

## Roasters Guild Sensory Summit

### A Masterful Execution of a New Industry Event

By Andi Trindle Mersch | photos by Lily Kubota, SCAA



I had the awesome opportunity to attend the Roasters Guild first-ever Sensory Summit at the University of California at Davis (UC Davis) Jan. 14–16, 2016. As a 20-plus-year industry veteran with numerous coffee conferences, origin trips and classes under my belt, it has become rare to find a revolutionary experience. To be clear, I absolutely learn something—often a lot—every time I attend a conference, take or teach a class, or generally spend time with coffee colleagues domestically or internationally. However, the word revolutionary hasn’t come to mind when describing an experience in many years.

Sensory Summit brought the word back into my vocabulary.

Sensory Summit was a two-and-a-half-day event promoted by the Specialty Coffee Association of America (SCAA) and the Roasters Guild as “an event focused on the higher-level needs of experienced roasters and coffee tasters, including sensory methods, quality control, product development and scientific research.” This somewhat stodgy but highly accurate description shouldn’t mislead you. The experience was dynamic, hands-on and reinvigorating. With nine generally amazing sessions (see the program on pg. 78) presented predominantly by esteemed UC Davis researchers and professors in a wide range of subject areas, Sensory Summit surpassed participant expectations across the board.

I’ll make a disclaimer here that I am currently serving on the Roasters Guild Executive Council, so I could conceivably have a bias toward touting grand success for this first-ever event, but I assure you I had absolutely nothing to do with anything related to putting this event together. All credit goes elsewhere, to many people, especially to SCAA staff and all the highly experienced and dynamic program instructors. Nonetheless, in case you question my glowing review, I decided the best recap of this event would come through simply sharing attendee responses to the questions, “How was your overall experience?” and “Did you have a favorite session?”

My methodology for choosing respondents, frankly, was random, though I did try to include a few different types of participants, along with a couple of the Roasters Guild



The Roasters Guild inaugural Sensory Summit was held at UC Davis, Jan. 14–16.

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The Sensory Summit included lectures and opportunities to apply a variety of sensory analysis techniques.

Executive Council members who were directly involved in the creation and execution of the experience. Here's what they had to say:

*This was a great experience. This event is really the kind of thing that will move our industry forward, both in terms of our own self-identity as coffee people and our connections with the larger world of specialty food production. This event helped to recognize the place of specialty coffee within the context of a larger community of craft food products.* —Drew Billups, lab manager at Atlas Coffee Importers

*I appreciated the sessions that showed some of the scientific techniques that can be applied toward sensory evaluation. We were shown not just one, but numerous evaluation techniques. The cool part was the intentional nature of these different techniques. Some are used for consumer exploration, some for critical evaluation, and some for quality control. We were also fortunate to see how these were applied to a variety of actual foods, including wine, honey, olive oil and coffee.* —Allen Leibowitz, president of Momentum Coffee and chair of the Roasters Guild Executive Council

## Sensory Summit Program

The Roasters Guild Sensory Summit included the following educational sessions, led by UC Davis faculty and graduate students and experts from the specialty coffee and food sciences industries:

- **Session 1:** Tasting in the Dark: Wine Tasting and an Exploration of Senses
- **Session 2:** Exploring the Honey Flavor Wheel and World of Honey
- **Session 3:** Product Development & Food Technology: From Concept to Product
- **Session 4:** Using Sensory Science to Measure Consumer Preferences
- **Session 5:** Beer and Coffee: Learning From One Another
- **Session 6:** Understanding Chemical Engineering Principles of Coffee Roasting and Brewing
- **Session 7:** Using Sensory Techniques in Product Development and Quality Assessment
- **Session 8:** The Science Behind the New SCAA Flavor Wheel

*It is so great to see the Roasters Guild taking steps to include higher-level concepts of other craft experts. Bringing in the voices of parallel craft industries that are based on the same sensory sciences feeds the advancement of specialty coffee. It is so important for coffee professionals to continually stoke the fire of enthusiasm for taste exploration, and the Roasters Guild Sensory Summit was jam-packed with opportunities to fuel up. The two-hour blindfolded wine tasting expanded my understanding of how the senses interact and influence each other, shaping the perception of taste. Exploring the approach to coffee brewing covered in the chemical engineering class at UC Davis gave me great optimism for the future in seeing how college students are excitedly diving into brewing fundamentals and the challenges of coffee extraction.* —Phil Beattie, director of coffee at Dillanos Coffee

*Holding the first Sensory Summit on the campus of UC Davis and limiting attendance to 100 coffee and allied professionals made for intimate classroom experiences and rekindled friendships. It was an occasion to briefly step out of our own close coffee focus and experience other artisans who share the same sensory issues as we have: discerning the flavors and aromas of products we make or enjoy and communicating that information through language. The opening night's presentation by Ph.D. student Henry "Hoby" Wedler was fantastic. Hoby, who has been blind from birth, has a highly sophisticated palate. We wore blindfolds for two unusually comfortable and educational hours as we first identified aromas, then discovered them in some of the wine we proceeded to taste.* —Barry Levine, CEO and owner of Willoughby's Coffee & Tea

*I remember when the idea of a second event [the annual Roasters Guild Retreat is the guild's "first event"] was tossed around at the bonfire at retreat a few years ago, and now participating in the "first annual second event" was extremely exciting! The sensory experience was very engaging due to the perfect venue, UC Davis.* —Mary Tellie, owner and founder of Electric City Roasting Co. and vice chair of the Roasters Guild Executive Council

*ANDI TRINDLE MERSCH is director of coffee at Philz Coffee in San Francisco. She was elected to the Roasters Guild Executive Council for a two-year term in March 2015. A frequent contributor to Roast, she also wrote "Valuing Our Mid-Chain Partners," beginning on page 54.*

## About the Roasters Guild

The Roasters Guild is a trade guild of the Specialty Coffee Association of America (SCAA) consisting of specialty coffee roasters dedicated to the craft of roasting quality coffee. Find out more about the Roasters Guild or get involved at [roastersguild.org](http://roastersguild.org).

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