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Quality and inequality: creating value worlds with Third Wave coffee

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Abstract

Based on a study of the burgeoning high-end ('Third Wave') coffee market in the USA and on research conducted with Maya farmers in Guatemala, this article examines how economic gains are extracted by translating values across symbolic and material worlds. Drawing on anthropological understandings of value and the analytic tools of convention theory, I show how roasters, baristas and marketers have developed a new lexicon of quality for coffee, one tied to narratives of provenance and exclusivity that creates much of the value added in the Third Wave market. This disadvantages smallholding coffee farmers who are heavily invested in land and the material means of production but who lack the social and cultural capital needed to extract surplus symbolic value from their crops. In this unintentional way, the quest for artisanal quality in the coffee market perpetuates classic dependency patterns of global capital accumulation across these value worlds.

Key words: capitalism, commodities, global economy, Latin America, symbolic interaction, values

JEL classification: B5 current heterodox approaches, L1 market structure, firm strategy and market performance, P1 capitalist systems

1. Introduction

Walking into Barista Parlor, a coffee shop in a rapidly gentrifying section of Nashville, TN, USA, one is struck by the earnest dedication to craft. Housed in a former transmission repair shop, Barista projects a sense of simple, honest quality. Owner Andy Mumma credits his Mennonite upbringing with inspiring a commitment to handwork and artisanry; in word and deed, he appears more driven by a pursuit of coffee excellence than making money (although he also shows that the two need not be mutually exclusive). *Esquire* magazine praises his store as 'authentic', and, indeed, everything is local, from the reclaimed wood tables to the denim aprons and homemade pop tarts. Everything, of course, except the coffee itself. But the deep authenticity of branding creates a warm glow around the careful curated

beans on the menu, extending the sense of an artisanal connection to farmers in faraway places, presumably likewise committed to the art of quality coffee.

The coffees on offer at Barista are all single-origin beans coming from particular (and named) farms, set apart from one another by geography (not just Indonesia, Rwanda or Guatemala, but also particular regions within countries), altitude (many cognoscenti use 'masl', meters above sea level, as a quick marker of overall quality) and descriptors that draw on an expanding cupping vocabulary. For each of the six coffees on the Barista menu, the farm of origin and the varietal are noted, along with tasting notes and a recommended brewing style. Prices range from \$4.00 to \$7.50 a cup; adding milk or sugar is frowned upon.

At the two ends of the coffee value chain, we find very different economic circumstances embedded in very different value worlds. On the consumption side, Third Wave coffees reflect a bourgeois consumer quest for excellence, artisanal authenticity and a connection with the provenance of production. Barista customers are consuming more than the simple use value of a drug food. The physical and addictive properties of coffee are not only key to its appeal, certainly, but it also provides a material foundation for imaginative narratives of quality and artisanal devotion. On the production side, growing exceptional coffees requires certain geographic conditions (soil, rainfall, altitude and other elements of *terroir*), and coffee farmers, like farmers around the world, highly value control over their material means of production (namely, land) as a form of security in an unstable world. For many smallholding Maya producers in Guatemala, high-end coffee has fueled an economic boom to which they attach their aspirations for a better future for their families and communities. While the growing market affords a degree of economic autonomy, farmers' sweat and toil and devotion (of a sort less romantic than usually imagined in distant coffee shops, but sincere all the same) are but one part of the creation of value. The largest percentage of economic value accumulated from the rarified prices of Third Wave coffees comes not only from the control of *terroir* but also from the translation of material qualities into symbolic and imaginative value domains.

This article combines a case study of the burgeoning Third Wave coffee market in the USA with ethnographic analysis of the conditions of production for smallholding Maya farmers in Guatemala.¹ Drawing on the anthropology of values and convention theory, I use the concept of 'value worlds' to refer to the multiplicity of moral and symbolic, as well as material and economic, arenas of valuation simultaneously at play in social and economic interactions. Here, I present the commodity chain of coffee as made up of various material and symbolic value worlds coming together in the ways people's lives interact with the trade. I show how roasters, baristas and marketers have created new metrics of quality for coffee, ones tied to narratives of provenance and exclusivity that create much of the value added in the high-end coffee trade. Taste and value are defined in Third Wave markets through

1 Data on the Third Wave coffee market in the USA come from ethnographic interviews conducted between 2012 and 2017 with dozens of importers, roasters, baristas, coffee association leaders and scientists working in the industry, as well as from extended participant observation at several Third Wave coffee shops in Nashville. The data on Guatemalan producers come from fieldwork in from 2011 to 2015; this involved teams of researchers working in 10 coffee growing communities across the country conducting surveys, focus groups and ethnographic interviews. This is part of a larger collaborative project conducted with my colleague Bart Victor.

material and symbolic quality conventions, cupping protocols and a shared lexicon of taste promoted by the Specialty Coffee Association (SCA). The coffee world's notion of 'quality' strives for objectivity, with tasting certifications, multi-judge panels and other empirical metrics. All this can obfuscate the underlying truth that quality is not discovered but created, given form through the symbolic values of roasters, baristas and other tastemakers.

The coffee value chain results from the interaction of different value worlds intersecting with the material object itself; the bulk of surplus economic value is extracted by arbitraging goods and ideas across distinct value worlds. With affluent consumers valuing the unalienated fruits of labor, they often assume that paying high prices for coffee helps promote a prosocial ethic countering the inequalities of the low-paid, unskilled agricultural economy. In fact, the market structurally disadvantages smallholding coffee farmers who are heavily invested in land and the material means of production but lack the social and cultural capital to benefit from the surplus value created in the symbolic value worlds of Third Wave consumers. This is a case where the consumer quest for excellence, quality and artisanal sensibilities perpetuates classic dependency patterns of capital accumulation in the moral and economic context of neoliberal globalization.

2. Value worlds, conventions and economic gain

Difference is what makes trade possible and desirable. There is the sterile, if often lucrative, differences in exchange value, buying cheap and selling dear, that fills mercantilist ledgers and fuels turn-of-the-millennium global trade. While the precision of accounting suggests otherwise, any deal maker will tell you that trade is more art than rational scientific practice and there can be great financial gains to be made in artfully translating different sorts of values (moral, symbolic and economic) across distinct domains.

The rarefied price of high-end coffee (retailing for \$50 per kilo and more) is justified through the artful translation of qualities and connotations across symbolic and material value worlds. This is to say that the values of terroir and authenticity are created not just by the material conditions in the highlands of western Guatemala but also by the roasters, baristas and tastemakers at Barista, Stumptown, Intelligentsia, La Colombe, Counter Culture and other 'Third Wave' coffee pioneers. Such roasters and retailers, supported by the SCA and a small constellation of related research institutes, promote an appreciation of coffee-as-craft in which symbolic and imaginative values can command extraordinary prices. Smallholding Maya farmers may be blessed with the auspicious geographic and climatic endowments to grow high-end coffee, but they largely lack the social capital needed to translate this into the symbolic value worlds of affluent consumers of pricey coffee.

Daviron and Ponte (2005) identified three key spheres of value creation in the coffee trade: the material (based on intrinsic attributes of the product), the symbolic (qualities that cannot be measured by the human senses) and the affective (as expressed through in-person service). They show that the production of symbolic and experiential qualities results in the greatest share of value extraction and in the concentration of convention-setting power at the consumption end of the chain (see also Ponte, 2002; West, 2012; Diaz-Bone, 2015). This, in turn, disadvantages smallholding producers who are invested in the material means of production.

Controlling the material means of production was at the heart of the distribution of power in a classic industrializing world system marked by core and periphery relations. Yet,

David Graeber (2013) pointed out that ultimate power comes not only from accumulating value within a system but also from defining what constitutes value for that system. Galbraith (1958), Baudrillard (1981) and others observed that in mature capitalist markets, needs and desires have to be manufactured along with their objects. In such contexts, the greatest gains come not from controlling the *material* means of production but rather from influencing the narrative construction of *symbolic* value worlds that orient paths of desire and demand (see also Ponte and Daviron, 2011; Beckert, 2016; Haskel and Westlake, 2017).

The challenge then becomes understanding how different qualities are evaluated in particular value worlds and how these come together in, for example, the coffee trade. Here, it is useful to call on the analytic tools of convention theory. Conventions are loosely shared understandings and mutual expectations that provide a sociocultural frame for interpreting the values attached to objects and behavior (Diaz-Bone, 2015; Ponte, 2016). Not so much rigid frameworks as evaluative logics worked out in practice and dialog, they provide a socially valid (if still contestable) justification for determinations of value within a given sphere. Boltanski and Thévenot (2006 [1991]) initially identified six broad ‘orders of worth’ or ‘worlds of justification’, each with its own metrics and vocabulary for evaluating beliefs, objects and actions, and ultimately based on a particular notion of the common good. Storper and Salais (1997) and others have since broadened the range of overarching value worlds (see Diaz-Bone, 2015).

Dewey (1939) pointed to the ‘trouble’ that emerges when multiple preference structures conflict in real-world decision-making; Stark (2009) highlighted the productive friction created by work environments that simultaneously invoke different evaluative orders and Diaz-Bone (2015) and Ponte (2016) stressed that a plurality of justifications can almost always be called upon by a single actor in a given circumstance. Such heterogeneity is key to the practice of valuation. Recognizing a broad plurality of value worlds allows us to link the political economic with the symbolic and moral, referring at once to values that orient conceptions of what is most important in life and to the precise dollars-and-cents material values that underwrite markets (see Fourcade and Healy, 2007; Beckert and Aspers, 2011; Fischer, 2014b; Fourcade, 2016; Krenn, 2017).

Research on quality conventions in global food chains illustrates how ‘different’ can become ‘better’ through symbolic frameworks for consumer understanding (Ponte and Gibbon, 2005; Diaz-Bone, 2016; Beckert *et al.*, 2014). Elizabeth Carter (2018) showed how these conventions are encoded with power relations and that terroir is a political more than a geographic determination. In the case of high-end coffee, those who successfully define what quality is (researchers, coffee aficionados, marketers and trade associations) are able to translate symbolic and imaginative values into material gains. It is important to note that the development of quality conventions is about more than just marketing or public relations. Rather, shaping desire paths involves an artful back and forth between enthusiasts and entrepreneurs, artisans and traders, most of whom see themselves involved in a virtuous pursuit of excellence by promoting an artisanal, quality product. Their mission is about educating consumers, driven for the most part by aficionados earnestly trying to build a knowledge base about coffee and to share their understanding and sensory experience with others, and to make some money.

Anthropologists too have been concerned with what constitutes value across contexts. As Rudi Colloredo-Mansfeld (1999, p. 218) pointed out, by looking at values, we are able

to 'draw attention to the moral nature of the principles structuring economic activity. As matters of morality, they go to the very core of the self and constitution of society'. Arjun Appadurai (1986, 1996) suggested that we move beyond static categorizations of value to look at the ever-changing 'social life of things'. This involves accounting for goods' transitions across various symbolic and material 'value regimes', including moving in and out of (alienated) commodity status. David Graeber (2001) saw different spheres of value as 'imaginary totalities', each offering a universalizing claim. He explained that 'there are any number of such imaginary arenas for the realization of value, each making similar totalizing claims, and the ultimate stakes of political life tend to lie precisely in negotiating how these values and arenas will ultimately relate to one another' (Graeber 2013, p. 226).

Influencing the narrative of symbolic value worlds can add economic value to a good (virtual or material) by enhancing its non-material values (through, e.g. accompanying narratives or by reference to esoteric measures of quality). Most Third Wave consumers are not only drinking a quality cup of coffee, but also buying into (in their own idiosyncratic ways) a vague moral identity of artisanal quality, authenticity and a connection to a distant Other. It is the interplay of material use values and more affective and symbolic values (and how these come together in the meaningful and sensual act of consuming a fine craft coffee) that justify Third Wave prices. On the other side of the equation, Maya farmers in Guatemala also attach their moral imaginations for a better life and a more just world on their coffee crops. But the stakes are much higher for them, and the risks they take can be catastrophic for their lives and livelihoods.

3. Third wave coffee

Coffee researchers often divide the last hundred years or so of consumption patterns into three broad waves.² The first was an early- to mid-20th century phenomenon marked by the spread of commodity coffee at the national level and the rise of still-familiar brands such as Folgers, Maxwell House, Jacobs (Germany) and Douwe Egberts (the Netherlands). Part of a broad trend in the consumer market, such branding emerged to assure consumers of basic quality (against the adulteration of bulk grounds with chicory and other substances) and protect against unscrupulous bulkers and grocers. It also marked a fateful shift of power away from both producers and retailers and the rising importance of intangible assets (such as trust symbolized by brand).³

In the post-World War II market, coffee brands sought to expand the market (a small luxury for every middle-class household) and to carve it up through polite competition. By the late 1950s and into the 1960s, what set most brands apart was price rather than quality or unique flavor profiles. Perhaps, it is no coincidence that coffee consumption in the USA

- 2 My understanding of coffee's history owes much to Pendergrast (2010), Dicum and Luttinger (2006), Hempstead and Chajon (2016) and Wagner (2003), and for the present, I am indebted to Daviron and Ponte (2005), Weissman (2008), West (2012), Wilson (2010), Manzo (2010, 2015), Lyon (2011), Reichman (2011, 2018) and Bookman (2013).
- 3 Carrier (1995) observes that the late 19th century emergence of food brands gave rise to new tensions between producers, food manufacturers and retailers, with a bigger share of profits claimed by brand-holding manufacturers. See also Daviron and Ponte (2005) on brands and trademarks as forms of symbolic capital.

peaked (in terms of cups consumed) in the early 1960s. Hand in hand with the comfortable competitive consensus among big brands, starting in 1962, the global market was regulated through the International Coffee Agreement (ICA). In the vein of expanding market regulation of the era, the ICA gave producing countries significant power to set quotas and keep prices stable. This was seen by the USA as a means of stimulating tropical development as well as a way of keeping the communists at bay in places like Guatemala (paying the coffee oligarchy, and hopefully the workers, enough to keep a lid on things). In this environment, big producers and big brands tended toward rent-seeking behaviors rather than robust competition.

The late 1960s and 1970s saw the early rise of a new vanguard of USA coffee purveyors, Second Wave pioneers such as Peet's in San Francisco and Zabara's in New York. Growing from local roots around the country, small roasters sought to recapture the unique qualities and taste profiles of coffees that were lost in the undifferentiated commodity blends. The movement toward quality really took off in the 1990s. This coincided with the effective demise of the ICA quota system in 1989, which opened up markets for both greater production and greater differentiation within the market for quality-washed Arabicas. The Second Wave grew at an exponential pace throughout the 1990s and early 2000s, led by the spread of Starbucks around the world. William Roseberry (1996) described the Second Wave as a shift from coffee as the beverage of capitalism (coffee and sugar serving as great proletarian hunger killers, as Sidney Mintz (1985) pointed out) to being the beverage of post-modernity (an outlet for performing identity and difference). An important element of the Second Wave link to personal identity was an increased concern with the ethical and environmental conditions of production, including FairTrade and other labeling (Daviron and Ponte, 2005; Jaffee, 2007; Wilson, 2010, 2013; Reichman, 2011; Lyon *et al.*, 2014 and see also Carrier and Luetchford, 2012).

The current Third Wave coffee movement rides on a general growth in the high-end market for artisanal foods and products. This is a move toward de-commodified singularity phrasing, in markets ranging from bourbons and chocolates to cheese and coffee (see Terrio, 2000; Paxson, 2013; Ocejó, 2014 and see also Karpik, 2010). In these affluent markets, there is a growing concern with geographic and moral provenance, knowing where something comes from. In these formations, symbolic values are often underwritten by a sense of virtue in supporting a craft, rewarding skill and hard work.

Virtually, all Third Wave coffees are 'micro-lots' (i.e. less than a 40 000 lb container load—not so micro by many smallholding farmer scales) and are usually from single farms. While overwhelming of the species Arabica, Third Wave coffees encompass a range of different subspecies varieties (or cultivars). Third Wave coffees are grown at high altitudes (1400 masl and up to around 2000 masl—the higher the better). Using the standard 100-point cupping scale discussed below, scores above 80 mark 'specialty' coffee (i.e. Second Wave) and scores in the high 80s and above 90 place beans in the rarefied world of Third Wave coffees that retail for \$5, \$6 and \$7 a cup and often more than \$25 a pound (454 g) for roasted beans [although usually sold in 12 oz (340 g) or increasingly 6 oz (170 g), packages both to stress the exclusivity of limited supply and to make the price tag slightly less eye-popping].

While the baseline New York futures price for standard grade-washed Arabicas fluctuated between \$1.13 and \$1.46 over the first 8 months of 2016, exclusive micro-lots of third-wave quality green beans routinely go for more than \$20 per pound. A growing number of

exclusive lots of green coffee have sold for more than \$100 a pound,⁴ a ceiling first broken in 2007 by the storied Gesha varietal from Hacienda La Esmeralda in Panama. In 2012, a Mocha (an heirloom varietal originally from Yemen) grown by the Finca El Injerto in Guatemala sold for a record \$500.50 a pound.

Guatemala is ground zero for Third Wave coffee production. This is due in part to its unique geographic and climatic endowments. High-altitude coffees tend to command higher premiums, and Guatemala's volcanic slopes and varied microclimates create a range of subtle flavors. But Guatemala's outsized prominence in the high-end market is also due to visionaries such as Bill Hempstead, who, as a leader of the Guatemalan Coffee Association (Anacafé), promoted the branding of regional cup profiles in the 1990s, leading to the flourishing of single-estate and micro-lot coffees. Guatemalan high-altitude and single-estate beans now can command extraordinary prices based on their cupping profile, a boom to the tens of thousands of smallholding Maya farmers situated in the right altitudes and microclimates of the western highlands.

4. Creating a value world of taste

Are these coffees worth the prices they command? Objective quality (by established tasting standards and conventions) and market scarcity play an important role, but just as important are the symbolic and imaginative values at play: the relative positioning of conspicuous consumption; the imagined, personal relationship with a producer; and underwriting it all, the cultural and market shift among the global affluent toward artisanal and de-commodified products. The language used to talk about Third Wave coffee borrows heavily from fine wine, ideas of terroir and the artisanal food movement. The narratives about provenance and taste are key to its value. This taps into a vibrant bourgeoisie consumer pursuit of excellence and authenticity.

For virtually all who try them, it is clear that micro-lot Third Wave coffees are different from run-of-the-mill joe. A whole range of subtle flavors come out in the clean, smooth, balanced profile of a fine coffee. There is an objective, material distinction: they simply taste different, and in ways that I suspect could be captured by some form of mass spectrometry. But *how does different become better?* The values and labels we assign to particular tastes are learned. They become codified among cognoscenti and then, to the extent that they become stylish, are learned by others. At the very least, a common vocabulary gets established, one permeated with class and cultural associations.

A loosely coordinated constellation of institutions emerged in the 1990s to promote the new Third Wave and, more broadly, specialty, coffees. Primary among these is the SCA,⁵ which was founded in 1982 and hired its first full-time director (the famed Ted Lingle) in 1991. Since 1989, the SCA has hosted the industry's most important trade show. The SCA's charitable trust, the Coffee Quality Institute (CQI), was founded in 1996 to promote uniformity of standards and quality benchmarks. CQI runs the industry-standard cupping certification program (Q Graders) based on the SCA's 100-point scale and flavor wheel. Founded

4 Coffee is still mostly commonly traded in pounds rather than kilos; the benchmark New York C price is a future contract for a specified number of pounds of quality-washed Arabica.

5 Until 2017, the association was the 'SCAA', but 'of America' was dropped from the title and the group merged with the SCA of Europe.

in 2012 and loosely associated with Texas A&M University, World Coffee Research is funded by many of the same big players behind the SCA and conducts research in the agronomy and organoleptic properties of coffee (including the *Sensory Lexicon* used by the SCA in building its flavor wheel).

The Alliance for Coffee Excellence, founded in 1999, holds annual cupping competitions in producer countries and auctions off the highest-rated beans, often for significant premiums. These Cup of Excellence auctions have become a benchmark in the Third Wave quest for rarity and quality.

Rather than producing a physical object, something of material use, these efforts produce perceptions and mental frameworks of value. We see this at work in the CQI's Q Grader program. Successful applicants have to pass five 'triangulation cuppings' to differentiate a total of 90 coffees. An article in *Roast* observes that with triangulated cupping (basically identifying the odd cup out) even a novice can quickly learn to distinguish coffees from different world regions and countries (Allen, 2010, p. 58); see Figure 1.



Figure 1 Anacafé master cupper instructs on triangulated cupping protocol.

In a coffee cupping course, one first learns the basic protocol (e.g. let the grounds form a crust for 3 min, break it and inhale to judge the fragrance/aroma score) and etiquette (slurping and spitting are encouraged). Then, for novices, one is coached to identify and label certain flavors, gently guided in the ‘right’ direction. When I first participated in cupping, I would tentatively identify a flavor (pomegranate?) and the master cupper might nudge me in a particular direction (perhaps it is actually raspberry ... what do you think?). I might well taste a distinct flavor in the cup, but be unable to articulate it until prompted with the ‘proper’ vocabulary. In this way, one becomes trained to look out for certain flavors and to internalize this class- and culture-inflected way of categorizing coffee.

Through such techniques, great care is taken to align the symbolic and material, to ground imaginary values in science and certainty to the extent possible. This is central to their notions of authenticity and legitimacy: getting cuppers to agree—at least most of the time and within a small margin of error—on a formal scale (while expressing their more idiosyncratic variability in the descriptors).

Working with its CQI, the SCA goes to great lengths to bolster the scientific credentials of its classifications and tasting protocols, stressing that they are discovering differences rather than creating them. Emphasis is placed on replicability, creating a standard based not on one’s person’s tastes. While there are a few different cupping (‘organoleptic evaluation’) protocols, the SCA’s 100 point scale is the industry standard, with the added virtue of echoing Robert Parker’s influential Wine Spectator scale:

90–100	Outstanding (premium micro-lot Third Wave coffees)
85–89.99	Excellent (micro-lot coffees, including Third Wave and some Second Wave)
80–84.99	Very Good (Specialty grade, i.e. Second Wave)
75–79.99	Usual Good Quality—decent commodity coffee.

The SCA rubric aggregates scores on 10 attributes: (a) fragrance/aroma, (b) flavor, (c) aftertaste, (d) acidity, (e) body, (f) balance, (g) uniformity, (h) clean cup, (i) sweetness and then the cupper’s holistic impression and (j) overall cup. Each of the 10 categories is rated 0–10, although in practice, it is almost always in the 6–9.75 range. On scoring forms, there is a separate category for defects, which subtract points. Scores of these categories are often represented on a spider graph.

The language used to talk about Third Wave coffee is inspired by the wine world, with exotic and evocative descriptors: ‘*Orange blossom, white tea, syrupy*’; ‘*Tangerine, brown sugar, lime*’ and ‘*Caramel, nutty, round*’. Roasters and retailers rely on numerical metrics and the intersubjective reliability of grading when buying bulk quantities—at least to make the first cut, then they will usually sample their finalists. But at the very high end of the scale, the numbers must be supplemented with more evocative descriptors. In this more poetic vein, in 2015, the SCA unveiled a new flavor chart. Working with researchers at the University of California, Davis, and Kansas State (see Sage, 2016), the Coffee Taster’s Flavor Wheel (Figure 2) offers a range of descriptors coming from ‘the frontiers of sensory science methods and analyses’. The process is described using specialist technical language [‘an Agglomerative Hierarchical Cluster analysis was performed on the results from the sorting exercise to group the flavor attributes into different categories (or clusters) represented visually by a dendrogram’].



Figure 2 SCA flavor wheel.⁶

The flavor wheel ranges from Chamomile, Rose and Jasmine to Vegetative and Herblike to Petroleum, Skunk and Pipe Tobacco. But even with a common vocabulary, there can be idiosyncratic differences and variability in judging intensity. Thus, the need for common reference points to ground the scale. In order to calibrate the flavor wheel categories on a 0–15 scale of intensity, [World Coffee Research \(2016\)](#) published the first-ever Sensory Lexicon for coffee. The lexicon provides a scientific methodology that is descriptive, quantifiable and replicable. The ultimate goal is to ‘understand which molecules in a coffee are connected to which flavors’. For now, they are settling for replicability: two trained tasters anywhere in the world should give the same score for any attribute based on a standard protocol. To give

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an example, the Lexicon's calibration (on a 10-point scale) for honey (a 'sweet, light brown, slightly spicy aromatic') reads:

REFERENCE: Busy BeeTM Pure Clover Honey

Aroma: 6.0

Dissolve one tablespoon honey in 250 mL of hot water. Serve one-fourth cup in a medium snifter. Cover.

Flavor: 6.5

Dissolve one tablespoon honey in 250 mL of hot water. Serve in a 1-oz cup. Cover with a plastic lid.

Another major player in the effort to codify coffee quality is the Alliance for Coffee Excellence's Cup of Excellence initiative. Acting as a market-friendly alternative to Fair Trade, the goal of CoE (as it is known in the business) is to reward farmers for producing high-quality coffee. The first CoE competition took place in Brazil in 1999. It was the culmination of efforts by economically liberal elements of the International Coffee Organization to offer an alternative to Fair Trade premiums and efforts to revive quotas. Building on the work of national coffee associations, particularly Guatemala's Anacafé, the idea was to replace the charity premiums of Fair Trade with quality premiums based on objective measures—to reward the farmers producing the highest quality coffee. A seeming neoliberal meritocracy with all of the promise and peril that entails.

In their quest for objective meritocracy, CoE competitions have taken cupping standardization to the next level: each coffee is blindly evaluated five times by different cuppers. Only coffees that get consistently high scores advance in the competition; each country will have 25–35 ranking coffees (out of hundreds of entrants) and these are sold through a live online auction. Prices for the top 10 coffees in 2016, Guatemala competition ranged from \$10 to \$53 a pound (and the average cupping scores from 89 to 92). [Wilson et al. \(2012\)](#) examined the factors that contributed most to Cup of Excellence winners in Central America over a number of years. They found that the quality score (0–100) is by far the most important attribute, followed by the number of descriptors (e.g. grapefruit, maple syrup and smooth) used by judges and then altitude (the higher the altitude, the better the coffee is assumed to be).⁷

CoE protocols are strict, enforcing a particular sort of merit to what is 'in the cup'. This builds on the CQP's Q grader certification program, which, in turn, uses the SCA's 100 scale and the Sensory Lexicon. Working together and in concert with Third Wave roasters and retailers and journalists, these institutions have made an effort to establish new taste criteria and to ground those value judgments in objective measurements. In this way, the means of symbolic production can work to make different into 'better: employing science (agronomy, geography and climatology) to create categories of 'objective' differences, upon which are built the cupping profiles, and values are assigned to this profiles on a scale that corresponds to price.

Third Wave coffee experts emphasize that quality is strictly about what is physically 'in the cup'—there are pride and trust in the objectivity of the blind cupping, the epitome of

7 Some think that altitude is fetishized. I have visited enough farms to know that precise altitude distinctions often do not mean much on the ground, filling bags. Nonetheless, the theory is that coffee is stressed more at high altitudes and produces more complex sugars and more pronounced spicy or fruity elements.

meritocratic process. At the same time, these conventions constitute a specialized knowledge that marks a certain kind of cultural capital. In coffee, there are objective empirical differences that we could trace to a multitude of compounds ('more complex than wine', the in-crowd likes to remind initiates). But we learn how objective differences matter, as [Beckert et al. \(2014\)](#) showed for the wine market. Both coffee and wine markets have undergone movement of de-commodification and singularization ([Kopytoff, 1986](#); [Karpik, 2010](#)) toward the lucrative long tail of artisanal rarity and away from the cookie-cutter trade in commodities.

5. Third wave retail

Coffee enthusiasts and professionals have developed a vocabulary linked to a system of values and valuations with corresponding numeric scales and metrics, but their work is largely behind the scenes, insiders talking to other insiders. This gets translated into the consumer market by Third Wave coffee shops and internet operations. In North America, Portland's Stumptown, Chicago's Intelligentsia and Durham's Counter Culture are leading this expansion, but many others are growing (including San Francisco's Blue Bottle, Philadelphia's La Colombe, Washington's Compass Coffee and Santa Cruz based Verve, among others). As a sign of the growth potential, German investment firm JAB has bought both Stumptown and Intelligentsia (along with Second Wave pioneers Peet's, Caribou and Dutch-German market leader Jacobs Douwe Egberts) and in 2017 Nestlé bought a majority stake in Blue Bottle.

In coffee shops and online stores, the means of symbolic production are deployed, with particular attributes highlighted and communicated (see [Weissman, 2008](#)). While there are a growing number of serious coffee aficionados, they still only constitute a fraction of a typical shop's business. Third Wave retailers have to educate consumers and create demand for a product that has long been priced as a bulk commodity. What kind of value does a \$7 cup of coffee bring as opposed to a \$1 cup?

As with Nashville's Barista Parlor, most Third Wave stores stress the artisanal quality of their coffee and the virtues of particular terroir. In the early days of Third Wave marketing, educating the consumer not only focused on broad cup profiles but also included a pronounced emphasis on a romanticized provenance, often including farmers' names and details about their lives. Paige West, in a study following New Guinea coffee from source to cup, describes how coffee shops play on various sorts of symbolic values to 'infuse the coffee beans with a kind of veneer of meaning that connects the beans to the ways the consumers imagine themselves' (2012, p. 213). She documents how images of producer 'poverty and primitivity' are used to add value to coffee, with consumers imagining that they are contributing to farmers' dreams of a better life. She concludes that 'with certified and single-origin coffees, the images used to sell the products are also manipulated to make consumers feel as if they are making other people's lives better through the act of buying' (2012, p. 25). [Sonia Bookman \(2013\)](#) showed how the global narratives of specialty coffee, as mediated by brands, can feed into a 'cosmopolitan cool' identity among consumers.

Such narratives bolster the de-commodified image of micro-lot coffees, personalizing the backstory. In late 2016, the Counter Culture website featured coffee from Finca El Puente in Honduras (12 oz for \$17.25 plus shipping). Their description reads: 'We met Moisés Herrera and Marysabel Caballero—the couple that runs Finca El Puente—in 2005. Since then, they have become like family and inspire us every year'. (The coffee, a washed Arabica grown at 1400–1653 m, is described as a 'mostly Catuai-variety lot lush with notes of

Concord grape accented by a brown sugar sweetness that finishes with a crisp, toasted nut character'.) Such provenance and a sense of personal connection to a producer is a key element of de-commodified value.

Similarly, around that time Blue Bottle offered a 'limited release' edition of a Honduras Guaimaca Miravalle coffee. The price was \$12.00—for 6 oz. The farmer, Don Miro, is described as exceptionally devoted to his coffee; harvested from high-altitude cloud forest land, 'his mature coffee trees produce vibrant red fruit with dense seeds' that take longer to dry. Blue Bottle says the resulting quality is worth the extra cost: Its 'fragrant tea-like acidity' is punctuated by 'orange blossoms and a syrupy mouthfeel'.

Baristas in Third Wave coffee shops often act as cultural intermediaries, at once seeking to meet their customer's wishes while also pushing them to try new things, to identify and then hopefully desire, new flavors. John Manzo's (2010, 2015) study of Third Wave coffee shops richly illustrated the creative back-and-forth between baristas and customers that help shape what is considered desirable. Such dialectic encounters between desire and profit (the consumer having an idea about their preferences that is honed and given form and direction by the expert vendor) constitute the way symbolic value worlds are created and sustained at the grassroots level.

What one is likely to see on a coffee menu in a Third Wave shop is a list of coffees with particular attributes highlighted, including:

- (1) Provenance: The geographic origin (country, region, farm and for the most exclusive, particular parts of a farm) is crucial to categorizing a particular coffee. This includes not only the ecology and agronomy of difference, but also the symbolic values of place. Cup of Excellence-certified coffees (not just the winners) from Guatemala get an average \$3.33/lb premium because of their country of origin (Wilson *et al.*, 2012).
- (2) Altitude: masl is used as a quick shorthand for quality, with higher altitudes assumed to be better. It is said that high altitudes produce denser beans and a sweeter and more intense flavor. Strictly hard bean (SGB) coffees (including most specialty coffee and all Third Wave coffee) are grown above 1400 masl up to the maximum altitude of around 2000 masl.
- (3) Varietal: The overwhelming majority of Third Wave coffee is *Coffea arabica*; the other main coffee species, *Coffea robusta* (*C. canephora*), is widely considered inferior in terms of sensory quality (although some coffee mavericks are starting to extoll its virtues). Among the Arabicas, there are a number of varieties (technically, 'cultivars'), each with distinctive characteristics (Table 1).
- (4) Processing method: Washed Arabicas have long been the standard-bearer for quality (with the coffee fruit de-pulped and washed immediately following harvest). In contrast, 'natural' processed (letting the cherries rot off the beans under direct sunlight) is associated with low-end bulk coffee from Brazil and elsewhere. Recently, there has been a revalorization of natural processed and the fruity flavor fermentation gives; and there is a new category of 'honey' coffee that is semi-washed (with cherries allow to decompose slightly before washing).
- (5) Taste descriptors: Cupping notes and taste descriptors are key to priming the customer and helping them select a coffee to their liking. Descriptors include flavors from the coffee wheel as well as a wider range of sensory adjectives (smooth, creamy, complex, deep, clear, clean, etc.).

Table 1. Common varieties and cultivars of *Coffea arabica* grown in Guatemala

Typica	Balanced, sweet, with citric acid notes; the 'original' varietal from which most modern Arabica production stems
Bourbon	Sweet, smooth, with good acidic balance; pronounced wine and chocolate undertones; classic coffee taste
Maragogipe	Typica mutant varietal; citrus and floral flavors; dwarf bushes with large fruit and beans; discovered in Brazil in the 1870s
Caturra	Bourbon mutant varietal, with a Bourbon-like profile but higher yield; produces after 3 years
Catimor	Hybrid of the Timor cross-species varietal and Caturra; good yields and disease resistance, but poor cupping profile
Pacamara	Hybrid of Bourbon with Maragogipe; classic Bourbon profile with some of the citrus and floral notes of Maragogipe
Mocha	Heirloom varietal named for the Yemini port and origins of Typicas; bright acidity, complex; wine/fruit flavors; very small bean
Gesha	Heirloom varietal named for Ethiopian town of origin; Stumptown's website describes it as 'like a Szechuan peppercorn or the Sun Ra Arkestra, complex and otherworldly'

- (6) Brewing method: Particular coffees are often paired with recommended brewing methods, most a version of the simple 3-min pour-over (which is what it sounds like: slowly pouring 95°C water over ground coffee in a filter), including Chemex, V60 and Bee House. While these low-tech methods are assumed to produce the cleanest cup, there is also increasing experimentation with high-tech methods that produce different flavors.

As Third Wave retailing is starting to mature, we see slightly less emphasis on the narrative details of provenance and more on the sensory properties ('the cup') and the art of blending and roasting. The stress on blends may correspond to the pace of a roaster's expansion plans (as blends offer much more flexibility in supply chains). In addition, many Third Wave coffee shops are chasing new flavors through technology and barista artisanry, with herbal infusions, coffee cocktails, nitrous cold brews and a growing range of innovations. All of this diminishes the importance of terroir and the power of farmers.

6. Maya farmers, quality conventions and social capital

Third Wave consumers often imagine a certain sort of production artisanry at the start of the value chain, projecting values about authenticity, commitment and quality onto distant farmers. In turn, we find growers imagining the desires of the consumers for whom their harvest is destined. The capacity of Maya smallholding growers to translate their material and cultural endowments into the symbolic frameworks of consumer markets is limited. While Guatemala is classified as a middle-income country, 79% of the Maya population live in poverty and 40% in extreme poverty (using World Bank measures). Maya makes up almost half of the country's population, but by any measure (income, education, life expectancy, access to electricity and potable water, political representation), they are the most marginalized. Over 70% of Maya children under 5 years are malnourished.

Coffee production in Guatemala has undergone a dramatic transformation since the late 1990s. The move among Northern consumers toward Third Wave coffees has driven demand for the quality SGB coffees grown above 1400 m. As a result, many of the large, lower-altitude plantations along synonymous with the German coffee oligarchy in Guatemala have abandoned production. Tens of thousands of Maya smallholding farmers in the highlands have begun growing coffee to fill the growing market for high-altitude beans.

Working with several teams of fieldworkers over a 4-year period (2011–2015), we carried out fieldwork in 10 Guatemala coffee growing communities representing different growing regions and market access.⁸ In 2011, we conducted preliminary interviews and surveys ($n = 82$). We followed in 2014 with a random sample survey in all 10 communities ($n = 315$ households). We augmented the survey with extended ethnographic interviews, life histories and focus groups with cooperative members. Our sample was 82% Maya and 18% ladino (non-indigenous); 64% spoke one of Guatemala's 23 indigenous languages as a native tongue. Female respondents averaged 4.8 years of education, while male respondents averaged only 2.9 years of school. Households had a mean of 5.8 family members and on average cultivated 1.05 ha of coffee.

These small producers live in very modest circumstances with limited resources and opportunities (Figure 3). As they describe it, coffee represents an opportunity in a context of few opportunities, an imperfect means to a marginally better life (Fischer and Victor, 2014; Fischer *et al.*, n.d.). Income from the high-end coffee boom has been transformational in the Maya communities in our sample, and elsewhere. Sarah Lyon (2011, p. 6), in her study of smallholding coffee producers, reported that locals refer to coffee production as “the bomb” that exploded in the community, bringing income that enabled families to end their seasonal migration to lowland plantations, build cement-block houses and educate their children'. In our sample, we found farmers to be overwhelmingly positive about market changes that rewarded quality and promised greater access to direct trade relationships—an optimism tempered by the realism of farmers who constantly face the risks of weather and pests as well as finicky markets.

Maya farmers generally highly value control over their land, for both deeply held cultural reasons and as a rational move in a market that values terroir. From the producer side, the idea and ideal of a neoliberal meritocracy are often appealing to hard-working farmers who want to believe that their efforts will be duly rewarded. Tania (Li, 2014) observed that for many smallholding farmers, the attraction of a ‘fair market’, one where rewards are based on hard work, is compelling (cf. Copeland, 2011). But trends toward quality artisanal production can also exacerbate market forces that tend toward winner-take-all distributions (Antrosio and Colloredo-Mansfeld, 2015).

Most smallholding Maya farmers lack the social capital and scale of production to tap into the most lucrative segments of the Third Wave coffee market, even if their cupping scores merit it. Many have only basic Spanish language proficiency, and almost none command any English. While most have functional literacy and numeracy adequate for their business dealings, women average only 4.8 years of schooling and men an even lower 2.9 years. These communities have, for the most part, a strong sense of social solidarity and communitarian moral values. The farmers we worked with are highly vested in the system

8 Anacafé provided logistical and in-kind support for the two surveys.



Figure 3 Coffee farmer.

of social capital operating in their localized value worlds but with very limited conception of the sorts of values US consumers might desire.

Farmers in our samples mostly realized the importance of quality but for most that was predicated on the judgments of intermediaries who assess quality through cosmetic appearance. While there is strong interest in knowing more about the people who drink their coffee, most growers' understandings of consumers are vague at best. In our 2014 surveys, 59% of farmers reported that they did not know where their coffee went after they sold it to their cooperative or to a middleman. Almost 32% reported having 'some knowledge' but that was generally just piecemeal impressions filtered through the cooperative.

A profitable understanding of the symbolic aspects valued in the Third Wave market is developing among the most savvy and successful smallholding producers. Raymundo is a 64-year-old Jakalteq Maya speaker from the Huehuetenango region of Guatemala, an area that has seen an economic boom over the last decade due to coffee, remittances and drug smuggling (a sizable percentage of the cocaine that enters the USA comes through Huehuetenango). He says that he sells his coffee to German buyers who are looking for 'real quality'. Recognizing the importance of narrative and authenticity, he continues by saying that 'you have to be earnest and sincere when talking about your coffee to these buyers'. In the end, he says, 'they still have all the power, they come in and tell us what the price for coffee is, like it or not'.

The retail de-commodification of coffee (in terms of the market for micro-lots, the importance of provenance and the connection with farmers) has shifted power (in terms of economic value extraction) to smallholding producers in places like Guatemala (who are

fortunate enough to control land at the right altitudes and microclimates). Still, rewards are not evenly distributed. For the big winners, success comes not just from microclimate and harvesting techniques but also from their ability to translate goods and ideas across various value worlds. The greatest proportion of value added comes from consumer tastemakers who help establish symbolic quality conventions (Daviron and Ponte, 2005). This requires the social and cultural capital to translate material and symbolic values across arenas of valuation. Looking at sales prices of award-winning coffees in Central America, Wilson *et al.* (2012) found that the size of a farm had a strong positive correlation with Cup of Excellence score and price. This class of larger medium-sized farms (averaging just over 92 ha) has more space and productive capital to experiment with different varieties and growing conditions—but they also have the cosmopolitan cultural capital to craft their narratives to speak to distant consumers' social and moral value worlds.

As traders have known since time immemorial, value can be accumulated through translating meanings as well as transporting goods across domains of valuation. The gaps between Graeber's 'arenas of valuation' (different contexts and social spheres with their own totalizing ideals and metrics of value) create opportunities for arbitrage and accumulation through translating one sort of capital (e.g. social) into another (e.g. financial). Anna Tsing (2015) showed that success in the matsutake mushroom trade rests on social and economic translational abilities and particular forms of cosmopolitan cultural capital—capable of linking the moral worlds of the immigrant Hmong picker in Oregon to the scales of the Tokyo mushroom grader who will assign a ¥ value. Kedron Thomas (2016) showed how Maya value worlds appropriate and reinterpret intellectual property rights to justify local production of 'pirated' clothes (see also Aspers, 2006 on the translational power in the global garment trade).

Coffee growers, even the smallholders, may control the material means of production to grow what the market has recently determined is the highest quality coffee (washed Arabicas scoring above 85 on the standardized distinctions of cupping scores): they have the altitude, the microclimate and access to varieties, and the knowledge (tacit as well as explicit) of how to grow quality coffee. The importance of 'authenticity' in the imaginative value creation of Third Wave coffee would seem to bestow significant power on small-scale artisanal producers. Yet, what most lack is the translational ability, the cultural capital and social connections that the more successful Third Wave producers have. The inequality of power here is not the traditional differential access to productive capital; rather, it is in the ability to translate material and symbolic qualities across different value worlds.

7. Producing values with Third Wave coffee

The rise of Third Wave coffee illustrates the central role translating symbolic values into economic surplus has taken in early twenty-first-century global capitalism. Roasters and coffee shops, the SCA and its corporate partners, and coffee trendsetters around the world have built a system of coffee metrics and descriptors that anchors valuations and price; this symbolic valuation machine is deployed alongside the cultural capital provided by narratives of romanticized provenance and self-improvement; and apparatuses such as the SCA Flavor Wheel and the accompanying Lexicon go to great lengths to ground their symbolic value creation in objective metrics.

Most leading figures in the specialty coffee world emphasize that the high prices for Third Wave beans are all about what is ‘in the cup’. Their notion of quality strives for solidity and objectivity, with tasting certifications and blind cuppings. Yet, tastes in coffee are always changing, especially in this market where the objective is to sell a de-commoditized product, something singular, unusual and unique. The turn to a supposed meritocracy of quality was largely embraced by farmers large and small alike across Guatemala, as they were willing to link their rewards to hard work. It went well in the heady early days of the expanding market.

To justify their price, specialty coffees have to carry symbolic values that distinguish them from other coffees—partly through cupping descriptors and numerical scores, partly by the lore that builds up around particular areas and farms. A big part of the economic value added in the Third Wave coffee market comes from the symbolic values produced through provenance narratives, often featuring farmers’ personal histories, as told by roasters and baristas. Third Wave tastemakers work to teach the market what to value and are constantly seeking out new markers of distinction for their brands and their coffees. Over the last years, there has been a move away from the deep chocolate flavors of bourbon and toward the more citrus and floral notes of Maragogipe beans and the bright complexities of mocha and Gesha varieties. Roasters are seeking the ever more exotic, as it is oddity and novelty that is most valued. As I write this, I received a promotional email for a Red Gesha offered by Stumptown with ‘juicy notes of watermelon and rose water with a hard candy sweetness’. It will be difficult for Maya farmers to keep up with market tastes that shift so quickly, especially when they have to make decisions about what varieties to plant 4 or 5 years out.

The emergence of specialty, high-end coffee and Fair Trade in recent decades has been a boom for many Maya farmers. They largely buy into the neoliberal promise of hard work justly rewarded; they would be happy to participate in a meritocracy, as they are used to playing with the cards stacked against them so severely as to crush hope. Growing coffee is back-breaking work and Maya farmers mostly live in very modest circumstances, with limited resources and opportunities. They are acutely aware of the perils of dependency on fickle global markets and while coffee prices have shot steadily up over the last decade, this follows a historic low in 2001. Yet, controlling, even partially, the means of production, allows farmers to access markets opportunistically and not just by obligation. As they describe it, coffee represents an opportunity in a context of few opportunities, an imperfect but valued means to realizing their desires for a better life; it is tied up with hopes, dreams and desires that go beyond mere income to visions of the good life (Fischer and Benson, 2006; Fischer, 2014a). Still, they have also assumed more risk and become more vulnerable to fickle markets. Their investment in terroir seems to give them some degree of power, but the means of symbolic production are largely held by Northern tastemakers in their distant value world.

In this way, the bulk of surplus value accumulation takes place in the Global North, allowed not so much by control over productive capital as the ability to translate qualities across value worlds. Thus, we find coffee aficionados chasing the most unusual flavors, the most unique characteristics in the cup. While apparently rewarding objective quality, these fickle preferences structurally disadvantage smallholding Maya coffee farmers in Guatemala. Such producers suffer from a dearth of the social capital that could help them translate their material endowments, technical expertise and cultural capital into economic gain. Market setting power rests with those controlling the symbolic and imaginative means of production (and who are situated much closer to the consumption end of the supply

chain). As a result, capital accumulation continues to follow classic world system patterns of concentration in the developed (and now post-industrial) core.

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