then named The Best of Brazil, the search for developing technical rigor and high quality criteria was decisive for the organizers to decide to invite a group of international judges. With different experiences and backgrounds, the set of judges contributed to the qualification of the COE protocols.

As could be seen in the development of cupping forms in the competition, the definition of categories and evaluation criteria were built from the relationship between the prior knowledge of some judges, discussions about the divergence between what should be considered a defect or quality, as in the case of acidity, and with the presence at all times of market devices such as the cupping form itself, which brought agency to the competition and modified the program's practices over time.

The development brought by the COE in the specialty coffee market in Brazil can be observed from different fronts. Methodologically, the development of the competition protocols changed the way of producing specialty coffees, especially for those who have already participated or those interested in focusing on the production of specialty coffees and participating in the event in the future.

The increase in COE Brazil participants can be related to the economic opportunity brought by the program throughout its history. When comparing the highest bids placed in the COE Brazil auction, it can be seen that in 1999 the highest bid was \$2.60/lb. In 2019, 20 years later, the highest value reached US\$60.10/lb (International Trade Centre, 2020). Also, according to ITC data, the result of this value achieved is due to the processing technique performed, the uniqueness of the variety and qualified labor, factors that bring greater quality and, consequently, a higher cupping score.

Another important measure that can be pointed out in the qualification brought by COE Brasil in its history is the elevation of the score. From the beginning of the competition to the present day, the international jury's score has gone from 80 to 87 points. This increase changed the conception of producers and the market about what is being transformed into specialty

coffee and what is ceasing to be. Again, it should be highlighted the agency involved in the agencement formed by judges, tasting forms, coffee samples with increasingly complex characteristics due to the development of production processes, discoveries of varieties and technological advances. In this attempt at requalification, the need for new criteria for evaluation is perceived, in the same way that it was felt in the first cupping form, in 1999.

The result of the competitions based on qualitative assessments also allowed the country to recognize the origins of specialty coffees that until now were not considered. As an example, during the editions of COE Brazil, four different producing regions in the country had at least once their coffees taking first place in the competition: Sul de Minas, Matas de Minas, Mogiana and Chapada Diamantina. In addition, in the 2019 edition, nine different regions were awarded in the competition.

## 6. Concluding remarks

From the analyzed data, we observed a series of devices, practices and market agencies in the COE program that transformed the Brazilian specialty coffee market. From a longitudinal perspective, the search for quality and recognition of Brazilian coffees in the international market have guided this collective of actors in carrying out actions to organize, manage and build it.

In these transactions, the role of market devices involved in the history of the COE (such as quality standards, competition protocols, and cupping forms) is decisive for the construction of the competition's quality criteria and its representation in the specialty coffee market international is perceived. Of equal importance, the market agencies established during the program's history, especially here highlighted the moments when the competition criteria were discussed between the judges and the information exchanged during the award ceremonies between producers, buyers, judges and others involved in the market brought dynamics for the program to develop and modify the structure of the Brazilian specialty coffee market.

The contribution brought by this research was to present, from a constructivist market perspective, the role of market devices and agencies in the qualification processes developed in the Cup of Excellence Brazil program. Based on the historical reconstruction carried out, the dynamics brought about by the definitions and rules between the judges during their meetings can be seen, the changes that their experiences acquired in different coffee markets modified the tasting form, and, consequently, performed the production processes of producers who sought to compete in the competition.

It is suggested that further research can carry out an integration between the market agencies identified in the COE and the market practices (Kjellberg & Helgesson, 2007) identified during the history of the program in Brazil. Another fruitful possibility would be to compare the results found here with the history of the Program in other countries that host its competitions.

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