

Sunalini Menon - a cuppa story

The aromas of coffee fill the damp Bengaluru air, bursting into your senses as you step into “Coffeelab”, to meet the 62 year old Sunalini Menon, Asia’s first woman coffee-taster. Coffee tasting or cupping as it’s called, is a relatively young phenomenon in India and has been around for just about forty five years. Menon began her career when the industry was at its nascent stage, grew along with it and is now a prominent leader with several awards and achievements to her credit. In April 2010, she was awarded the ‘Leadership Medal of Merit’ by the Specialty Coffee Association of America and in April 2014, the “Alfred Peet Passionate Cup” award 2014 was presented at the Specialty Coffee Association of America (SCAA) conference for her outstanding achievements in the specialty coffee industry and unique contributions to the association.

Hundreds of coffee mugs adorn the wall and the sounds of grinders and roasters reverberate through, as she recollects how she entered this rather peculiar career, “I had studied food technology and was looking for a job when I saw this advertisement from the Coffee Board of India inviting for the role of a coffee taster. It rekindled childhood memories when my sister and I used to visit my uncle’s tea plantations for school holidays. He used to walk around, savor the tea with a slurping noise and then spit it out either admonishing or appreciating the taste. At that age, it looked grand, like a magic potion. So, when I saw the ad, I wanted to give it a try.”

The coffee industry was at a rudimentary stage and had just started in 1969. In 1972, when Menon was recruited, the interview panel was skeptical about picking a woman, since it was a male dominated industry then. “They were reluctant and felt that I would eventually marry and move on and all the training would become a waste. I thought I will not get the job and told them candidly that if they felt that being a woman is a disadvantage, they should have explicitly stated that only men candidates should apply. But the board chairman, Dr. HGV Reddy backed me up and said that if she has performed well, she should be picked and that’s how an eventful journey began.”

Menon was hardly 20 years old when she joined the Coffee Board. She was the only woman at the officer cadre level then and received a lot of resistance from her co-workers, “I was an outsider, had moved from TamilNadu to Karnataka, was young and there was also the gender factor. Also, I did not have any knowledge of coffee then. None of these elements worked in my favour. The initial years were a struggle as the much older colleagues would refuse to take instructions from me. Here I was, giving them timeframes and telling them I need to validate things... they were not used to working with that kind of discipline. I was almost ready to quit the job when my boss advised me not to give up and to learn the subject. The next month, I spent every week in a different department, sitting along with the workers, understanding the intricacies of the job. They had never seen someone do this. Eventually, they accepted me and once I had a command on the subject, they were perhaps even a bit frightened of me because I was now the expert. It took me years to build that expertise, but my biggest learning was to be patient and tolerant.”

In 1995, the coffee marketing leg got liberalized. It was a time of change and Menon decided to start her own consulting firm “Coffeelab” to help coffee farmers brand and market their products. Menon explains the transition, “By then, the farmers had the knowledge to own their marketing and the government did an excellent job by gradually delegating the control to them. Initially the government allowed them to market 25% in the internal market and then slowly upped it to 50% and then permitted free sale within the country and then part export and finally provided complete liberalization.”

So, what prompted her to start her own firm? “My husband had a traveling job and my daughter and I had been staying back in Bengaluru. When the market got liberalized, I decided to end the makeshift arrangement and move in with my husband to the Middle East after quitting the Coffee Board. But the farmers called me and insisted I help them with the product quality as they had limited exposure in that space. So, I set up the “Coffeelab” and we began to successfully launch many brands from our lab.”

The lab helps in the certification of product quality and training people in the field of coffee cupping, but importantly, it helps develop a specific coffee taste for the seller and then brand it. It also assists cafes with recipes for coffee blends. “We look for a distinctive coffee taste and then cup it several times. Cupping involves tasting a sip, understanding the nuances of the sip and then spitting out. The process is repeated several times in a day. Then, we experiment by changing variables and observing how the taste changes – it’s pretty much like cooking and getting different flavors from different ingredients. We work on highlighting a specific nuance and submerging negative nuances. You may think it’s subjective but I try to keep it as objective as possible by trying blind-folded and also by creating it in diverse styles like the espresso way, infusion way, etc. to be confident of the results.”

A lot of data is collected over years in understanding what causes a certain flavor – it could be the plant [strain](#), age of plant, processing technology, altitude or other factors. It is certainly a long drawn process that requires perseverance. After three years of cupping and experimenting, Menon has recently developed a brand called ‘Veer Attikan’ from coffee bags sourced from Biligiri Rangan Hills. “Veer means valiant and also refers to the hills which the notorious bandit Veerappan used as a hideout. Attikan is the name of the estate. Along with the uniqueness of visuals and flavors in the beans, I also look for a story to market the product. Ultimately, it should be a product that the farmer feels proud of and validated by buyers from a commercial angle.” [Sometimes she also gets single origin coffees from other producing nations for evaluation.](#) “It is an interesting day for us to evaluate a ‘Huetenango’ coffee from Guatemala or ‘Yirgacheffe’ from Ethiopia and compare them with our Indian single origin coffees,” she smiles.

[Menon acknowledges that it took her approximately fifteen years to develop the skill of being able to explain the cup nuances with descriptors relating to products including fruits and flowers, which a layman is familiar with,](#) “There are no quick results and money cannot be the motivation. It takes years to develop a product but it’s an adventurous field where you get to experiment and innovate. You also need to be thorough and detailed oriented, possess [good memory and](#) impeccable communication skills to explain the characteristics of a cup of coffee. I

need to be able to explain when I use terms like 'acidity' or 'citrus' in the coffee or talk about the flavors of plums, peaches or apricots."

Menon has traveled extensively across the globe, specifically to coffee producing areas to meet prospective buyers. She is also a Coffee Corp Volunteer for CQI (Coffee Quality Institute) and has done quality training workshops in Zambia, Tanzania, Kenya, Ethiopia and Uganda. She shares about her enriching travel experiences, "When I go to Costa Rica or Nicaragua as a jury member to evaluate that country's coffee, it helps me learn something new and I tend to use it during my cupping process back home." She also travels extensively to the Coorg, Chikmagalur and Baba Budan belts to interact with coffee growers.

Menon credits her family for being her pillar of strength while she navigated through a challenging profession. "My grandfather encouraged the daughters in the family to stand on their own feet and have a career and so did my mom. She pushed me when I was initially hesitant to live by myself in Bengaluru and insisted that I learn to be independent. My husband has been of incredible support, especially when I faced resistance at work and used to come home crying in the initial years. He advised me not to be a doormat and to stand up for what I believed in. My daughter is what I would call my 'friend, philosopher and guide' and I consult her on all key decisions."

With a bountiful of cuppas in a day, are there any side effects? "Well, technically I don't consume them ... I taste, discern and spit out. I have also reduced my regular coffee intake now to retain an objective palate. In general though, coffee is beneficial for health, if kept under 32 ounces a day. It is an effective stimulant and also acts as an anti-oxidant because it has chlorogenic acid.. Indian style of coffee consumption is quite safe because most people add a lot of milk keeping the caffeine to only 1-2 ounces per cup ...so it's a healthy drink," smiles and signs off the coffee proponent.