

By JULIET CHUNG

From Madagascar to Costa Rica, farmers, scientists and multinational companies have been racing to deliver an elusive product - a gourmet coffee bean that's naturally low in caffeine.

Coffee companies have been spending millions of dollars identifying, breeding and, in some cases, genetically manipulating promising coffee varieties. They've rooted through seed banks, assembled teams of agronomists and tasted countless cups of coffee, all in pursuit of what some people call the industry's holy grail, a bean that produces a great-tasting cup of "low-caf."

Italian roaster Illycaffè introduced Idillyum, its low-caffeine bean, in Italy in early October and plans to offer limited quantities in the United States starting Monday. The UCC Ueshima Coffee Co., one of Japan's biggest roasters, has begun selling limited supplies of its low-caf Bourbon Pointu beans in Japan for about \$300 a pound. Brazilian grower Daterra Coffee is selling its Opus I Exotic at a handful of coffee shops around the U.S. as well as to several wholesalers. And the Costa Rica-based Doka Estate, which is owned by the Vargas coffee family, plans to start exporting its own low-caf beans next year for roasting and taste tests, with commercial sales expected to begin in the U.S. in 2011. The company's clients include American chains such as Caribou Coffee and Peet's Coffee & Tea.

A LO-CAF TASTE TEST

We organized a blind tasting of coffee made from three new naturally low-caffeine beans: Daterra's Opus I Exotic; UCC Ueshima's Bourbon Pointu; and Illy's Idillyum espresso. For comparison, we also included a full-caffeine coffee, Intelligentsia's Los Inmortales, as well as the decaf house blend from Stumptown Coffee Roasters, based in Portland, Ore. , in the tasting.

Our tasters were Dan Griffin, of New York coffee consultancy Tamp Tamp; Kevin Mahan, managing partner of Gramercy Tavern in New York; Oren Bloostein, owner of New York specialty coffee roaster and retailer Oren's Daily Roast; and Steve Colten, a coffee merchant and former president of the Specialty Coffee Association of America.

The new low-cafs were in for a challenge. All four panelists said that as a rule they prefer drinking regular coffee. Mr. Griffin says he routinely tells his café clients not to serve decaf at all. "I drink coffee for the complexity, for the sweetness, for the beauty of the flavor," he says. "With the decaf, it's just not there."

To minimize some of the variables that could affect the quality and taste, we had four of the coffees roasted on the same day, though this was done

by four different roasters, and prepared the same way: the beans were ground before the tasting and steep-brewed. The fifth coffee, Illy's Idillyum espresso, had been roasted at an earlier date and was packaged in a pre-ground espresso pod. It was prepared in the Illy coffee maker for which it was designed.

Here are the results, obtained after much slurping and spitting.

Bourbon Pointu from Reunion Island

Ericka Burchett/WSJ

All four tasters chose UCC Ueshima's low-caffeine coffee as the best cup, although their enthusiasm for it varied. Mr. Colten dubbed it "fabulous," praising its body and maintenance of flavor from hot to lukewarm. Mr. Mahan detected a note of canned pineapple but liked the coffee's acidity. Mr. Griffin thought the coffee was "out of balance" but said, "if this is a decaf, they did a pretty good job." Mr. Bloostein faulted the coffee for having "little complexity" but said it had the best acidity.