



REDEFINING VALUE IN COFFEE

# THE Q EVOLUTION

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TL;DR: Specialty Coffee Association (SCA) launched the Coffee Value Assessment System (CVAS) in 2023 to modernize and improve how coffee quality is evaluated. Unlike the outdated 2004 cupping form, which combined multiple types of sensory testing into one flawed method, the CVAS separates these into four distinct, scientifically sound forms: Affective, Descriptive, Extrinsic, and Physical. This aligns with sensory evaluation principles and allows for a more comprehensive understanding of coffee's value—including factors like origin, processing, and sustainability.

However, controversy arose when the SCA announced its acquisition of the Q Grader Program without sufficient industry consultation. Many stakeholders—Q Graders, instructors, and organizations—felt blindsided, raising concerns about transparency and inclusivity.

Despite the disruption, the author believes both systems can coexist. While the Q system reflects expert opinion, the CVAS offers a more holistic, science-based framework.

At PCR, both forms will continue to be taught, with a commitment to supporting all coffee professionals—whether they embrace the new system, stick with the Q form, or learn both. The industry is overdue for change, and CVAS is a step toward a fairer, more nuanced way of assigning value to coffee.



In the Foundation-level Sensory Skills course, we introduce two core CVAS tools: the Affective Form and the Descriptive Form. The Affective Form is designed to capture a taster's hedonic response—essentially, how much they like or value certain sensory attributes in the cup. This is done using a 9-point scale, where 1 represents an “extremely low” quality impression and 9 denotes “extremely high.” (See: opinion, subjective, personal feeling). The Descriptive Form, by contrast, is focused on sensory precision and objectivity. Cuppers are asked to assess the intensity of specific attributes and apply standardized descriptors to characterize the coffee sample in measurable terms. (See: factual, objective, emotionless).

At the Intermediate and Professional levels, we introduce two additional forms: the Extrinsic Form and the Physical Form. The Extrinsic Form evaluates non-sensory attributes that add value to a coffee but are not inherent to the cup itself. These may include environmental certifications, geographic origin, elevation, processing method, cultivar, and other contextual factors. The Physical Form provides a structured approach to evaluating green coffee, building upon and modernizing the methodology used in the former Green Grading form.



These four forms are the foundation of - what SCA claims to be - a “scientific model” for sensory evaluation of coffee. Each has a clear objective with a specific form that meets the purpose of each.

**SCA Coffee Value Assessment**  
**Descriptive Form**

Name: \_\_\_\_\_  
 Date: \_\_\_\_\_  
 Purpose: \_\_\_\_\_

Intensity scales for: Fragrance, Aroma, Flavor, Aftertaste, Acidity, Sweetness, Mouthfeel.

Flavor Intensity:  Floral,  Fruity,  Berry,  Dried Fruit,  Citrus Fruit,  Sour/Fermented,  Sweet/Fermented,  Green/Vegetative,  Other,  Chemical,  Musty/Earthy,  Woody.

Aftertaste Intensity:  Roasted,  Cereal,  Baked,  Tobacco,  Nutty/Cocoa,  Chalky/Cocoa,  Spicy,  Sweet,  Vanilla/Vanillin,  Brown Sugar.

Mouthfeel Intensity:  Rough (Gritty, Chalky, Sandy),  Silty,  Silky,  Syrupy,  Metallic,  Oily,  Mouth-Drying.

**SCA Coffee Value Assessment**  
**Affective Form**

Name: \_\_\_\_\_  
 Date: \_\_\_\_\_  
 Purpose: \_\_\_\_\_

Intensity of quality:  EXTREMELY LOW,  VERY LOW,  MODERATELY LOW,  SLIGHTLY LOW,  NEITHER HIGH NOR LOW,  SLIGHTLY HIGH,  MODERATELY HIGH,  VERY HIGH,  EXTREMELY HIGH.

Intensity scales for: Fragrance, Aroma, Flavor, Aftertaste, Acidity, Sweetness, Mouthfeel, Overall.

Notes: \_\_\_\_\_

**SCA Coffee Value Assessment**  
**Physical Assessment**

Alpha V1 - September 2023

Based on a 350g sample

Color:  Blue Green,  Bluish-Green,  Green,  Greenish,  Yellow-Green,  Pale Yellow,  Yellowish,  Brownish

Physical Defects	CATEGORY 1		CATEGORY 2		TOTAL GREEN DEFECTS
	Defect Count	Full Defects	Defect Count	Full Defects	
Full Black (1:1)			Partial Black (1:1)	Partial Sour (1:1)	
Full Sour (1:1)			(1:1) Parchment (1:1)	Floater (1:1)	
Dried Cherry (1:1)			(1:1) Immature / Unripe (1:1)	Withered (1:1)	
Fungus Damage (1:1)			Broken / Chipped / Out (1:1)	Hull / Hank (1:1)	
Foreign Matter (1:1)			Damage (10:1)		
Severe Insect Damage (1:1)					
Total Category 1 Defects					
Total Category 2 Defects					
Total Category 3 Defects					
Total Category 4 Defects					

Moisture: \_\_\_\_\_ %

Size: #10, #11, #12, #13, #14, #15, #16, #17, #18, #19, #20, #21, #22, #23

**SCA Coffee Value Assessment**  
**Extrinsic Beta**

Name: \_\_\_\_\_  
 Date: \_\_\_\_\_  
 Purpose: \_\_\_\_\_

Processing:  Conveyer,  Dry Mill,  Other,  Washed,  Natural,  Other.

Trading:  CAC,  FFB Trade,  Organic,  Established Alliance,  Other.

When I first encountered the CVAS, my reaction was, “Nice, yeah this is scientific.” Finally, here is a system that is aligned with the principles we teach in sensory science. As someone deeply engaged in sensory training, I had already been reading extensively about sensory evaluation methods. These included the distinctions among hedonic (affective) testing, descriptive analysis, and discriminative or analytical testing—each with its own methodology, statistical foundations, form design considerations, and requirements for panelist skill level. A fundamental principle across these methodologies is that different test types should not be combined within a single assessment tool. For instance, a test designed to measure preference should not also require participants to provide descriptive or intensity ratings.

This is precisely where the 2004 SCA Cupping Form fell short. It combines three different types of sensory evaluation into one form—namely, affective (preference), descriptive (flavor notes), and quantitative (intensity) assessments—without clearly separating them by method or objective. From a sensory science perspective, this conflation compromises the reliability and clarity of the data collected. When the CVAS was introduced, I was kinda relieved. It brought much-needed coherence between the theoretical underpinnings of sensory evaluation that we were teaching in the Sensory Skills program and the practical tools we use to assess coffee quality. However, these forms do leave room for improvement and some in the sensory science community find fault in the hedonic scale on the Affective Assessment as it specifically asks the assessor to measure “quality” impression.

**Specialty Coffee Association Arabica Cupping Form**

Name: \_\_\_\_\_  
Date: \_\_\_\_\_  
Table no: \_\_\_\_\_

Quality Scale			
6.00 - GOOD	7.00 - VERY GOOD	8.00 - EXCELLENT	9.00 - OUTSTANDING
6.25	7.25	8.25	9.25
6.50	7.50	8.50	9.50
6.75	7.75	8.75	9.75

Sample No. 1, 2, 3 (identical grids with sections: Roast Level of Sample, Fragrance/Aroma, Flavor, Acidity, Body, Uniformity, Clean Cup, Overall, Defects (Taint, Fust, # of cups, intensity), Notes, Final Score)

*This form is designed and intended to be used in conjunction with the SCA Protocol for Cupping Specialty Coffee.*

As someone who manages a cupping lab, regularly participates in quality assessments, and oversees competitions that still use the 2004 form, I understand the appeal of scores. Numeric scores offer a universal language for discussing quality, enabling comparison and calibration across diverse cupping contexts. However, one of the primary critiques that emerged from stakeholder surveys conducted by the SCA was that the existing cupping protocol reduces a coffee’s value to a single score on a 100-point scale. This simplification has broader consequences. For example, a producer’s coffee might receive a score of 81 from one cupper, while a more experienced evaluator might score it an 83. That two-point difference can significantly affect the market price the producer receives. For smallholder farmers—many of whom operate below the poverty line—such variations can have material implications. Ensuring that coffee value is assessed fairly and holistically is critical to supporting the long-term sustainability of the industry.

We have been assigning value to coffee based solely on “quality”. And the reason quality is not used as a metric in sensory test methods is because *quality is not an objective concept*. It will always rely on the needs, opinions, preferences, and feelings of the consumer.

Mostly aligning with established sensory evaluation methodologies, the CVAS introduces several forward-looking innovations. It recognizes and evaluates extrinsic and physical factors alongside sensorial. It is inclusive of diverse coffee species and processing methods. For example, *Coffea canephora* (commonly known as robusta) has its own License Q grader training program and evaluation form, acknowledging its distinct attributes and market potential. Unlike the 2004 SCA cupping form, which was primarily designed for washed arabica coffees, the CVAS is adaptable to evolving industry practices, emerging consumer preferences, and the increasing diversity of coffee production methods.

In summary, the Coffee Value Assessment System represents a significant evolution in how we evaluate coffee. It provides a structured, scientifically sound-ish, inclusive framework that honors the complexity of coffee and the labor of those who produce it.



My not so HOT take: I believe the SCA’s recent acquisition of the Q Grader Program has raised legitimate concerns—not least because of how the transition was communicated. Going against the very framework included in the SCA’s Coffee Sustainability program, one of the key principles of sustainable program development is to account for the social implications of implementing new systems. This includes transparent communication, stakeholder engagement, and equitable transition planning. Despite the years of research and development that have gone into the Coffee Value Assessment System, the SCA did not adequately engage or inform its stakeholders about the timeline and impact of the Q Program transition. This lack of consultation was, in my view, a missed opportunity for inclusive collaboration and respectful dialogue with the global coffee community.

For licensed Q Graders, Q Instructors, certifying bodies, trade organizations, importers, exporters, and others who have invested significant time, resources, and energy into the Q system, the sudden nature of this shift has been disruptive. Many in the industry are experiencing what can only be described as grief over what some see not as evolution, but the extinction of a program that helped shape the specialty coffee movement. Since the announcement of the merger between SCA and the Coffee Quality Institute (CQI), reactions have ranged from confusion to frustration to outright mourning.

So where does that leave us?

Despite the upheaval, I don't believe that the 2004 SCA cupping form is obsolete. Not yet! There's a time and place for scores and ranks. But if we're going to use the 2004 form, then we have to be honest about what it is: The 2004 form is a subjective, non-scientific tool that captures informed personal opinion. That doesn't diminish its value. The perspectives of experienced Q Graders are meaningful and respected in the industry. However, we should not elevate this tool above other valid ways of assessing coffee, such as the more structured and theory-driven approach of the CVAS, or the broader extrinsic factors that shape a coffee's value.

It's time to reframe the conversation. The Q score is not inherently more authoritative than the preferences of an average consumer, nor is it more relevant than a coffee's origin, variety, or sustainability credentials. It represents a skilled professional's interpretation of a coffee's quality—and that opinion is perfectly valid and in many cases, valued.

For now, the team at PCR intends to keep offering training on the 2004 form. It has been the industry's primary sensory tool for over two decades and won't disappear overnight just because a new system has been introduced. At the same time, we're fully embracing the CVAS and will offer education and training for those looking to understand or transition to this updated framework. For those who wish to learn both systems, we wholeheartedly support that. Being a skilled sensory professional today means having the versatility to navigate multiple methodologies and evaluation tools.

Ultimately, we're choosing to be optimistic about this shift. While we share the industry's frustration with how the changes were communicated and implemented, we also see this as a necessary evolution in how we define and communicate coffee value. The CVAS represents a significant advancement in sensory evaluation and market alignment. At PCR, our goal is to equip our community—whether they're adapting to the new Evolved Q (EQ) system, holding on to the 2004 form, or simply seeking to deepen their understanding of sensory science—with the tools, training, and support they need to thrive.



## Important Dates:

- Sept 30, 2025: Sunset on the Q grader Quality Evaluation program
  - 2004 legacy form no longer used in Q training
- Oct 1, 2025(ish): New Evolved Q program launches
  - CVAS taught in all SCA and CQI Sensory programs
- Dec 31, 2025: Last day to take the CVAS training to be grandfathered into the EQ program as a Q grader

## Glossary of Terms:

- SCA - Specialty Coffee Association
- AST - Authorized SCA Trainer
- CVAS - Coffee Value Assessment System
- CQI - Coffee Quality Institute
- QE - Quality Evaluation
- EQ - Evolved Q
- SCA Legacy Form - The 2004 SCA Cupping Form

**If you fall into any of the categories below, here's what you need to do by the date listed above:**

1. If you want to get your Q before Oct 1, 2025 and you haven't started the process you have two options and should only follow these paths if you have significant cupping experience already: You will either need to register and pass a QE Course & Exams combo by Sept 30, 2025. This program does not introduce the CVAS at this time and will still be training and testing using the 2004 form until Sept 30. So long as you have passed the exams by Sept 30, 2025, you will have until Dec 31, 2025 to complete the CVAS 2-day course and your Q license will convert to the EQ Q-license for 2026. Alternatively, you can take the Sensory Skills Intermediate and Professional level courses and pass the practical and written exams (~5 days of instruction) and complete the CVAS 2-day course by Dec 31, 2025 and your Q license will convert to the EQ Q-license for 2026. The Sensory Skills path will introduce you to the CVAS.
2. If you have completed the Q combo course but still have exams you need to pass, you should register your retakes. So long as you have passed the exams by Sept 30, 2025, you will have until Dec 31, 2025 to complete the CVAS 2-day course and your Q license will convert to the EQ Q-license for 2026. This goes for folks who need to do any re-takes: You have until Sept 30 to pass.
3. If you are a lapsed Q Grader, all you need to do is take the CVAS 2-day course by Dec 31, 2025 and your Q license will convert to the EQ Q-license for 2026.
4. If you are a current Q grader, same as above, all you need to do is take the CVAS 2-day course by Dec 31, 2025 and your Q license will convert to the EQ Q-license for 2026.
5. If you are a SCA Sensory Skills professional level student, again, all you need to do is take the CVAS 2-day course by Dec 31, 2025 and your Q license will convert to the EQ Q-license for 2026.
6. If you are currently a licensed AST in the SCA Sensory Skills module, you need to take the CVAS 2-day course by Dec 31, 2025 and you will be granted a Q-grader License. Additionally, as a Sensory Skills AST you will be authorized as a Q-Instructor under the EQ program.