



Puerto Rico Coffee Grades: Specialty, High Mountain Grown, and the SCA Scale



Puerto Rico coffee grading uses three overlapping systems — the Specialty Coffee Association's (SCA) 100-point cupping scale, the High Mountain Grown altitude classification, and the commercial specialty-grade AA designation — that together determine how Puerto Rican coffee is evaluated, priced, and marketed to

both Puerto Rican consumers and international specialty buyers. Understanding these grading systems helps coffee drinkers make informed purchasing decisions, helps farmers target market tiers, and helps industry participants discuss quality with shared language. For anyone seeking to engage seriously with Puerto Rican coffee quality, grasping these systems is essential.

The SCA 100-Point Cupping Scale

The Specialty Coffee Association's 100-point cupping scale is the internationally recognized standard for evaluating coffee quality. The scale evaluates ten attributes of a coffee sample — fragrance/aroma, flavor, aftertaste, acidity, body, balance, uniformity, cleanliness, sweetness, and overall impression — each scored on a 0-10 scale. The total score determines the coffee's grade classification: 90-100 is Outstanding, 85-89.99 is Excellent, 80-84.99 is Very Good, and scores below 80 are not considered specialty-grade.



The scoring process is conducted by certified Q-Graders who have completed the SCA's training program. Q-Graders evaluate roasted coffee samples through a standardized process that includes dry-grinding aromatic assessment, wet infusion smelling, initial sipping at standardized temperature, and continued evaluation as the coffee cools. The ten-attribute scoring plus defect deductions produce the final score. Inter-rater reliability is strong among trained Q-Graders, allowing meaningful comparison across different graders.

Puerto Rican Coffees on the SCA Scale

Puerto Rican specialty coffee regularly achieves scores in the 84-88 range on the SCA scale, placing the best Puerto Rican coffee firmly within Excellent territory. Some specific farms have achieved higher scores — Cuatro Sombras, for example, has reported cupping scores of 90 on its Hacienda Santa Clara coffee from Yauco, placing it in the Outstanding tier alongside the world's top-scoring specialty coffees. These higher scores are not typical across the industry but demonstrate the quality potential of top Puerto Rican farms.

A large, bold, black number '4' is centered on a textured, light grey background. The background has a subtle, grainy texture and a slight gradient from top to bottom. The number is simple and sans-serif.

Lower-tier Puerto Rican coffee — coffee that does not meet specialty cupping thresholds — serves Puerto Rico's domestic market and lower-priced commercial channels. The distribution between tiers varies by farm and harvest, with specialty-capable farms often producing both specialty and commercial lots depending on cherry quality, processing outcomes, and market channels available at the time.

High Mountain Grown Classification

The High Mountain Grown (HG) designation classifies Puerto Rican coffee by altitude — the elevation at which the coffee was cultivated. High Mountain Grown coffee comes from farms above specified elevation thresholds, typically 3,000 feet or higher for Puerto Rican application. The classification is significant because altitude strongly correlates with flavor complexity — higher-elevation coffee develops more slowly, producing denser beans with more complex flavor profiles than lower-elevation coffee.



Yauco Selecto, the premium Puerto Rican coffee brand, markets its coffee as "High Mountain Grown" based on the elevations of its three founding haciendas. Other premium Puerto Rican coffees from Orocovis, Jayuya, and similar high-altitude municipalities also qualify for the designation. The classification gives specialty buyers a

simple indicator of altitude advantage without requiring them to research specific farm elevations.

The Specialty-Grade AA Designation

Commercial specialty-grade Puerto Rican coffee carries an AA designation indicating the highest specialty tier. AA coffee must meet specific bean-quality standards — 18+ screen size, minimal defects per sample (typically less than 2 defects per 300 gram sample), and processing meeting export specialty standards. The AA designation predates the SCA cupping scale and focuses more on visual bean quality than on cupping performance, though AA coffee typically also scores well on SCA cupping evaluation.



The AA designation is used in Yauco Selecto marketing and in other Puerto Rican specialty brands. Consumers seeing AA on Puerto Rican coffee packaging can generally expect top-tier quality, though AA alone does not guarantee specific cupping performance — two AA coffees can differ substantially in specific flavor characteristics even with similar grade designations.

Green Bean Defect Screening

Before any cupping evaluation, Puerto Rican coffee goes through green bean defect screening — inspection of unroasted beans for visual flaws that indicate processing or storage problems. Defects include broken beans, insect-damaged beans, pebbles or other foreign materials, immature beans, and variations in color or size that suggest inconsistent harvesting or sorting. Each defect carries a weighting that deducts from the coffee's potential grade.

<https://www.youtube.com/embed/v2irY8zenxE>

Watch: Coffee cupping and specialty grading at Cuatro Sombras in Old San Juan

Defect screening matters because even a single serious defect can substantially reduce a coffee's final grade. A sample with multiple minor defects or one major defect cannot achieve specialty-grade classification regardless of cupping performance of the undamaged beans. This is why Puerto Rican specialty farms invest heavily in careful harvesting, thorough processing, and meticulous sorting — defect minimization is as important as flavor development for achieving specialty-tier classification.

The Cupping Process for Puerto Rican Coffee

Cupping a Puerto Rican coffee follows the same standardized SCA protocol used for all coffees globally, with no island-specific modifications. Certified Q-Graders typically evaluate Puerto Rican coffees alongside coffees from other origins, providing comparative context. This international scoring framework allows Puerto Rican coffee to

be evaluated on the same scale as Ethiopian, Colombian, Kenyan, or Jamaican specialty coffees without special considerations.



The cupping process reveals Puerto Rican coffee's characteristic profile — balanced body, chocolate and caramel notes, moderate acidity, full but restrained mouthfeel. These profile characteristics typically score well on the SCA attributes of body, balance, sweetness, and overall impression, while scoring moderately on acidity (reflecting the Puerto Rican style's preference for balanced rather than bright acidity). The profile positions Puerto Rican coffee well for drinkers who appreciate classic island coffee character.

Pricing Implications

Grade classifications directly influence Puerto Rican coffee pricing. Commercial-grade coffee sells at commodity prices tied to C-market benchmarks, with small premiums for origin identity. Specialty-grade coffee commands substantial premiums, sometimes 2-3

times commercial prices, with specific farms and brands commanding higher premiums based on reputation and cupping score history. The highest-tier Puerto Rican coffees — Yauco Selecto, Cuatro Sombras, and comparable specialty brands — price in the range of premium Caribbean and Central American specialty coffees.



For consumers, this pricing structure means that Puerto Rican coffee is available at multiple price points depending on grade. Budget-conscious drinkers can access authentic Puerto Rican coffee at commercial tiers with chocolate-caramel notes and balanced profile. Premium drinkers can access top-tier specialty Puerto Rican coffee with Outstanding or Excellent SCA scores. Understanding grading helps consumers identify what they are purchasing at each price point.

How Consumers Can Apply Grading Information

When purchasing Puerto Rican coffee, consumers can use grading information to inform their choices. Products labeled "specialty-grade," "AA," "High Mountain Grown," or carrying specific SCA scores provide meaningful quality signals. Products without any grading information typically represent commercial-tier coffee that may still be enjoyable but does not carry the verification that specialty grading provides.



PuertoRicoCoffeeShop.com and other authentic Puerto Rican coffee retailers typically provide grading information for their products, allowing consumers to make informed decisions. When grading information is not provided, consumers can ask retailers about the specific farm or origin, the altitude of the coffee, and any cupping scores available. These questions signal serious consumer interest and tend to generate useful information from knowledgeable retailers.

The Role of Grading in Puerto Rico's Coffee Future

Grading systems will play an increasingly important role as Puerto Rico's coffee industry continues its post-Maria and post-Fiona rebuilding. The industry's economic future depends on capturing specialty-grade premium pricing for as much of its production as possible — commercial-tier pricing does not support the investment required for climate adaptation, infrastructure rebuild, and farmer income stability. Graduating more Puerto Rican coffee into verified specialty tiers becomes both an economic necessity and a quality aspiration.



Puerto Rican coffee farmers, cooperatives, and processors are investing in cupping capacity, quality training, and grading certification to support this graduation. Partnerships with USDA Agricultural Research Service, TechnoServe, and international specialty buyers provide grading infrastructure and market access that individual farms could not develop alone. The collective result should be an increasing share of Puerto

Rican coffee carrying verified specialty grades over the coming decade.

Why Grading Matters

Grading matters because it creates shared language for discussing coffee quality across the supply chain from farmer to consumer. Without grades, quality discussions devolve into subjective preferences that cannot be rationally negotiated. With grades, specific measurable attributes can be compared, priced, and improved. The SCA cupping scale, the High Mountain Grown designation, and the AA specialty grade together give Puerto Rican coffee a vocabulary for expressing quality that connects to the global specialty coffee conversation.



For Puerto Rico, engaging fully with international grading systems also signals serious participation in the global specialty coffee industry. Puerto Rican coffee that scores 85 on the SCA scale is recognizable to specialty buyers worldwide as Excellent-tier coffee, without requiring those buyers to understand Puerto Rican history, geography, or cultural context. The grading creates access to global markets that unreferenced quality claims cannot generate.

Key Facts — Puerto Rico Coffee Grades

- SCA 100-point scale: internationally recognized cupping evaluation
- Specialty-grade threshold: 80 points and above
- Outstanding tier: 90-100 points
- Excellent tier: 85-89.99 points
- Very Good tier: 80-84.99 points
- Puerto Rican specialty coffee: typically 84-88, with some reaching 90+
- High Mountain Grown: altitude-based classification, typically 3,000 feet or higher
- AA designation: commercial specialty grade based on bean quality standards
- Screen size requirement: 18+ for AA grade
- Defect limit: less than 2 defects per 300g sample for AA

Frequently Asked Questions

What is a specialty-grade coffee? Specialty-grade coffee is coffee that scores 80 or higher on the SCA 100-point cupping scale. The designation indicates meaningful quality above commercial coffee and requires evaluation by certified Q-Graders following standardized protocols. Specialty coffee commands premium prices and typically comes from farms that invest in quality-focused production.

Does Puerto Rico coffee routinely achieve specialty grade? Yes. Puerto Rican specialty-capable farms routinely achieve specialty-grade scores in the 84-88 range.

Some top farms like Cuatro Sombras have achieved scores of 90+ on specific lots. Commercial-tier Puerto Rican coffee serves other market segments and does not carry specialty-grade designation.

What is the difference between "AA" and "SCA 85 points"? AA is a commercial specialty designation based on bean visual quality, screen size, and defect limits. SCA 85 points is a cupping evaluation score. The two systems overlap but focus on different aspects of quality — AA on bean characteristics, SCA on cupping performance. Top Puerto Rican coffee typically meets both standards.

What does "High Mountain Grown" mean for Puerto Rican coffee? High Mountain Grown indicates coffee cultivated at high altitudes, typically 3,000 feet or higher in Puerto Rican application. Higher altitudes produce denser beans with more complex flavor development, so the designation signals quality potential beyond the raw SCA score.

How can I find out what grade a specific Puerto Rican coffee is? Check packaging for grade indicators like "specialty-grade," "AA," "High Mountain Grown," or SCA score. Ask retailers about the specific farm or origin, altitude, and any cupping scores. Reputable Puerto Rican coffee retailers like PuertoRicoCoffeeShop.com provide this information readily.

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