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Mark Dundon

## A Cup of Excellence

*Melbourne coffee baron Mark Dundon heads to Brazil to judge the world's highest coffee award.*

It's the second day, and it hits me. I'm standing with an Icelandic, Czech and Japanese dude in a plain building amongst coffee trees in Brazil, about to judge the top coffee from this country. I've travelled half way around the world to spit and slurp my way through about 90 preselected coffees with 23 other international jurors to award some farmer the 2009 Cup of Excellence, the world's most esteemed coffee award.

The Cup of Excellence is a non-profit organisation set up to recognise the coffee farmers with a dedication to outstanding quality. The competition is run every year in nine coffee producing countries in Central and South America and Africa. The Cup of Excellence is only awarded to the very, very best coffee.

I haven't been to Brazil before, and expectations are a strange thing: Amazon jungle, flat farms with zillions of coffee trees, and mega cities in the tropics with 20 million people. My first experiences don't exactly support those expectations, but do relay the fact that it's huge: I've travelled five hours from Sao Paulo to be at the judging facility in Machado, which looks a tiny distance on the map. It's hilly and lush, with beautiful little farms and towns dotted throughout the country.

We'll be here, in the very rural Machado, for a week so we'd better get used to being awoken every morning by the chickens. We pass the time when not tasting coffee watching the school kids muck around on their way to school or the local tradesmen working on the site a couple of doors down. At night, we all head out for a drink at a local bar on the square, and down Antarctica beers and Brazilian bar snacks and watch the local kids out the front dancing to Lady Gaga blasting out of car speakers.

Ok, down to business: we like to know who we're buying our coffee from. Forget your Fair Trade at \$1.65 or your five cents above the dollar, with no recognition for the farmer, no transparency and no focus on quality. We are here to choose the #1 coffee, coffee that in the

past has earned above \$40 per lb; has a totally transparent production process, and is quality driven with the power and recognition to the farmer.

On each table is a series of four samples of each coffee, with ten different coffees per table. And today we are doing four tables – 160 coffee samples to be slurped, whoa!

I have been a juror once before, in Columbia, and this time around I'm more confident and relaxed, able to concentrate on the flavours in each cup. There are some stunners, and each table seems to have all these hidden gems. As the coffees cool they sweeten and become more rounded; some fade, some crash, but others become more complex, sweeter and unique.

As the week progresses we narrow our



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selections down to the final 26. These have all scored over 84 points out of 100, the prerequisite required to be included as a Cup of Excellence coffee. We have all had our favourites but some coffees have scored well with some judges and not with others. As we approach the final top ten we are all in agreement. The common factors are sweet, clean tones with interesting character and profile.

On the last day of the week-long event we are cupping the final 11. Usually there are only ten coffees at this stage but the last three have tied. We slurp, spit and vote. The farmers who have made the final cut are here, alerted to their success and possible awards earlier. I meet

the farmer from Santa Terezinha, a coffee we are using at Seven Seeds, as well as few other farmers I hold in high esteem. It's odd and awkward trying to communicate with them about the journey of their beloved coffee from farm to cup, especially in the broken languages attempts from either side.

The presence of guys in suits and girls in high heels alludes to the importance of the awards. After a few nervous glances from the farmers and a mic check, we're away. The judges are relaxed; we are over and out, our job's done, we've only the celebrations ahead. The farmers, meanwhile, assemble on stage as they receive their various awards and as the stage fills to capacity we reach that nervous final announcement.

Bahia's Fazenda Ouro Verde farmer Candido Vladimir Ladeia Rosa wins with a score of 91.08. Visibly shocked, he accepts the awards and turns to his friends, jubilant. His victory is all the more sweet because Bahia, a growing area further north than the recognised coffee areas and a long trip from the awards ceremony, hasn't won a Cup of Excellence before.

The Cup of Excellence is about finding those best coffee lots, tucked away in these fantastic countries, and rewarding the farmer by giving them a profile and status that will propel him or her into specialty coffee stardom. Candido can expect about \$US 35 per kilo for his winning green coffee lot, around \$25,000 in total. The best thing about winning, however, is that his name is now bankable. After all, it's the farmer who is recognised as the producer of this fine cup, not the barista, syphon master, roast master or anyone else along the line. Here, the farmer is king.

For more information about Cup of Excellence visit [www.coe.org](http://www.coe.org)

*Mark Dundon is the owner of Melbourne cafes Seven Seeds and Brother Baba Budan.*