

THE WALL STREET JOURNAL.

Terroir Rated Best Overall, September 23rd 2005

What could be lazier than hitting the corner cafe for a morning cup of coffee? Maybe having a bag of beans sent right to your mailbox. More specialty roasters have begun to offer home delivery by mail that lets coffee drinkers sign up for regular shipments of beans -- once a week, say, or once a month. Intelligentsia Coffee & Tea, with two shops in Chicago, started its "Bottomless Cup" mail-order club in March, and Starbucks plans to introduce a similar program in October.

Of course, mail-order support for your coffee habit makes sense only if the supply is reliable and the coffee worth drinking. To test both elements, we signed up for weekly delivery from five roasters, and ordered a bag of Colombian and a bag of Kenyan, in whole beans, from each. Each site let us choose our delivery frequency; each charged our credit card automatically and let us cancel at any time. (We did, after three deliveries of each.) Mail-order prices were comparable to store prices, about \$11 to \$16 a pound, but we had to pay shipping.

With our 10 bags in hand -- plus two from a local Starbucks for comparison -- we went to see Ken Nye at his Ninth Street Espresso shop in New York. He ground the beans and brewed each in a French press. (We concealed the brands from him until the end.) The good news is that delivery went smoothly. The better news came in the tasting. While all the beans were reasonably fresh, we found two roasters that were well worth a trip to the Web. At the same time, we learned a bit about the virtues of different light roasts, and how to toss around java-phile lingo like "warm finish."



Shira Kronzon

A Well Cooked Bean

Two factors count most in coffee: the quality of the beans and the degree of roast -- basically, how long they get cooked. Mr. Nye thought the beans from Peet's Coffee & Tea, a chain based in Emeryville, Calif., seemed to be good quality: a consistent size, with no flaws. But the roast was very dark, giving the beans an almost black color and an oily sheen. Dark roasts are popular these days. But our expert believes that going too dark can hide the coffee's character, like cooking meat to well-done. That seemed to be a problem with the Peet's Colombian, which Mr. Nye said had "a roasty, bitter taste." Doug Welsh, vice president of coffee at Peet's, says the Colombian is "exactly right," to his taste, and that darker roasts "can enhance the body."

Mr. Nye was even less enthusiastic about the similarly dark beans we'd picked up at Starbucks. He didn't like that the beans were of mixed sizes and that some were chopped in pieces. "We don't even need to brew this," said Mr. Nye. (Chris Gimbl, a Starbucks spokesperson, says that some breakage is "not uncommon," especially in a dark roast, and that some variation in size won't affect flavor.)

The beans from Peerless Coffee & Tea, based in Oakland, Calif., weren't among Mr. Nye's favorites. He gave slightly higher marks to the balanced Kenyan from Caribou Coffee, a Minneapolis-based chain of cafes, which he said had good acidity -- a sharpness that you might find in a good red wine -- and a nice, earthy finish.

The coffee from Intelligentsia was more memorable. Tasting the Kenyan, our expert started enthusing about mouthfeel and approachability. (We'd even say it tasted good, too.) The Colombian had great body and balance. "Whoever roasted this knows what they're doing," said Mr. Nye, who picked up some cherry and flowery notes. It turned out that Mr. Nye knew the owners of Intelligentsia, but we agreed with his choice, and rated it a Best Overall.

Because prices didn't differ dramatically site to site, we don't have a Best Value this week. Instead, we gave another Best Overall to the Terroir line from the George Howell Coffee Co. Terroir didn't have a Colombian option, so we ordered a Guatemalan, which can be similarly rich in acidity. Mr. Nye liked the hints of chocolate, and rated it highly. He liked Terroir's lighter roast, and called its Kenyan best of all the Kenyans. "The complexity and aromatics are really impressive," he added.

Back at home, we converted one former charred-roast addict to the Terroir beans. With nearly 30 pounds of coffee still in our kitchen, there's no telling what else we'll find the energy to do.

-Lisa Kalis

STORE/PRICE/PHONE

George Howell Coffee Co.
El Injerto Guatemalan, \$10.95/12 oz.,
Kiamabara Kenya AA, \$13.45/12 oz.
866-444-5282, terroircoffee.com

QUALITY

Best Overall (tie). Smaller selection than Intelligentsia, but lightly roasted beans are top-notch. Roasted, sent the same day. Date stamped on bag.

SHIPPING COST/TIME

\$5.17 per order. Most orders arrived one day after roasting.

RETURN POLICY

Call for replacement or refund if you're not satisfied. Usually no need to return coffee.

PHONE/WEB EXPERIENCE

We weren't sure how to add items to our recurring order, but a call to customer service cleared things up. Company says site has been updated

COMMENT

Only 15 varieties but lots of details on coffee brewing and history. All beans are from a single country, and sometimes a single estate - no blends here.