

# Cup of excellence and the evolution of the Brazilian specialty coffee market: a historical perspective

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## ABSTRACT

Over its more than 20 years of existence, the Cup of Excellence program has contributed in several ways to the expansion of the Brazilian and global specialty coffee market. Therefore, the aim of this research is to demonstrate, from a historical perspective, the role of the COE in the development of the Brazilian specialty coffee market. To this end, a timeline was drawn up with the main events in the Brazilian specialty coffee market from the late 1980s to the present time. Documentary and bibliographical research was used. In addition, in-depth interviews were conducted. Based on the results, it is evident that the technical legacy left by the COE changed the specialty coffee market not only in Brazil but throughout the world. The results also show that the forms, protocols and rules that regulated the competition's editions had an impact on the entire market, including production processes and consumption trends.

**Key words:** Historiography; Coffee competition; Quality competition.

## 1 INTRODUCTION

Coffee is considered a significant agricultural product from multiple perspectives (economic, social and cultural), particularly in the context of Brazil, which is the world's leading producer and exporter of the product (Conselho dos Exportadores de Café do Brasil - CECAFÉ, 2019; Traore; Wilson; Fields, 2018). Brazil has a strong reputation in the market due to the quality and variety of its coffees, which have complex characteristics derived from the country's geographical breadth and, consequently, diversified cultivation (Brazil Specialty Coffee Association - BSCA, 2019).

There are two crucial moments in the history of Brazil's coffee policy that epitomise the deregulation of the global coffee market: (1) Brazil's refusal to accept the clauses in a new International Coffee Agreement (ICA) in 1989 and (2) the dissolution of the Brazilian Coffee Institute (*Instituto Brasileiro do Café - IBC*) in 1990 (Moricochi; Martin, 1994).

Since then, it has become important to find ways to add value to coffee. The market regulation produced by the ICAs disincentivised quality, as Brazilian coffee became a common product for export. Along the same lines, following the deregulation of the coffee market, a new market - specialty coffee - emerged in the market (Barra, 2017), which led to great transformations in organisations associated with the sector, particularly as a result of changes in production processes and the mentality of many coffee growers, who have begun to focus on quality rather than quantity (Santos; Ferreira, 2018; Singulano, 2016).

The term specialty coffee was first used by the Norwegian Erna Knutsen (Rhinehart, 2009); in her definition, she linked specialty coffee to beans grown in special geographical microclimates. According to another definition, the term specialty coffee may refer to a gourmet coffee that is processed using exceptional beans grown in climates conducive to production (Van Der Merwe; Maare, 2016). For Traore, Wilson and Fields (2018), specialty coffee is defined as coffees grown in regions with specific, ideal climates that have a unique taste and few or no defects.

Initiatives such as quality competitions have contributed to the dissemination of specialty coffee in Brazil and have shifted the focus of producers towards obtaining products with higher added value, following guidelines proposed by the associations and other entities that, among other activities, organise these competitions (Barra; Silva; Machado, 2007). According to Oliveira, Elias and Lessa (2012), coffee quality competitions reaffirm the crucial role of these entities in strengthening, recognising and enhancing the value of the specialty coffee market.

One such specialty coffee quality competition is the Cup of Excellence (COE) programme, organised by the Brazilian Specialty Coffee Association (BSCA), in partnership with the Brazilian Trade and Investment Promotion Agency (*Agência Brasileira de Promoção de Exportações e Investimentos - Apex-Brasil*) and the non-profit organisation that runs the COE, the Alliance for Coffee Excellence (ACE), which was also established by the BSCA.

Comprised of different rounds of quality competitions followed by an auction, the COE is considered the world's leading specialty coffee quality competition, evaluating beans that have undergone both natural and pulped natural post-harvest processing.

Throughout its 20 years of existence, the COE has contributed in numerous ways to the expansion of the Brazilian specialty coffee market, with an emphasis on strengthening the country's reputation as an important specialty coffee origin, encouraging improvements to production processes and strengthening the relationship between buyers and producers (Alliance for Coffee Excellence, 2019; Barra; Silva; Machado, 2007).

Given these contributions, the objective of this article is to demonstrate, from a historical perspective, the role of quality competitions – in particular, the COE – in the development of the specialty coffee market in Brazil. To this end, a timeline will be created that includes the main events in the Brazilian specialty coffee market from the late 1980s and early 1990s to 2019 based on a number of studies on the topic identified through document and bibliographic research and on interviews with actors who were involved in the development of the market in some way. The expectation is that based on the results of this survey, it will be possible to demonstrate the path that led Brazil to become a leader in the global specialty coffee market and to analyse how this process took place from a historical perspective.

When consulting the literature, the published works involving the COE program (Donnet; Weatherspoon; Hoehn, 2008; Traore; Wilson; Fields, 2018; Wilson et al., 2012; Wilson; Wilson, 2014) do not direct to look at the Brazilian context, where the entire history of the competition began. In addition, there are few researches that deal with the development of the specialty coffee market in Brazil, especially when looking for historical research.

Therefore, it is expected that carrying out an investigative effort that integrates different sources of data on the origin of the COE program and its impact on the expansion of the Brazilian and international market will fill part of this gap in the context of the literature on the specialty coffee market.

## 2 MATERIAL AND METHODS

This study can be classified as descriptive and qualitative. The research method used was historiography, a procedure that is gaining increasingly legitimacy within the field of management and is considered essential for elucidating the events that have occurred in a society during a given period (Costa; Silva, 2019; Pieranti, 2008). In the context of this

study, this methodology is appropriate considering the interest in chronologically enumerating the main events in the history of the specialty coffee market in Brazil, beginning with the deregulation of the coffee market.

The following data collection techniques were used: bibliographic research, document research and in-depth interviews (Gil, 2018). To this end, it is important to note that although the study of history has traditionally been strictly limited to document analysis, a growing number of oral sources have been recognised in the literature with the objective of further enriching the research data (Alcadipani; Bertero, 2014; Booth; Rowlinson, 2006; Costa; Silva, 2019).

Non-participant observation was also used in this paper (Marietto, 2018). Observations were carried out over the four days of the COE Brazil 2019 Competition, held at the Federal University of Lavras (*Universidade Federal de Lavras (UFLA)*) from 15 to 19 October 2019. Throughout the event, observations and photographs were recorded in a field diary and subsequently analysed with the rest of the data corpus.

The selected documents included competition reports; project reports, which are considered the seeds of the COE; protocols; rules; promotional materials; competition and auction results tables; and documents available on the ACE and BSCA websites, among others. In the selection of documents, the following criteria for selection or rejection of a document were adopted: (i) authenticity, (ii) credibility, (iii) representativeness and (iv) meaning.

Nine semi-structured in-depth interviews (Table 1) were conducted (Ryan; Coughlan; Cronin, 2009) with actors who played a significant role during the 20 years of the COE. These actors were identified through prior document analysis and the snowball method (Gil, 2018).

Among those interviewed were the co-founder of the ACE and the COE and a marketing consultant; a quality judge and head judge for many iterations of the COE; one of the largest coffee buyers honoured by the COE; a judge and creator of the COE cupping form; the executive director of the ACE; the co-founder and former president of the BSCA and a consultant to the Gourmet Coffee Project (GCP); a professor and researcher of post-harvest coffee who has also acted as a consultant to the ACE; the executive director of the BSCA; and a member of the BSCA in the area of business intelligence.

The interviews were conducted between October 2019 and January 2020 either in-person or via Skype and lasted an average of 60 minutes. Subsequently, they were transcribed in their entirety. As the group was very small, the researchers chose not to characterise the respondents as part of the results.

**Table 1:** Description of respondents.

Interviewee	Nationality	Interview date	Involvement with the COE
01	North American	10/15/19	Co-founder of the Alliance for Coffee Excellence (ACE) and the Cup of Excellence (COE) program, in which she served as a marketing consultant.
02	Brazilian	10/16/19	Quality Judge and Head Judge for many editions of the COE.
03	Japanese	10/16/19	Quality judge and one of the biggest buyers of coffees awarded by the COE.
04	North American	10/17/19	Co-founder of COE, creator of the COE evidence form and quality judge
05	North American	10/18/19	Executive Director of ACE.
06	Brazilian	11/05/19	Co-founder and former president of BSCA.
07	Brazilian	11/19/19	Professor and researcher specializing in post-harvest coffee; participated as a consultant at ACE.
08	Brazilian	12/17/19	Executive Director of BSCA
09	Brazilian	01/07/20	Member of BSCA in commercial intelligence.

Source: Authors (2020).

### 3 RESULTS

#### 3.1 The deregulation of Brazil's coffee market: The starting point

Until the 1990s, Brazil's coffee market was regulated by a state agency called the Brazilian Coffee Institute (*Instituto Brasileiro do Café* [IBC]), which, among its actions, fully regulated trade, had a monopoly on exports and assigned quotas to exporters. In this context, the focus of Brazil's coffee production was on generating external resources for the country, primarily because coffee was considered Brazil's main export product until the 1970s (Santos; Ferreira, 2018).

Moreover, Brazilian agricultural technology began to develop more robustly beginning in the 1970s and 1980s. At that time, there was clear progress in the field: Brazil went from being dependent on a great diversity of foods to becoming one of the world's largest food exporters, taking on the task of meeting a significant portion of the global market demand.

As a result of those shifts in the market and the change in the composition of Brazilian production, the IBC was dissolved in 1990 (Spers; Saes; Souza, 2004); this allowed producers to sell their products on the world market, which had previously been restricted by government regulations. In this scenario, it was necessary to understand what the real global market demand would be. To this end, a group of producers and members of several cooperatives embarked on a journey to understand the market, particularly in the United States and Europe. Their visits to fairs and other events of the specialty coffee market inspired them to participate in the specialty coffee market because in the commodity coffee market, there was a disparity in terms of competition with large traders, who had a higher trading volume and a significantly lower selling price than small producers.

The idea of participating in the specialty coffee market was brought to Brazil and discussed with the Ministry of Agriculture, which offered Brazilian producers the opportunity to develop this idea further through the Gourmet Coffee Project (GCP) conceived by the International Trade Centre (ITC), which included, in addition to Brazil, Ethiopia, Burundi, Papua New Guinea and Uganda (GCP Report, 2000).

Prior to the Gourmet Coffee Project, other programmes aimed at promoting coffee quality and regional differences were established, including the BSCA (1991), the Illycaffè Quality Competition (1991) and the Minasul Quality Competition (1993).

##### 3.1.1 The Brazilian Gourmet Coffee Project

A National Supervisory Committee (Comitê Supervisor Nacional [CSN]) was appointed to execute the project. The committee comprised representatives from different national institutions: The National Coffee Department (Departamento Nacional de Café [DENAC]), the Agricultural Institute of Minas Gerais (Instituto Mineiro de Agropecuária [IMA]), the Brazilian Coffee Industry Association (Associação Brasileira da Indústria do Café [ABIC]), the Federation of Coffee Exporters (Federação de Exportadores de Café [FEBEC]) and the National Coffee Council (Conselho Nacional do Café [CNC]), which is represented by the BSCA, the Cerrado Coffee Growers' Associations Council (Conselho das Associações de Cafeicultores do Cerrado [CACCER]), the Minas Gerais Central Cooperative of Coffee Growers and Farmers (Cooperativa Central de Cafeicultores e Agropecuaristas de Minas Gerais [COCCAMIG]) and Sulminas-Café.

The Gourmet Coffee Project was limited in geographic scope to the state of Minas Gerais. The justifications for this demarcation included the facts that Minas Gerais is the leading producer of coffee in Brazil, has considerable regional differentiation and is considered a leader in quality (GCP

Report, 2000). Moreover, the focus on natural and PN coffees was also defined because those methods were used by most of the producers in question.

Through the resources allocated to the project, an international team was hired to provide guidance on how to address the issue of quality in the country's coffee production. The project was scheduled to last two years and began in 1997 with a focus on developing strategies and hiring international market specialists from the United States, Europe and Japan.

1998 was a year of learning, observing the obstacles to the production of high-quality coffee in Brazil and its reputation and sales in the North American market. In addition to being at the mercy of weather conditions, small Brazilian producers were not in a favourable position to sell their coffee to the North American market, particularly given the infrastructure limitations of their properties in terms of processing and drying coffee (GCP Report, 2000). Within the national context, it was also evident that producers had a subjective concept of quality, and most of them did not cup their own coffee; the beverage was evaluated by cuppers who did not always have knowledge of or contact with international quality evaluation standards (GCP Report, 2000). Another reality at that time was producers' sceptical attitude towards the value of quality-driven production, a legacy left by Brazil's regulation of the coffee market until the early 1990s.

The Gourmet Project, through a series of seminars, asked Brazilian producers to send samples as part of an effort to sell to and provide a demonstration for the North American market. This initiative was undertaken to reach coffee cooperatives and associations of producers. Despite the attempt at promotion, approximately 30 samples were received, none of which were evaluated as "excellent quality" (GCP Report, 2000).

However, samples of high-quality Brazilian coffees, some of them winners of the competition organised by Illycaffè in 1997, were selected by members of the project and sent to specialty coffee roasters and importers in the US. The response from the Americans, however, was disappointing. Below is an account describing the preparation of the samples and the discouraging result:

"So, we took a sample of the best coffee that Illy selected, as well as several samples that the agent knew were very fine coffees, and it was like, look, let's show the Brazil that those people don't know about, that, domestically, I haven't forgotten. The primary goal was to show that Brazil and that diversity, which we knew about domestically, which we knew we had but weren't able to show. (...) We selected everything enthusiastically; we did great work, and we're going to select this coffee here in Brazil and send it. And we sent it to several people, but we weren't successful. This first experience wasn't

good... Why wasn't it good? Most of the responses were like, "Oh, you have nice coffee, but it's not that different from what I have" (Respondent 02).

Those responses were strange to those who had sent the samples. To identify potential constraints in the relationship, they asked specialty coffee roasters and importers in the US to send samples of the Brazilian coffees in their stock for cupping and evaluation. The results indicated that the samples of coffee were considered moderately acceptable to very poor in quality (GCP Report, 2000).

The negative performance of the Brazilian samples that reached the US market, coupled with the culture of low expectations and low curiosity exhibited by the US industry, led to a lack of credibility in the quality of Brazilian coffees. The low price that was paid for them compared to coffees from other importing countries and the question raised by the results for the samples that had been sent created uncertainty regarding whether the results were being influenced by the unfavourable image of Brazilian coffee.

Following the unwelcome results, members of the Gourmet Coffee Project decided to reformulate the plan, creating initiatives that included seeking out Brazilian producers and their quality coffees and raising the producers' awareness about producing a quality product. With these objectives in mind, the following programmes were created (GCP Report, 2000):

I – The model farm programme, the objective of which was to advise producers about field methodologies to enhance the quality of their coffees. To measure the effectiveness of the results, the batches produced on the model farm were documented and evaluated, and the sale price was later compared to the price generally paid in the region. The programme targeted only the Sul de Minas region as it contained approximately 24,000 small producers with great quality potential (GCP Report, 2000).

II – The exemplary coffee programme, which sought coffees with exemplary quality to sell later at higher prices and to promote the criteria and methodologies used for these coffees. To attract potential samples, promotional actions were carried out by the CSN.

III – Education programme for producers and consumers, which served the dual purpose of promoting the education of both producers and buyers. The situation in the Americas in particular demanded increased caution as this market did not exhibit attention to and enthusiasm for Brazilian coffee. As a result, later samples were not sent on their own; instead, Gourmet Coffee Project consultants accompanied them and made a presentation about Brazilian specialty coffee, its characteristics and processes.

In 1999, with the revised plan put into practice, the results began to bear fruit, as the project's members had hoped. First, through the Exemplary Coffee Programme, three



samples that considered exemplary coffees were identified. Among the three, only one was available for sale and was traded to Japan via the project.

The result of that trade was considered a great success due to the price that the Japanese paid for one container of Brazilian coffee - a figure that, until that point, was unlikely to be paid in the US market. The transaction motivated the members of the Gourmet Coffee Project to present these buyers with a new challenge: A blind tasting in which the samples of Brazilian coffees that they had purchased could be compared – impartially – with the three samples from Brazil that had been identified via the programme.

Accordingly, four events were held for roasters and companies in the US specialty coffee market. On these occasions, the samples were properly roasted in a precise and consistent manner according to the necessary criteria. Below is an account from the Gourmet Coffee Project's final report:

“The same method was used in all four seminars: We cupped our three exemplary coffees against the participants' Brazilian coffees. I supervised the precise and consistent roasting of all the samples. All the coffees were roasted to a light colour of approximately Agtron #65 [note: I would recommend a darker colour for washed coffees with more acidity...]. The seminars had between six and 11 Brazilian coffees being cupped at the same time. All the cuppings were blind [six cups per sample to detect variations]” (GCP REPORT, 2000).

These seminars also included presentations about the Gourmet Coffee Project, specifically the Brazilian version, which one of the respondents considered to be the only one that delivered the anticipated success.

“The five countries were Ethiopia, Burundi, Papua New Guinea, Uganda and Brazil. The project did not have any results for any of those countries; it was just consultants writing beautiful reports, but an effective result for the producer never made it off the page – only in Brazil” (Respondent 06).

After the four seminars, the results showed that the three exemplary coffees excelled among the others. Participants in the events demonstrated enthusiasm and appreciation for the coffees, considering them both to yield a clean, sweet cup. The results of the Gourmet Project, which was coming to an end, especially the seminars in the US, thus encouraged those involved and offered new ideas for continuing to promote Brazilian specialty coffee and enhance the value of producers.

In this context, based on conversations among the project's participants and previous experience by one of the members during a period spent in Kenya, there were discussions about the possibility of holding a quality competition in Brazil: A competition that would identify and award prizes to coffees with different qualities based on evaluations by an international

jury comprised of notable actors in the specialty coffee market. Among the main benefits sought by the organisers, a coffee quality competition in Brazil with prominent national and foreign jurors would lead to (i) greater awareness in Brazil of quality-driven production, increased attraction of producers and, consequently, the generation of more samples; (ii) promotion in the international market, which would also contribute to future sales; (iii) the recognition and honouring of coffees and producers; and (iv) the development of close relationships with judges and other influential actors in the market for Brazilian coffees.

### **3.1.2 The first “Best of Brazil” quality competition**

As part of the planning for the initiative, the competition site was identified. In the city of Lavras, in Sul de Minas, a region known for its high-quality coffee production and strategic location for this agribusiness, UFLA opened its doors to the competition. In addition to the institution's enthusiasm about hosting the event, researchers there had been conducting studies on coffee for many years and had the necessary equipment and adequate facilities for the competition.

As one of the main attractions of the contest, a prestigious panel of international judges was invited to rate the best coffees in Brazil. The participants included the executive director of the Specialty Coffee Association of America (SCAA); the president of the Specialty Coffee Association of Europe (SCAE); Gourmet Coffee Project marketing consultants from Italy and Japan representing their respective countries; important specialty coffee retail companies, importers and a prominent coffee writer representing the US; and finally, two Brazilians: The Gourmet Coffee Project quality consultant and a coffee expert representing the Brazilian roasting industry.

The US\$40 per bag prize for the award-winning coffee, coupled with the lure of the competition, resulted in the submission of 347 domestic coffee samples representing six different regions of the country (GCP Report, 2000). The project's quality consultant in Brazil, together with a team of BSCA evaluators, narrowed the number of samples to 71. At this stage, there was no evaluation form, and it was necessary to select the best coffees from among the many samples sent. Accordingly, evaluations were made using a “star” system, with the number of stars reflecting the recognised quality of the coffee:

“Then we had those samples. We didn't have a form, we didn't have many tools, so the first time we made our selection was more or less using that traditional method, and the coffees that were better (...), some I gave five stars, another I gave four, some I gave three. I said, “Everybody, there are some great coffees, but they have different attributes.” So, when we received them, I was able to cup those 342, 347, something like that, and we took half. I used that methodology” (Respondent 02).

Next, a new evaluation narrowed the field to 40 samples, which would later be cupped by the international jury in the final round. It became clear that a form was needed to ensure a better and more detailed evaluation of the selected coffees.

In the final round, the judges used the official SCAA form with modifications suggested by George Howell, one of the members of the Gourmet Coffee Project. In this form (Figure 1), four different attributes of the samples were evaluated: Flavour, finish, acidity and body.

Before the final round, the judges performed a calibration by adjusting the numerical evaluations of the participants using the forms for two different samples of coffee and then comparing their results. Then, the competition began with the cupping of the samples, in groups of six units at a time (Figure 1). At the end of each cupping session, the judges met for approximately 30 minutes to discuss and compare their results, an event that was called the “panel” (Figure 2).

The result of the days of competition had a positive outcome for the organisers, considering the success and impact of the competition. Notable cuppers in the specialty coffee market stated that they had never participated in an event featuring so many Brazilian coffees with such a high quality. The coffee that won the first “Best of Brazil” quality competition was from the southern region of Minas Gerais, reinforcing the potential of this *terroir*.

In addition to the positive impact of the quality competition model, the solution proposed for selling the award-winning coffees was a milestone in the world specialty coffee market: A virtual auction. This bidding model was suggested due to concerns among those involved in the competition

regarding the impartiality of the sales process and the objective of holding an international bidding process, since the jury that selected the award-winning coffees was primarily comprised of foreigners. One factor that provoked this discussion was the need to determine to whom the award-winning coffees should be sold, as the demand from international buyers was high for the batches of the 10 winners: “And then, what do you do? (...) How could we adapt? Why should I sell to someone and not someone else? Split it up? So, let’s try to do an auction, right? Then Susie said, ‘Let’s do an electronic auction.’” (Respondent 02).

The virtual auction was a collective action among the participants in the competition; the SCAA, the institution that offered its platform and professionals for the event; the BSCA; the ITC; the International Coffee Organization; and the Regional Cooperative of Coffee Growers in Guaxupé (*Cooperativa Regional de Cafeicultores em Guaxupé - Cooxupé*), among others. The entire process demanded dedication and effort from the parties, as the work required a high degree of attention to issues such as logistics and risk assessment. Before the day of the auction, samples of the award-winning coffees were distributed to potential bidders so that they could be cupped prior to the start of the event.

After 48 hours, 11 bids were recorded from a total of 19 candidates from the US, Europe and Japan. Despite their participation, the Japanese did not perform well, which may be explained by a lack of experience with auctions and little knowledge of the modality. In general, the auction met the organisers’ expectations (GCP Report, 2000):



**Figure 1:** The first “Best of Brazil” quality competition.

Source: BSCA archives.



**Figure 2:** Panel at the first “Best of Brazil” quality competition.

Source: BSCA archives.

“The competition auction served as a highly efficient funnel. This combination selected the best batches of coffee in the country and then offered simultaneous and equal bidding access to quality-conscious importers and roasters from all over the world – with transparent end results, for the benefit of the producers” (GCP Report, 2000).

Below, Figure 3 shows the form that was used in what would become the first “Best of Brazil” quality competition, an event that was renamed Cup of Excellence in 2001.

### 3.1.3 The second “The Best of Brazil” quality competition: To do or not to do?

The events of 2000 motivated the members of the competition to continue, but there was also an awareness that several points needed to be adjusted. During discussions and an evaluation of the first competition, it became clear that a more solid protocol for the competition needed to be developed to better define procedures such as roasting, the use of forms, the need for equipment suited to the size of the event, etc. The impact on the market also reflected recognition of the competition, although there were some divergent opinions, as evident in the account below:

“But like everything in the world, it has a positive and a negative aspect. Listen! The positive side (...) gave me a good feeling: This is the discovery that can revolutionise everything. Because it brings together producers, quality reassessments and buyers

who are going to come to us - that is, producers who have never been discovered – [and is] a completely new methodology that will be able to revolutionise everything (...). When it ended, we had some well-known people, friends, who said, ‘Everybody, this was fantastic. These people are friends, they want to collaborate, they want to participate in this movement. They bought this expensive coffee, but they won’t have anyone to sell it to. So, if you do it again, it will probably screw up everything. It won’t work, you know? Be careful!’ (...) And on the other side, they said, ‘Everybody, this is what is going to revolutionise everything; this is what’s going to happen. Because when you drink this coffee, you’ll see that this coffee is on a different level; it’s on another level. You’ll have greater demand, and with greater demand, you’ll affect the entire business cycle’” (Respondent 02).

Despite disagreement arising from the multiple positions of closely associated people who were present at the first competition and had formed opinions about the feasibility of a second one, the 2000 “Best of Brazil” quality competition was held, again in the city of Lavras.

As mentioned above, with the improved protocol and the experience of the previous year, the organisers were more confident in carrying out the event, at which a prize was awarded to a coffee from a region that had never before been recognised for specialty coffee: Zona da Mata, also in Minas Gerais, now known as Matas de Minas. One producer, Dona Ceci, had won first prize in the 2000 competition,

and this result had a great impact. Participants in the competition and members of the public did not understand how a region that was still unknown in Brazil could win a quality competition of this calibre against competitors from traditional regions.

The result had a great impact and provoked astonishment; nonetheless, the award was deserved, and because the competition process was so focused on transparency and integrity, it provided the market with the assurance of the protocol that had been adopted and the event's potential to recognise high quality coffees.

### 3.1.4 The creation of the ACE and the COE

In 2001, the results of two editions of "The Best of Brazil" quality competition piqued Guatemala's interest in holding a competition of its own, following in the footsteps of Brazil. When the members of the Brazilian competition were approached regarding this request, they held a number of meetings to analyse the

opportunity to expand the event to other countries. After discussions on the topic, they understood that spreading the competition to other countries with a good reputation for specialty coffee production would be advantageous for consolidating the Brazilian competitions and this segment's market.

In addition to Guatemala, buyers who had taken part in the competition also demonstrated an interest in holding the competition in their own countries:

"When the best buyers who came to the competition began to say, "No, we also want that know-how to be able to select coffees in other countries as well" (...), then they said, "If you want the COE to be truly successful in the long term with all the buyers, we also need to have coffee from other countries." Then they started doing it in other countries, too. And to make that possible, the ACE was created, which brought this know-how to the main producing countries" (Respondent 06).

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Figure 3: Form for the first "Best of Brazil" quality competition. Source: BSCA archives.



The need for an institution that would manage and run the programme was acknowledged. Such an institution was established through and funded by the BSCA; it was called the Alliance for Coffee Excellence (ACE) and was based in Montana, in the United States. The quality competition also needed a name, as the event in Brazil included the country's name. Thus, the competition was named "Cup of Excellence".

Through the ACE, quality competitions such as those that had been held in Brazil in 1999 and 2000 were organised and held in countries that demonstrated an interest and showed significant potential for specialty coffee production: "The ACE was created during this phase. (...) The idea was to create something non-governmental, non-profit to manage it, and rules had to be established. And we decided to do it in the US, in Montana (...)" (Respondent 02).

As the above account indicates, a set of rules was needed to standardise the protocols and criteria adopted by the quality competitions in different countries. Consequently, a new form was created that was more complex and evaluated more attributes; this form is still in use in the present day and

is a model for a number of other quality competitions around the world. The Cup of Excellence cupping form, used since the Guatemala Competition in 2001, is shown in Figure 4.

After the COE was held in two different countries and its results were recognised by the market, other producing countries expressed an interest, and new versions of the competition were created. Figure 5 shows the first time the COE was held in each participating country, in chronological order.

Throughout the 20 years of the Cup of Excellence quality competition, including its two years under the title "The Best of Brazil" in 1999 and 2000, the event has taken place in Brazil on all but one occasion: In 2007. According to some respondents, the BSCA experienced a period of internal difficulty that year, which made it impossible for the event to be held.

### 3.1.5 COE Brazil for naturals

In the history of the COE, one moment marked the beginning of a change in the perspective of cuppers, buyers and

Name: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_ Session 1 2 3 4 Brazil Cup of Excellence™ 2001 Coffee Competition

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ROAST COLOR DEVIATION  $\langle \rangle \leftarrow 0 \rightarrow +3$  AROMA DRY CRUST BREAK DEFECTS  $i \times 2 = \text{SCORE}$   $i = \langle 1 \rangle \text{ to } \langle 3 \rangle$

SAMPLE	ROAST COLOR DEVIATION	AROMA DRY CRUST BREAK	DEFECTS	CLEAN CUP	SWEETNESS	NERVE ACIDITY	MOUTH FEEL-BODY	FLAVOR	FINISH	BALANCE	OVERALL	TOTAL
_____	_____	_____	_____	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	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	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	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	_____
_____	_____	_____	_____	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	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	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	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	_____
_____	_____	_____	_____	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	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	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	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	_____
_____	_____	_____	_____	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	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	0 2 4 6 8	0 2 4 6 8	0 2 4 6 8	0 2 4 6 8	_____

Figure 4: Cup of Excellence cupping form.

Source: BSCA archives.

others involved in the event: A quality competition for natural coffees. Although there was no distinction in the contest between natural coffees and PNs, PNs dominated the results:

“At the beginning of the COE, everything was together; that category didn’t exist. But what excelled were the PNs, the wet process [coffees], which was what people started to have - beginning in 2002 - started to have in other countries. It was what everybody was used to seeing in other places, too. So it all went in the right direction. Then, the first years that I was there, 2008/2009, there were naturals, but none of them made it out of the pre-selection. They couldn’t survive the first table, could they? And there were only PNs left, and naturally everyone was only selecting PNs. And people were saying that we had to do something for the naturals” (Respondent 08).

As noted in the account, the dominance of PN coffees was relegating natural coffees – which also had admirers and were considered exceptional by many experts – to the background. Consequently, in 2011, members of the BSCA and the ACE proposed holding a competition specifically for natural coffees. At the time of the proposal, there were several questions, such as whether any of the natural coffees submitted would score higher than the cut-off: By early 2012, when the event was going to be held, the score was to be raised from 84 to 85 points. Accordingly, for the first COE event in 2012, the 85-point cut-off score was introduced, as was the natural coffee competition, which caused some apprehension for the organisers.

Nonetheless, the competition received 132 samples after it opened to submissions in October 2011. The result was 19 award-winning coffees, four of which scored higher than 90 points. This was a milestone in the history of the competition and the specialty coffee market, opening up a range of possibilities for quality coffee. The idea of separating the natural coffee competition from the PN competition made it possible to recognise the potential of this coffee when it is properly processed:

“Naturals arrived on the scene. It has already begun to change, right? Because we held separate competitions. Then, many new flavours started appearing, and from the moment you started to separate naturals and process them properly, many more flavours exploded” (Respondent 02).

In 2012, the COE began to hold the separate competitions on different dates. This continued until 2015, when there was a proposal to hold both competitions during the same time of year after a request to hold the events closer together, as holding one event in October and another in January would undermine buyers:

“Little by little, people started saying that they didn’t need to be so far apart. The Australians, who always liked to buy naturals said, “In January, the auction only goes to March. We get the coffee, and Brazilians are already harvesting again. So it’s very late; it needs to be earlier.” As we scheduled it earlier, the time between [events] became shorter, until it reached a point that I suggested we should do it during the same week: Three days of one, three days of the other” (RESPONDENT 08).



Figure 5: Timeline of the first COE by country.

Source: Alliance for Coffee Excellence (2019).

The competitions were held at the same time for two years. In 2018, the decision was made to merge the competitions again given the high quality that had been achieved with the production and processing of natural coffees and that Brazil was at that point the only country hosting the COE that separated the coffees into two competitions. Based on another account, it is possible to ascertain the image of Brazilian natural coffees in the international market:

“... Which, for other countries, is already what was happening, since the only one that had two Cups was this one, right? And as people began to see the success that our naturals were having here, right? The other countries, our competitors who have the Cup, started wanting to do naturals, too, and to put naturals in their competitions” (Respondent 08).

These decisions made sense within a context of scoring coffees, as in 2019, the winner of the competition was a natural coffee rather than a PN.

### 3.1.6 Cup of Excellence Brazil 2019: 20 years

The COE Brazil quality competition held from 15 to 19 October 2019 celebrated the 20<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the

first competition and was also called “The Best of Brazil”. The event took place at UFLA, as the first competition did, and was attended by a group of national and international judges; it also marked a reunion of the founders and other figures who played a decisive role in the history of the competition.

During that event, the researchers were able to learn how the quality competition was carried out, step by step, and to conduct interviews with the programme’s founders, judges and buyers. The 20<sup>th</sup> competition provided a unique opportunity to meet many important actors in both the competition and the speciality coffee market.

On the first day, after the opening ceremony, the head judge made a technical presentation about the competition and the rules contained in its protocol and regulations. Then, the calibration phase began, at which point the judges cupped several samples and sought to align their scores. As this process is a collective undertaking, it was possible to witness the judges’ observations of one another’s actions. Figure 6 shows an image of one of the cupping tables.



**Figure 6:** COE Brazil 2019 cupping table.

Source: Authors archives.



Beginning on the second day, the cupping of the samples previously selected by the national jury began. Each session was followed by the panel, for which the judges gathered in a room to present and discuss the results. Figure 7 shows one of the COE 2019 cupping sessions, and Figure 8 shows one of the panels.

On the final day of the competition, an awards ceremony was held (Figure 9) at which the award-winning coffees, producers and regions were announced. At this event, a number of participants in the specialty coffee market came together: Producers, buyers, judges,

agribusiness companies and members of the press, among others.

In this competition, awards were given to 27 coffees from nine different origins: Campo das Vertentes, Chapada de Minas, Chapada Diamantina, Cerrado Mineiro, Mantiqueira de Minas, Matas de Minas, Média Mogiana, Montanhas do Espírito Santo and the Sul de Minas region, which won first prize.

To compile the main events in the development of the specialty coffee market in Brazil, with a particular focus on the changes produced by the quality competitions, a timeline was created and is presented in Figure 10.



**Figure 7:** COE Brazil 2019 cupping session.

Source: Authors archives.



**Figure 8:** COE Brazil 2019 panel.

Source: Authors archives.





**Figure 9:** COE Brazil 2019 awards ceremony.

Source: Universidade Federal de Lavras website.

#### 4 DISCUSSION

Throughout the history of the COE, there has been a diversity of practices, many of which have been replicated in other contexts. Examples are the quality competitions that spread around the world, using the operational format introduced by the COE; the cupping courses that use, among other materials, the form developed for the COE and its protocols; even information on the participants in the competition or award ceremony, which circulates through the market and reaches cafés and retail outlets that sell specialty coffee, showcasing the latest flavours, processes and brewing, among other information.

The technical legacy of the COE over the years of its existence has transformed the specialty coffee market, not only in Brazil but around the world. As shown throughout this historic reconstruction, forms, protocols and rules were established that regulated the different editions of the competition and served as templates for a range of other events. The qualitative emphasis of the judges and other participants on the standardisation of the competition revolutionised the world's understanding of specialty coffee. The richness that developed from encounters among international judges at the COE – a true exchange of information and experiences related to the international market – should not be overlooked.

The model proposed by the programme – a quality competition, followed by an award ceremony and a virtual auction – is another mark that the COE has left on the market. These practices served as examples for a number of other institutions in Brazil and abroad.

Another legacy of the COE that can be observed through the survey conducted for this paper concerns the pursuit of integrity and transparency during all rounds and processes. The programme introduced a quality competition and an auction system to the market that had clear and well-defined procedures for both the producer and the buyer and sought to reward coffee growers for the quality of their product. The pursuit of the perfect cup, as an ideal, was what mobilised different actors in favour of the COE. Additionally, the quality competitions created producers who were “competition specialists”, i.e., those who invested in spectacular batches as a way to compete in the market.

The market encounters offered by the COE throughout its history, as well as the focus on the producer – evident in events ranging from the opportunity to participate in development activities, such as the model farm programme, to the more intimate relationship with large buyers, which one of the respondents described as “allowing two totally separate worlds to come into contact” (Respondent 07) - can be understood as an important shift in the market. Thus, the COE is viewed as a model that brings buyers and producers closer together and provides a strong impetus for direct trade.

For producers, the recognition of different Brazilian origins by the COE over the past 20 years has enabled the emergence of new *terroirs* in the market, new discoveries of quality coffee and, consequently, new producers with different practices in and knowledge about the production, harvesting and post-harvest processing of coffee. The recognition of origin also brought opportunities to regions of Brazil that were still little explored, as well as recognition for those who were producing quality products. Along these lines,

it is important to consider that without the tools offered by the quality competitions, many of these producers would be languishing in the anonymity of long trading chains with multiple middlemen.

It is worth mentioning that these achievements in the speciality coffee market were not intended by the organisers of the COE. The market transformations produced by the programme surprised even the programme's founders, as respondent R1 described: "At the beginning of the programme,

we really had no idea about the impact of what would happen next" (Respondent 01).

Finally, it is important to note that this article sought to present a version of past events related to the Brazilian speciality coffee market and quality competitions, particularly the COE. As such, it does not presume that its history of the Brazilian speciality coffee market is definitive; rather, it is merely an examination of a specific perspective.



**Figure 10:** Main developments in the specialty coffee market in Brazil.

Source: prepared by the authors based on research data.

## 5 CONCLUSIONS

This study was carried out with the aim of demonstrating, from a historical perspective, the role of quality competitions - in particular, the COE - in the development of the specialty coffee market in Brazil. It is believed that the objective has been satisfactorily achieved, as it sought to develop a timeline that included important events in the Brazilian specialty coffee market from the late 1980s and early 1990s to 2019, based on a series of studies on the subject identified through documentary and bibliographic research and interviews.

The results allowed to demonstrate the role of the COE in the expansion of the Brazilian specialty coffee market. Specifically, it is possible to observe the technical legacy left by the COE over the years of its existence and its impact on the Brazilian and world specialty coffee market.

The longitudinal view adopted allows us to monitor the way in which forms, protocols and rules were established that regulated the editions of the competition and served as a reference for several other similar events. Likewise, this historical reconstruction work emphasizes how the model proposed for the program, which consists of a stage of a quality contest, followed by an awards ceremony and, finally, a virtual auction, was also a mark left by the COE on the market.

The main contribution of this work was to bring light, from a longitudinal and qualitative perspective to the COE program and the Brazilian context, where the entire history of the competition began. As highlighted above, research carried out so far on the COE has not focused on the history of the program and how its development has transformed the specialty coffee market.

Among the limitations of this study, the restricted set of analyzed data stands out. However, the scarce number of scientific papers on the subject of this research reinforces the need for other researchers to mobilize efforts to meet this demand in the literature. In addition, the aim of this research was to demonstrate, from a qualitative perspective, how the COE program contributed to the specialty coffee market in Brazil. Due to the proposed focus, the presentation of quantitative data aimed at the evolution of the price of marketed coffees, as well as other information related to the marketing of specialty coffees via COE was not the purpose of this research. Thus, carrying out new investigations from a quantitative perspective would bring important contributions to the field.

Therefore, it is recommended that further research be carried out in order to analyze the impact of the COE program in other countries that host its competitions. Another interesting theme would be to investigate, from different data sources, the before and after market of each country participating in the program. Finally, although this research has included some international interviewees who brought their views on the

influence of the COE in the Brazilian market, it is suggested that future research should consider interviewing other foreign actors, especially those interested in Brazilian specialty coffees.

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## 7 AUTHORS' CONTRIBUTION

GNM participated in the definition of the research objective, in the design of methodological procedures, carried out data collection, analyzed the data, wrote part of the text as well as its revision. PHMVL participated in the definition of the research objective, in the design of methodological procedures, analyzed the data, wrote part of the text as well as its revision. ERG participated in the design of methodological procedures, carried out data collection, analyzed the data, wrote part of the text as well as its revision. FNM participated in the design of methodological procedures, analyzed the data, wrote part of the text as well as its revision.

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