

Independent review: **Hottop on Test here in Australia!**
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Introduction



The New Arrival. Impressive.

It was a pleasure to evaluate the Hottop as I had read and heard so much about the Hottop. There are a few owners on the CoffeeSnobs forum here in Australia too and I got very positive feedback on their relationship with their Hottop.

Chang Yue Industrial Corporation is a large Taiwanese company that manufactures a wide range of electrical products for automotive and food use. Manufacturing a coffee roaster then, is well within their abilities with respect to the mechanical and electronic engineering expertise required. Chang Yue also has a wealth of experience in the manufacture of food processing equipment such as rotisseries and food dehydrators.

The following URL links to the main site for Chang Yue: <http://www.globalsources.com/changyue.co> . If you look under the R&D category you will see some Hottops being QA inspected prior to shipment (good to see that ☺).

The Hottop started its life back in the year 2000. Evidently Australia featured here with an antipodean suggesting that a cheap drum roaster would be 'the go', priced under \$100USD, to be sold by TV advertising. Chang Yue did their research and decided that 250grams was the sweet spot batch size. Incidentally this is about the median batch size indicated when our little CoffeeSnobs forum did a poll of members recently. Anyway, the model was not priced anywhere near \$100USD. It originally came out without a filter and without a cooling tray.

The man in charge of the initial design was Janson Su who is still in charge of the marketing of this product. The design is now a team effort and Shelly from Hottop says that research and development continues, with tonnes of green beans being sacrificed in search of the perfect roast.

In 2002, the Hottop as we now know it, the KN8828 was born with the filter(s) and a cooling tray. The same year the Hottop was launched in the USA. Hottop USA has a comprehensive website with complete Hottop manual(s) and a comprehensive repair guide for the Hottop (www.hottopusa.com) available.

The machine that I am now testing is the KN8828D, the 'D' for digital, which we will call the second generation Hottop, and was released in 2004. I believe some changes have been made to the drum motor and the drum fitting that attaches to the drum motor at the rear of the unit. It certainly is easy to take out and replace.

The temperature profile has also been tweaked to give a more linear increase in temperature.

The most obvious change though is the digital temperature/roast time remaining readout rather than just roast numbers on the side.

Shelly assures me that they will continue development of this machine. This is a good thing too as I think roasters will not only become more popular but this market may become a good deal more crowded with time. It is essential that you buy a machine from a company that invests in the required Research and Development. You certainly don't want to pay good money for an orphan (sounds harsh doesn't it ☺).

The Hottop in Australia

A number of Hottops are now in Australia but buyers have had to import them from overseas. This has caused a few extra and sometimes unforeseen expenses, involving documentation and other customs charges.

Chang Yue decided that it was time for a more satisfactory arrangement to be put in place. As from very recently, the Hottop is now available to customers here in Australia from their Queensland warehouse.

The Arrival

The Hottop came well packed and on the five working day delivery time stated by Australia Post. Note the colour manual and the 250g of Columbian beans included.



Woohooo. . .

The machine is quite impressive and heavy at about 9kg Even the drum is 540g and is built of high grade stainless steel.

Overall construction is excellent. There is a mixture of ABS plastic (main body), pressed steel, stainless steel and aluminium (used for the trays). Most of the materials used, are themselves made in Taiwan (who's the 'clever country' then?).

The design is certainly well thought out. Bear in mind too that this is the second generation Hottop and there was nothing wrong with the first generation one which seemed to get good wraps from owners.

The drum is very easy to remove and replace. Just take off the front of the machine by undoing the gold screw. The plate that holds the drum in, then needs to be removed by undoing four screws. The drum now just pulls out. It is a two minute job to remove and replace the drum. Easy.

The filter is easily removed from the back of the machine simply by grabbing and sliding it out. The carbonised side, faces inwards, no doubt for heat resistance.

The chaff tray just pulls out as you can see from the picture. It is a machine with attitude and looks as if it is poking its tongue out at the opposition. The tray is made out of aluminium but is robust enough for its purpose which is just to make chaff removal easy.



Hottop poking its 'tongue' out

I even pulled the filter and back off the machine to look at the drum motor and internals. You can see that the drum motor is really quite large, possibly over designed, which can only be a good thing. The electronics are kept lower down away from the heat. Most of the heat from the element escapes out of vents on the side of the machine and through the top filter anyway. The control panel is easily removed and there are instructions on the Hottop USA site mentioned, already to do this.



Wow, that Drum Motor is BIG

It impressed me overall with the simplicity and robustness of its design. There are also detailed instructions on the US site to replace any component of the machine should you suffer a breakdown. In the event that a breakdown occurs, Chang Yue, will get parts out to you within seven days, free of course, during the one year warranty period.

Here is one more picture of the assembled bit before they start to get dirty!



Last look at them CLEAN bits before start of business

Smokin'

I decided for some reason to run it without beans to see what it would do. I still feel guilty about doing this. Don't anybody tell Shelly!

I had my thermocouple (the first one) dipped in the bean chute. It read about 40 degrees or so higher than the inbuilt one. The bad news is that it died when the internal sensor read 211C and the thermocouple registered 258C. I knew something dreadful had happened when I smelt burning plastic and saw a puff of smoke.

The phantom 'roast' actually completed successfully. I sort of realised that it was just the thermocouple that had vaporised and sure enough there was a blob of melted plastic stuck to the chute. No damage though and the plastic was easily removed with the end of a wooden spoon.

Please DON'T do this to your Hottop. It shows though that even someone stupid like me was unable to kill it. Seriously I knew it would have a thermal cut out and would/should stop itself from dying in an event such as this. It is good to know that the machine is well enough designed not to overheat even if you do leave it without putting the beans in!

The first real roast was the 250g of Columbian (I checked the weight to make sure I wasn't ripped off ☺) that came with the Hottop.

I decided just to use the inbuilt temperature measurement for this roast, a decision helped by the fact that my thermocouple had just melted...

First of all you press START and the LED shows 00. You then press TIME until the amount of time shows (from 17 to 21 minutes). If you want to go finer you can adjust the seconds also using PLUS.

To start the machine in motion you then press START again. This time things start moving and the machine starts to heat up.

I dialled in 18 minutes (which proved not to be enough). The Hottop first has to warm up for five minutes (approximately) and then beeps at you and immediately starts its countdown.

I tipped the beans in through the top bean chute using the plastic funnel provided and could hear the beans rustle as they churn inside the drum. It really is very quiet.

The fan cut in and out a few times but not a lot. I watched rather fascinated as the beans started to change colour and become darker.

With about five minutes remaining the first bit of smoke appears.

About 50 seconds left to go the first crack is well and truly going at a temperature of about 191C.

When it hits 40 seconds it beeps to tell you, time is running out. You can press to add 30 seconds to the roast time, at this point. I had to press it three times to add sufficient time to get me to second crack which was my last recorded temperature at 203C.

I actually ejected the beans about 15 seconds early using the Eject button.

The beans fall through a gate at the back of the roasting chamber, pushed out by the rotation of the drum and falling into the cooling tray which now has the fan on the and arms moving to keep the cool air flowing over the beans. How effective is the cooling? Well, after the cooling cycle is complete in four minutes, they are at room temperature. The cooling cycle is indicated by the words COOL and it counts down the seconds remaining and starts beeping when near the end of the cooling cycle.

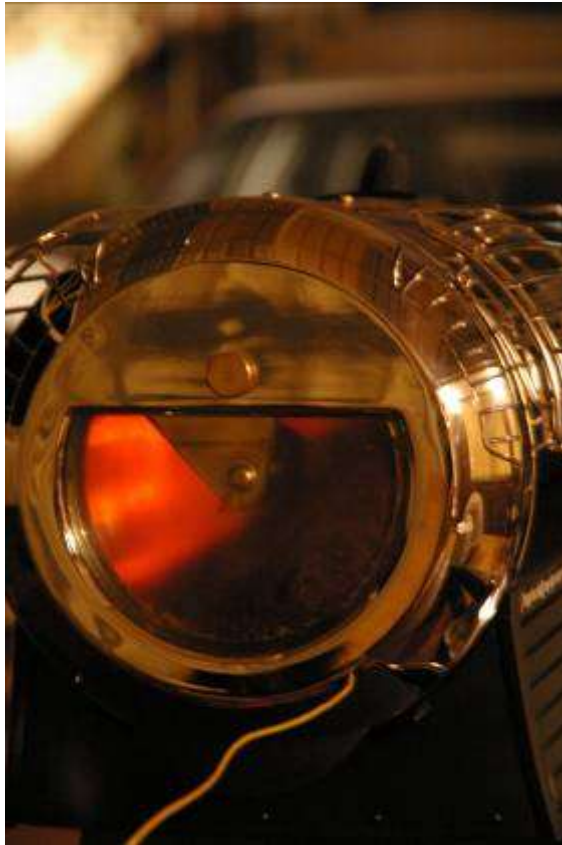
Cool!

The machine is ready to go again once the chaff tray is emptied and I tidy out the roasting chamber. I personally would prefer to take out the drum after each roast especially with beans that produce a lot of chaff. You can though just tip the machine forward and with the front off, just blow compressed air into the chamber to blow the chaff out.

I tried a total of five roasts. You will notice on the profiles there are only four! Well, I did have one failure on 150g of Decaf. Not even a failure really. The manual says,

“Extra care must be taken when roasting decaffeinated coffee. The decaffeination process changes the indicators used to judge roast level and over-roasting can result.”

Bearing this in mind, I watched the roast like a hawk and once the first crack started at about 184C, I dumped the beans. The Decaf beans looked dark enough but the espresso tasted like sour apples, so in the rubbish they went and I tried again. This time I just relaxed a bit and let it go to second crack. This time the flavour of the finished product was just perfect. I really just did what I did when I roasted Decaf in the popper which was to listen and watch carefully for the start of second crack.



Hottop at Night!!

One bean that I had trouble doing in my popper was the Brazilian Macaubus. This always seemed to come out a bit sour, even when taken to second crack and was rather lacking in flavour and body. I decided to try this in the Hottop as I thought that this bean might particularly benefit from a slower roast profile. I was right. It came out with a much richer although still delicate flavour with more body than when done in the popper.



Brazilian Roast. Nice! Tasted as good as it looked too.

The roasts all came out exceptionally well with lovely rich, well developed flavours and good body, courtesy I think, of a very slow and well controlled temperature profile given by the Hottop. It also obviously distributes the heat well as there is no unevenness in any of the roasts that I have done. I would have to give this machine full marks for roasting.

The Hottop roasts with a great deal of predictability and precision for all roasts between 250g – 300g. Even when using 150g roasts, it controlled the temperature very well, although I think that this would be close to the lower limits of what should be roasted in this machine.

Maintenance:

I like the idea of the filters in the machine. I think that this is necessary especially when used inside. The smoke isn't so much of a problem but any escaping particles can be a pain when used inside. Most extractors will remove smoke but particles and small bits of chaff would probably present more of a problem. There are two rear filters for the Hottop that come with the machine. These will last for 30 – 40 roasts each and replacement filters cost \$12USD (including shipping) here in Australia. This is a cost of approximately 40 cents Australian per 250grams of coffee. There is also a top filter which needs replacing I believe about every 100 roasts. I haven't got a price for this one but I would assume it costs about the same (although it is much smaller).

Overall I like the idea of the filters and the cost is quite small in the scheme of things.

I removed the drum and cleaned the machine out each time I used it but this is my preference as I am very fussy. Chang Yue recommends doing this every 4 to 5 roasts.

In between each roast, the chaff tray MUST be emptied. You then want to check the drum for beans stuck in it. I normally found one after each roast that had got stuck. You can knock these out with the end of a wooden spoon. A blast of compressed air or tipping the machine forward can get rid of most chaff not captured in the chaff tray.

The glass in the front of the machine is terrific and absolutely necessary in my opinion as you then both see and hear what the roast is doing. The beans do rub against this glass during roasting so it must be cleaned regularly. I used glass cleaner and a paper towel. They recommend a bit of espresso machine cleaner and a nylon pad if it is heavily soiled. I also took the glass out (four screws hold it in) to clean it after the fifth roast. I told you I AM fussy!

The rest of the machine is allowed to get a bit dirty but will need cleaning occasionally.

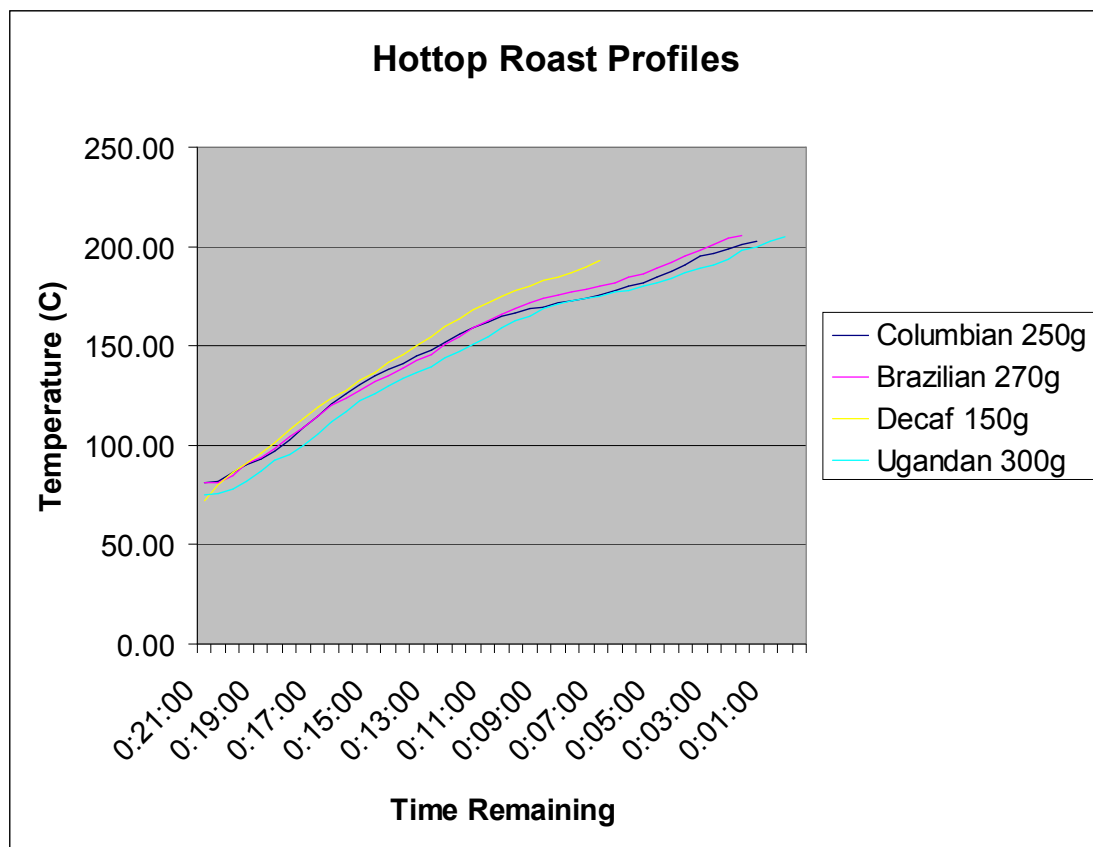
Roast Profiles:

This section is rather self explanatory. Note though that I have taken all roasts back to start at 21:00 in order to make comparing roasts easier. The Decaf, for instance, I gave 17:00 as I knew it would complete before that time. The maximum time you can start a roast with, is 21:59. Within 40 seconds of the end of the roast you can hit PLUS up to five times, each time adding 30 seconds to the roast, to give a maximum roast time of 24:29. The Hottop has only one profile so only the roasting times vary.

I did, by the way, check the displayed temperature against my thermocouple located in the chaff tray. Generally there was pretty close agreement, although chaff covering the thermocouple did affect the readings. Overall I am confident that the displayed temperature is accurate.

You can see just how precise the operation of the roaster is from 250 to 300g with very little spread.

The Decaf at 150g has a different profile but this is well below the recommended load. Nevertheless it didn't represent a problem and the roast came out perfect, after my initial experiment.



Conclusions:

It is hard not to be impressed with this machine. It is very well manufactured and designed. Chang Yue has shown already that they are as good as their word and have continued to develop the Hottop, with this second generation machine.

My overall impression of the machine is one of quiet sophistication. The Hottop quietly goes about its business of producing exceptional roasts without fuss (or even much smoke).

If the machine sounds boringly efficient you would be wrong. The Hottop is a wickedly appealing machine with a lot of presence and it still fascinates me each time I use it.

I find it hard to be critical of this machine as there isn't anything not on it that I would like on it or that I would redesign.

I suppose programmability would be one thing many people would want. I personally am happy with the profile that they have chosen. It is a slow and progressive roast and results in roasts of exceptional quality.

If you're in the market for a roaster, this one is highly recommended.

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