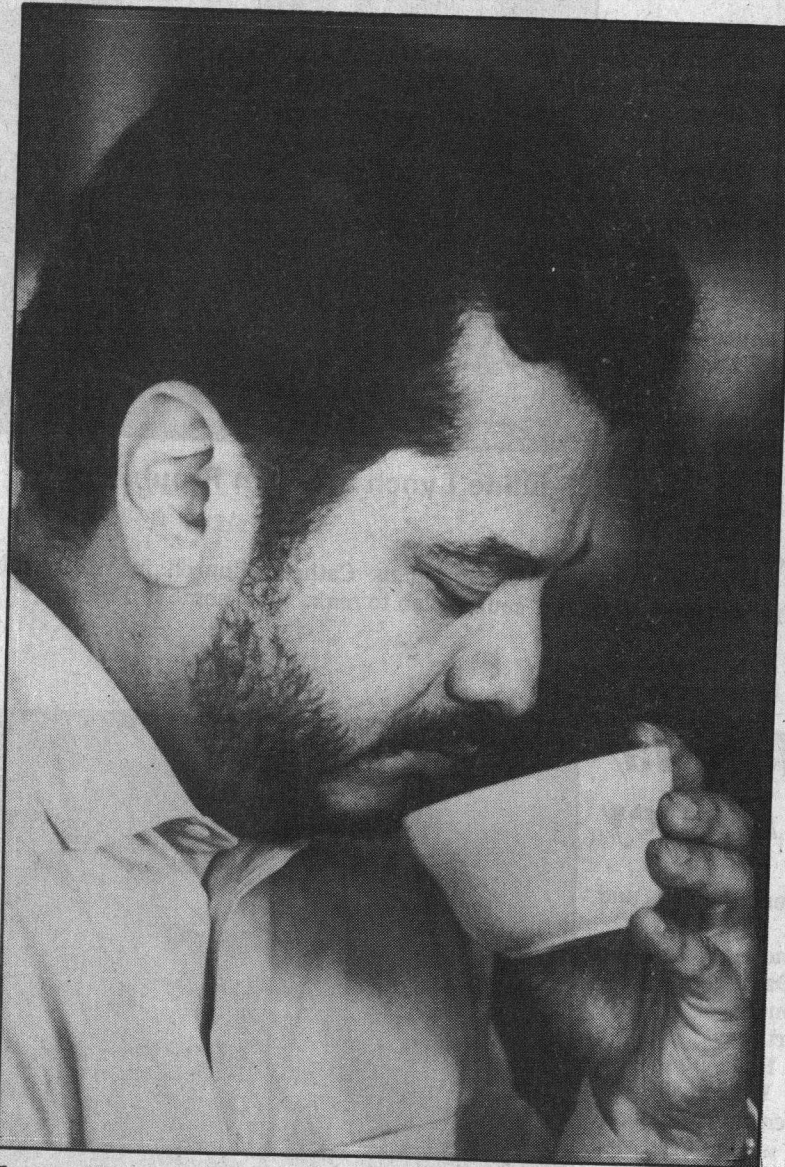


## Sharing the daily grind of 'cupping' fine coffee

*Register Pajaronian 6-10-92 P. 11*



Manuel Perez, of Aptos, sniffs dry grounds.



Tim McKinney, in front of coffee roaster, explained coffee 'cupping' to local residents.

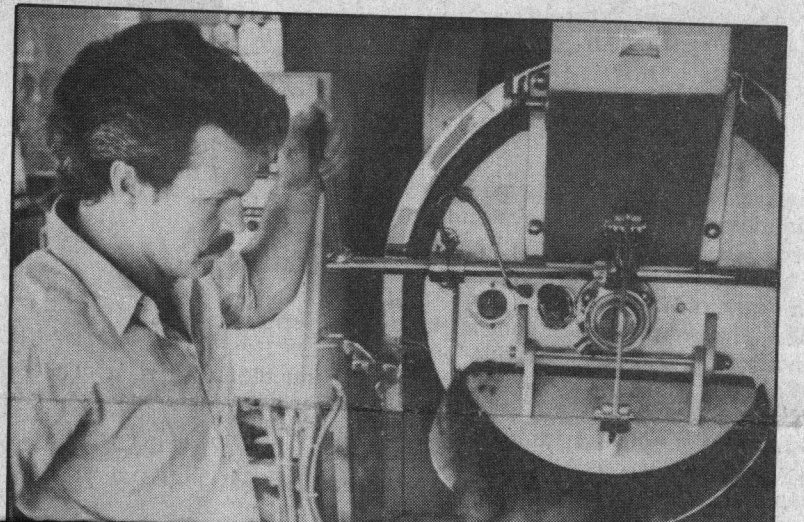
By CANDACE ATKINS  
LIVING PAGE EDITOR

**T**IM MCKINNEY SLURPS his coffee. Really badly. Out of a spoon, too. And get this: Then he spits it out.

But before McKinney gets crossed off dinner guest lists, it's important to point out that it's his job to slurp and spit. McKinney is the master roaster and chief coffee purchaser for Pacific, Los Gatos and Palo Alto Coffee Roasting companies, and he's eager to teach others the basics of enjoying coffee by way of a systematic examination and evaluation known as cupping. He said that even with nearly a

As the coffee steeped, a crust of grounds formed on the surface. Tasters were shown how to push this aside with the back of a silver spoon and get ready to dip into the brew below. It's at this point McKinney said he's able to detect certain problems such as sourness, moldiness and mildew, or more elusive qualities he describes as "rubbery, baggy and fermented."

Finding none of those qualities with the coffee in front of him, McKinney rinsed his spoon then pulled up some coffee. A huge slurp followed. Participants squirmed in their chairs, realizing it was their turn to





wholesale purchasing under his belt, he's still a baby in the business. Many cuppers, he said, have been sipping and spitting a half century.

McKinney led a cupping recently at Pacific Coffee Roasting Company in Aptos, where local residents learned to appreciate the four major characteristics of coffee — aroma, flavor, body and finish. Although few picked up on the finer points at that first sitting, all agreed they were able to discern what McKinney calls “the four big things” about coffee.

What's more, McKinney said anyone can set up an informal coffee cupping and can educate themselves about coffee properties.

“You can learn it,” McKinney said. “You can train your palate, especially if there's an interest behind it.”

McKinney called the community cupping “a somewhat scientific process” in which green and roasted beans were displayed in small trays set before porcelain cups, each containing an equal measure of freshly ground coffee. Tasters that evening were seated around the traditional circular cupping table McKinney uses when he ‘cups’ samples of coffee for potential purchase. The table top is on ball bearings, enabling it, rather than the taster, to move from cup to cup. That evening, McKinney selected Guatemalan Antigua, Celebes Kalossi, Kenya AA and Yemen for tasting.

But first comes the olfactory evaluation. Amateur cuppers, following McKinney's lead, brought the cups just under their noses, inhaling the 300 volatile chemicals that make up coffee's aroma and a large part of one's experience with coffee. That experience was about to enlarge, he said. It was time to make coffee.

“What is important here is how each of you taste,” he said, pouring water just off the boil into the grounds in each cup. Again, the sense of smell came into play as tasters this time bent over the cups and were told that 90 percent of coffee's “taste” is actually olfactory.

“Aspirate it, spray that coffee across your tongue,” coached McKinney. “We want that coffee to explode in your mouth. You've got to make noise.”

Cuppers were looking to taste sweet, salty or sour and, by rolling the liquid in their mouth, were attempting to identify what amounts to the coffee's texture — oily, thin, buttery or thick.

“It sounds really technical,” McKinney said, “But it comes down to, ‘Oh, I like that!’ (Tasting) is a real fast process.”

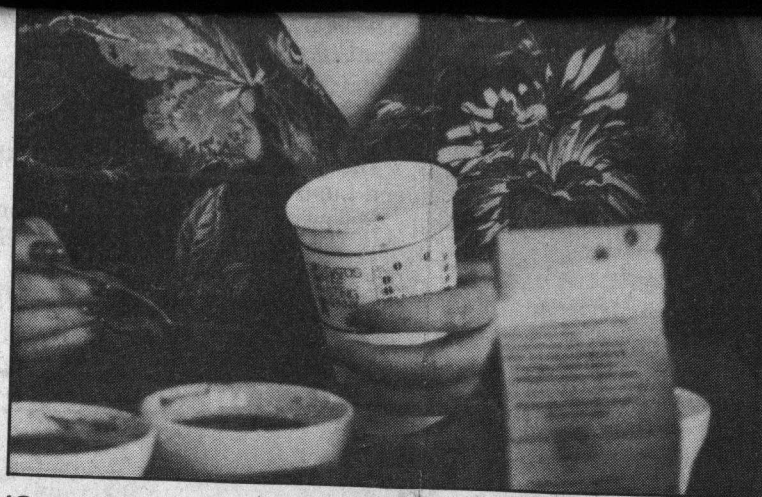
At first, it was slow. Nobody really wanted to make a racket then spit, except McKinney. But his declarations of, “Could I be getting a little problem here? A little hint of cardboard? ... This texture is fantastic — silky! ... OK, take note of that aftertaste — it's caramelly,” quickly led to a room full of objectionable noises by enthusiastic cuppers.

New cuppers, McKinney said, should take note of where in their mouths they perceive the distinctive flavors of coffee. It's the repeated tasting and comparing, combined with learning about coffees, he said, that leads to the full experience of good coffee.

McKinney said he doesn't cup following a spicy meal, and added that some cuppers go so far as to avoid strong spices in their diet altogether in an effort to keep their palate clean. He cups in a special cupping room at the Los Gatos store, usually in the mornings and always without distraction. Some weeks he's behind his cupping table every day — usually in the late spring and early summer, when he places orders for the season's newly harvested coffee. In the fall, he cups for buying purposes less frequently.

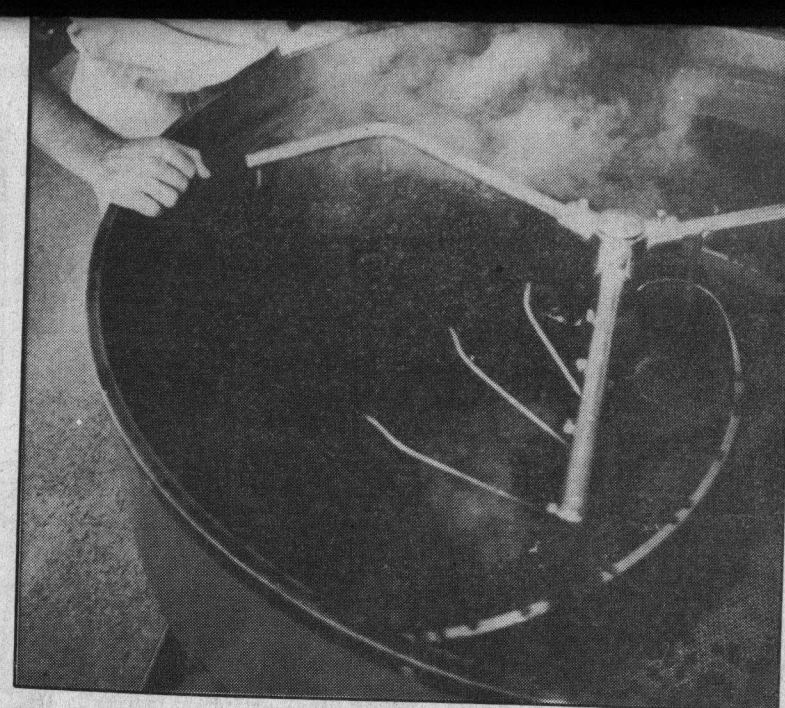
Coffee Roasting company founder and owner Teri Hope has given McKinney *carte blanche* when it comes to buying. As with any agricultural product, coffee can have good and bad seasons, bumper crops and mediocre quality.

“Every season will be different,” McKinney said. “That affects the quality. This year's crop from Guatemala is extra



‘Cupper’ Linda Perez, of Aptos.

*Photos by Mike McCollum and Kurt Ellison*



Tom Hope releases freshly roasted beans.



See COFFEE page 14 ▶ Teri Hope says the more her customers learn about coffee, the more they seem to enjoy it.



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## COFFEE

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good. Last year, it wasn't."

But price isn't always an indication of the best coffee. McKinney said he blind-tastes coffee for purchase, without looking at either the grower or the going rate.

"I let the coffee tell me," he said. "I buy the best (quality) coffee on the table. I don't look at the price."

Hope said she's tested coffee so much in her decade in the business she often can identify a coffee's country of origin on tasting it. That ability originated, she said, in her love of coffee and her desire to know more about it.

She's nothing short of excited, she said, when her customers follow the same path. Since opening the Los Gatos store, she said the call for specialty coffee has increased almost geometrically. With it, she said, is an enthusiasm by consumers for more information about the beans they buy.

"People appreciate our information and educational handouts," she said. "They're very willing to experiment. Even when they buy \$1 worth of beans (to try) it makes them a better customer."

Most customers, she said, begin by buying small amounts of a variety of beans. Through process of elimination, they usually get down to a couple of favorites.

The common thread, Hope said, is that once people drink good coffee, properly prepared, they're sold.

"No one has to be there beating you over the head," McKinney added. "It just hap-



Kurt Ellison

**Coffee is a family business for Teri, at left, Tom and Dena Hope.**

pens."

And for McKinney, the real test comes when he isn't behind his cupping table, when he drinks a cup of coffee that is so

fresh and of such high quality, he doesn't automatically begin to evaluate it.

"When that happens," he said. "It's a joy. Pure joy."