

## CHAPTER 13

## STARBUCKS AND THE THIRD WAVE



Hating on Starbucks is now *de rigueur* for coffee snobs: “They burn their beans!” “They brought that abominable Via instant coffee to market!” (It’s not that bad.) “They had the audacity to offer breakfast sandwiches in their stores!” But if, in a quiet moment, you ask a third waver to come clean and honestly assess the effect of Starbucks on their business, they’ll have no choice but to say: “Without Starbucks, there would be no third wave.”

It’s true. The third wave<sup>1</sup> would not have been possible without the Starbucks juggernaut clearing the way. Let me explain with a story.

Recently I had the great pleasure to patronize a wonderful shop in Portland, Oregon, called Barista. It is a small, industrious place, crammed full with two espresso machines, three grinders, the coffees of various roasters, and a few sit-down bar seats. While Barista is justifiably renowned for its espressos, with three different offerings available each day, I came for the vacuum pots.

A vacuum pot is a double-chambered brewing device, where a heat source boils water in the lower chamber, forcing it through a cloth filter

*Coffee – Philosophy for Everyone: Grounds for Debate*, First Edition. Edited by Scott F. Parker and Michael W. Austin, series editor Fritz Allhoff.

© 2011 John Wiley & Sons, Ltd except for editorial material and organization © 2011 Scott F. Parker and Michael W. Austin. Published 2011 by John Wiley & Sons, Ltd.

into the upper chamber. Here the water and grounds percolate. When the heat is removed, the brewed coffee returns to the lower chamber, resulting in a wonderfully clean cup of coffee. For this I paid the going rate of \$9 for a 12 oz. cup of an Ethiopian Sidamo, and gladly tipped my skilled barista.

How did coffee, once the proletariat drink *par excellence*, good for keeping workers awake and revolutionaries feisty, become such a bourgeois beverage? On what planet is \$9 an acceptable price for a cup of coffee? And how is it that I feel comfortable admitting such excess in print with only the slightest bit of shame? The answer is simple: Starbucks taught us to pay for quality coffee. Without the consumer education provided and paid for by Starbucks, places like Barista could not easily survive.

Starbucks has taught us much about what makes for good coffee, but in this chapter I will focus on two subjects. First, Starbucks has created a signature blend and roast, and taught consumers to expect boldness as the *de facto* standard for specialty coffee. This, coupled with the aura of artistry in the creation of beverages, is the aesthetic component of a Starbucks education. Second, and just as importantly, Starbucks has gone to great pains to craft an ethical narrative about its coffees. Commitment to fair trade and C.A.F.E. (Coffee and Farmer Equity) Practices, community involvement, and concern for the environment are forefront in their image.

The genius of Starbucks branding lies in this intertwining of aesthetics and ethics. When you buy a drink at Starbucks, you are told, not only do you get a delicious treat, but you do good in the world at the same time. Such was the success of this advertising scheme that the ubiquitous green-logoed cup was, for a time, one of the primary images of conspicuous consumption in America, a status symbol affordable to the masses.

In *Everything But the Coffee: Learning about America from Starbucks*,<sup>2</sup> Bryant Simon describes the relationship between Starbucks' branding and neoliberalism. The basic tenet of neoliberal economics is that fostering individual freedoms is the primary task of good governance. To achieve this end, government must limit its activity, creating institutional conditions for the maximization of free markets and private enterprise. With this comes an evacuation of governmental influence from the public sphere, so that private interests and corporations come to fulfill many of the tasks necessary to a properly functioning society. For better or for worse, this remains the dominant economic ideology of our day. All problems – public and private – are now understood to



entail private solutions. If your child's school is bad, find a tutor. If municipal water tastes terrible, buy a Brita filter. If you need an army to fight a war, hire Blackwater.

It is in this context that the power of the Starbucks brand must be understood. What was a relatively cheap commodity crop has become a costly luxury, at once comforting and invigorating. Starbucks was able to effect this metamorphosis by refashioning both coffee and the coffeehouse. Instead of being a dingy place filled with beatniks and wannabe revolutionaries, Starbucks turned the coffeehouse into a "third place" that appealed simultaneously to laptop warriors, soccer moms, and status-seeking teens. Your cup of coffee, you are told, is brewed from the finest beans, ethically sourced, and artfully roasted. Even the consumables – the cups, napkins, sleeves – are emblazoned with evidence of their sustainability.<sup>3</sup> Doing business with Starbucks thus becomes the most painless sort of doing good in the neoliberal fantasy that the corporation is equally devoted to profit and social justice. Your toting a Starbucks product becomes a way to tell the world that you're trendy, socially responsible, and a bit of an aesthete.

## The Starbucks Aesthetic

Starbucks' initial success had much to do with the creation of an easily identifiable aesthetic. This involved their trademark dark roast coffee, of course, but equally important was the positioning of the brand as being authentic, as offering "real coffee." When Howard Schultz took over Starbucks in 1987, he made it a point of honor to require extensive coffee knowledge of his workers. Baristas ground coffee in store, pulled espresso shots by hand, and partook in public cuppings, or coffee tastings. The performance of these rituals led to a well-educated workforce, as well as a palpable feeling of authenticity.

Such labor-intensive methods are, however, difficult to scale. Extensive training requires time and money, which may not be recouped given staff turnover. As Starbucks expanded at a nearly exponential rate, some of this authenticity had to be sacrificed in the name of simple logistics. Automated espresso machines were installed, cutting the time required to produce espresso-based drinks. No longer was coffee ground in store, but instead it was shipped pre-ground. These small changes proved damaging to the Starbucks mystique, and when coupled with the increased



visibility of non-coffee beverages and merchandise, Starbucks' coffee cred began to slip.

The explosive growth of the frappuccino market represents an important mutation in Starbucks branding. It might seem odd that a company built upon the image of coffee authenticity would become so well known for what amounts to a coffee-flavored milkshake, except that the frappuccino is a prime example of retail therapy – the purchase of a good or service as a response to unhappiness – and its popularity coincided with a shift in Starbucks' branding from a company that specialized in coffee to one that catered to self-indulgence. In this context, a frappuccino makes a perfect “self-gift,” a low-cost bit of consolatory consumption.

Self-gifting is best understood, in my view, against the backdrop of neoliberal ideology. As Simon correctly notes, there is a reason that Oprah – the high-priestess of neoliberalism's self-help through consumption – would regularly proclaim her love of Starbucks on television. Self-gifting is an entirely rational choice given the logic of the free market. But such a habit gets expensive quickly. Given the realities of the American economy today, on what basis can self-gifting be understood as rational?

Self-gifting is a way of signaling one's worth in a world that seems to revolve around market fundamentalisms and the profit motive. Your purchase of a fancy drink is an investment in oneself, an affirmation of self-worth in an age of relentless consumerism. Solace takes on a dollar value. The market provides a tangible, affordable cup of affirmation. It is in this sense that self-gifting is fully rational – it observes the basic postulates of the free market in its practice.

Let me, before moving on, be very clear. I am not trying to effect a moral argument about self-gifting or conspicuous consumption. After all, I'm the guy who spent \$9 on a cup of coffee! I am simply making two points. Much of the initial success of the Starbucks brand involved its careful crafting of an aesthetic, both in terms of the coffee itself and the feeling of authenticity in the shop. When this aesthetic changed, part of the Starbucks mystique was lost. Part of the response to this shift was a corporate decision to hawk non-coffee beverages and sundry merchandise in the store, banking on the brand's power to sell music, books, and so on. This decision was, again, rather astute in terms of understanding neoliberal purchasing, but the side-effect of this commercialization of the brand was a further loss of its authenticity. Such brand delegitimation opened much of the market space where third wave coffee would thrive.



## Starbucks and Ethical Sourcing

Thus far I have been arguing for the role of aesthetics in the success of Starbucks' branding. Here I take up the ethical component of its brand. It is not only that you are being sold solace at Starbucks, but your purchase allows you to "make a difference" in the world, too. Because Starbucks demands that its suppliers engage in ethical practices, ranging from adherence to fair trade standards to the use of recycled materials in consumables, your purchase of its product indirectly subverts the inequalities of global capitalism and aids in the protection of the environment. Starbucks also makes sure that its initiatives in this area are well publicized. From in-store signage and fair trade logos to corporate outreach via public speaking and the Starbucks website, patrons are continually informed of the good their consumption can do.

Surely such initiatives are laudable. Indeed, one sign of their importance is the speed with which third wave coffee has taken up similar causes. But here again we run up against the problem of scale, common to both Starbucks and third wave roasters.<sup>4</sup> The explosive growth of the Starbucks brand, from the physical store to supermarket coffee, means that the company couldn't use all fair trade beans if it tried – there aren't enough in the world!<sup>5</sup> According to Starbucks' own website, fair trade coffees made up approximately 10.6 percent of all coffee sold in 2009, while an additional 3.8 percent of coffee sold was certified organic. Now, to be fair, some 81 percent of coffee purchased by Starbucks in 2009 adhered to its internal set of "C.A.F.E. Practices," which subject the economic, ethical, and environmental practices of both buyer and supplier to third-party verification.<sup>6</sup> Notably absent from the materials promoting these practices, however, is the fact that such coffees are not necessarily organically produced. Additionally, specific requirements for producers are glossed over.

Again, my point is not to denigrate what I assume are good-faith efforts by Starbucks to balance its desire for social responsibility with the voracious need for profit. Starbucks is, as its website notes, the world's largest purchaser of fair trade coffees; for this, it should be commended. It is the disconnect between the image and the facts, however, that gives pause. That so many people are aware of these kinds of slippages between branding and reality is an important event in American consumerism, part of a broader cultural backlash against crass commercialism. That, despite this awareness, so many people continue to consume according



to the winds of advertising remains troubling. One is reminded here of nothing less than Slavoj Žižek's understanding of how ideology operates under neoliberalism. The cynical function of ideology requires that "they [consumers or, more generally, political subjects] know that, in their activity, they are following an illusion, but still, they are doing it. For example, they know that their idea of Freedom is masking a particular form of exploitation, but they still continue to follow this idea of Freedom."<sup>7</sup>

## From Starbucks to Stumptown

I have been arguing that the third wave of specialty coffee would not have been possible without Starbucks. Only by Starbucks' vigorous education of the masses, through the costly fashioning of an appreciation for a specific coffee aesthetic and image of corporate responsibility, could the third wave have come along and challenged its hegemony. Third wave coffee depends upon a consumer with a nuanced palate, a taste for social justice, and a fat wallet. Starbucks has done the hard work of creating just such a consumer. Now third wavers show their appreciation for this expenditure by stealing Starbucks' clientele.

They do so by following the Starbucks game plan to the letter – the emphasis on artisan, handcrafted coffee coupled with a commitment to a more ethical version of capitalism. While Starbucks was tinkering with breakfast sandwiches and private-label compact discs, third wave giants like Counter Culture, Intelligentsia, and Stumptown were sending staff out to coffee farms across the globe, laying the groundwork for what would become today's direct trade initiatives. While Starbucks was introducing automated espresso machines into its stores, third wave baristas were forming the Barista Guild, organizing regional training sessions, and competing in international barista contests.

Third wave coffee has, in effect, overtaken Starbucks among aficionados by becoming better versions of Starbucks. The drinks seem more authentic. The commitment to ethical practice is better publicized and often more transparent, with initiatives like Cup for Education<sup>8</sup> and Crop to Cup<sup>9</sup> becoming increasingly common components of business models. The commitment to certified coffees – from fair trade and organic to Rainforest Alliance and Slow Food – also signals customers as to the ethical standards of a roaster or shop.<sup>10</sup>



These same companies, however, face an increasingly important challenge. How can they learn the lessons of Starbucks' recent troubles while they expand their businesses? How, in other words, can they remain true to their ideals while expanding their businesses? Counter Culture has training centers in New York and Washington, DC, Intelligentsia has just opened shops and a roastery in California, and Stumptown, having moved some of its roasting into New York, is being described in the press as the "new Starbucks."<sup>11</sup> Can these third wave businesses succeed without cutting corners to improve profits? Can they maintain their brand prestige while expanding into new markets?

Here we encounter the most interesting question about third wave coffee. Can it endure its growth and increasing commodification? Does it scale? In the end, of course, all third wave companies are working within the capitalist system. They are profit-seeking enterprises. This, to my mind, is the key test of the third wave model – is it possible to be a capitalist and remain committed to some kind of ethics in business practices, or does success require preferring profit over people?

To further investigate this question, we must return to the two key elements of Starbucks' branding success – aesthetics and ethics – and see how they are refined in third wave branding. If it is possible for a company to succeed without succumbing to the most crass forms of profit seeking, this success will depend upon the careful negotiation of an aesthetic and ethical vision that moves product and spirit equally.

## Fair Trade Revisited

The fair trade movement and ethical sourcing are deeply embedded in the third wave ethos. TransFair USA, one of the leading certifiers in the Americas, describes the certifying process as one that "empowers farmers and farm workers to lift themselves out of poverty by investing in their farms and communities, protecting the environment, and learning the business skills necessary to compete in the global marketplace."<sup>12</sup> The fair trade ideal is thus twofold: to simultaneously improve both the coffee itself and the livelihoods of producers by tying improved purchase price to social and environmental controls. But what does fair trade really do? How is it viewed by producers and purchasers? Is it ultimately fair?

In *Brewing Justice: Fair Trade Coffee, Sustainability, and Survival*, Daniel Jaffee offers a studied critique of the fair trade movement on the basis of



multi-year fieldwork in Oaxaca, Mexico. One of Jaffee's key insights is that there are at least three competing visions for what fair trade is and should be.<sup>13</sup> To the three versions of fair trade described in Jaffee's book, I will add a fourth.

There are those who view fair trade as a way to address the problem of market *access*. On this view, fair trade counteracts economic barriers and injustices enforced on producers by facilitating market access. Because wealthy nations often float heavily subsidized commodities on the international market, artificially depressing prices in the process, the idea behind this version of fair trade involves the carving out of niche spaces in the market for certified goods and services.

There are also those who view fair trade in terms of market *reform*. Given the fundamental inequalities present in global economics, fair trade works to reform capitalism by giving producers a more direct, or less mediated, avenue for sales and marketing. The hegemony of capitalism is not contested here; rather, fair trade as market reform device works within capitalism to better the lives of producers.

Such a desire to work within the system is not part of the third vision described by Jaffee. On this view, fair trade is a way to work toward dismantling the abuses of capitalism. Such a *market-breaking* strategy views depressed global commodity prices as components of broader economic evils. The price protections built into fair trade agreements help to counteract the deleterious effects of neoliberalism on developing countries and the Global South.

For Jaffee, these competing visions for fair trade often result in differing tactical plans for activism. While some advocates define success in terms of the adoption of certified coffees by local shops, others would argue that such a narrowly defined project does nothing to undercut broader systemic evils. Moreover, there is an argument to be made that one of the underlying premises of fair trade – that justice can be effected within the framework of free markets – only further ensnares producers in the vagaries of the market. Evidence for this viewpoint can be found in the quotation from TransFair above, where the benefits of certification basically devolve to greater capital investments and increased market competitiveness.

From the perspective of the roaster/coffee salesperson, there is a fourth account of the fair trade movement to consider. This involves the *marketability* of certified coffee. One of the first things I learned in the roastery retail room was the marketing cache of certification. Some people would come in and ask specifically for fair trade or organic coffee; others, when





presented with choices, would tend toward certified products. From the roaster's perspectives, fair trade is important, at least in part, because *it sells*. Any discussion of third wave coffee that does not acknowledge this is, in my opinion, obfuscatory.

Granting, then, the four differing accounts of the reasons for fair trade coffee, we must now tackle a much larger question. Is fair trade really fair? Jaffee concludes that fair trade is a “necessary but not sufficient”<sup>14</sup> step in the right direction, and I direct the reader to his book for the details. I do, however, want to investigate one of Jaffee's concerns more specifically, because it cuts to the heart of the debate over the fairness of fair trade. Certification is often overlooked in discussion of fair trade or organic coffees. Because of the transparency built into the certification process, it is easy to assume that everything is above board. Nevertheless, the stringent, sometimes arcane nature of the rules for compliance can disqualify otherwise qualified participants, and even small errors in documentation can lead to decertification.

The cost of certification is also problematic. Small farmers may not have the financial resources to pay for certification, even if they fulfill all other requirements. The same is true of organic certification, and such financial disenfranchisement is doubly tragic given that smaller farms are often organic by necessity – petrochemicals are prohibitively expensive for many producers. Because small farms may not be able to afford certification, even while fulfilling all other requirements in the process, they lose out on access to fair trade/organic markets and marketing.

There is, then, some reason to agree with the Mexican extension agent, quoted in Jaffee's book, when he describes certification as “ecological neo-colonialism.”<sup>15</sup> Certification, by definition, entails the imposition of foreign regulations and what amounts to monetary tribute on indigenous producers. Because there are limited, if any, avenues for producers to contest the terms of certification, describing the process as a form of colonialism is not wholly unreasonable.

Some third wave companies, in light of the concerns addressed above, are moving toward alternative forms of ethical sourcing. So-called “relationship coffee” and direct trade are two avatars of this movement, designed to get around the remaining problems of the fair trade movement. Granting the real advantages of this alternative model for sourcing, the dual challenges of eco-colonialism and scale linger. If the standards set by the purchasing company are not met by the producers, even with the assistance of their corporate partners, sales will not go forward, or purchase price will be decreased. That the purchaser holds all



of the cards in the relationship, setting terms and conditions, etc., only further reinforces the specter of colonialism.

The problem of scale also haunts the direct trade movement given the nature of the environmental controls built into most relationship agreements. Would organic practices work on large-scale industrial farms? The jury is still out on this matter.

If, in the end, fair trade is not a panacea, why is it so well promoted by producers and in marketing campaigns? The answer, in part, is that certification sells. Highlighting a commitment to ethical sourcing allows the consumer to feel as if her purchase is doing good in the world, as if the corporation cares about those upon whose backs its wealth is built. To its credit, Starbucks does seem to possess a corporate concern for responsible sourcing, is known for its decent treatment of employees, and evinces some level of environmental awareness. How much of this commitment is authentic, and how much is a form of greenwashing, is a question that ultimately admits of no clear answer. Such is the continued effectiveness of Starbucks' branding.

Third wave shops are equally guilty of having mixed motives regarding the fair trade movement. Ethical sourcing is surely a cornerstone of the third wave movement, and the various levels of direct trade represent some real advances over the limitations of fair trade certification. But we need to be clear on this matter. Direct trade does not only position a roaster as a good corporate citizen. It also gives that roaster exclusive access to a well-grown, delicious cup of coffee, and this exclusivity may result in sales within an increasingly discerning marketplace.

Fair trade represents an improvement upon the traditional coffee market. Certification has introduced some real changes for good. The problems of scale and eco-colonialism still haunt the movement, and until they can be fully exorcised, the promise of fair trade will not be fulfilled in its practice.

## The Hermeneutics of Taste

The third wave did not just take over the ethical component of Starbucks' branding. It also co-opted the aesthetic dimension by promising consumers a better cup of coffee. More specifically, the third wave builds upon Starbucks' branding by refining customer palates, and by introducing a touch of elitism into its marketing. There is, without question,



a certain snobbishness and hipster attitude built into the third wave, and for good reason: It sells.

My goal in this section is to puncture one of the primary myths of the third wave. I quote Nicholas Cho, former owner of Murky Coffee, to set the scene.

So what of this “Third Wave?” In an admittedly esoteric way, I usually refer to the “Third Wave” as *letting the coffee speak for itself*. During the first two waves, we appreciated coffee for what it gives us: caffeine, a hot beverage to sip and enjoy a conversation over, a drink to modify with sweetener, dairy (or non-dairy) creamers, syrups, whipped cream, etc. The Third Wave is about enjoying coffee for **what it is**.<sup>16</sup>

The third wave lets “the coffee speak for itself”? Nonsense. What the third wave does, and does incredibly well, is create a narrative or hermeneutic for coffee, a set of expectations that a consumer comes to internalize and insist upon. Taste – for coffee, whiskey, fine clothes, whatever – is not innate, but must be taught. It is the *language* of third wave coffee, in particular, that requires apprenticeship. An example helps to make this clear.

I am currently drinking the last of an order of Intelligentsia’s House Blend. The bag claims that “this medium-bodied blend offers subtle fruit notes with milk chocolate and caramel close behind. The balanced acidity finishes with notes of baked apples.” If I were to ask a non-initiate to have a sip and describe what she tasted, her description would not in any way resemble Intelligentsia’s. She might say that it was strong or bitter, or perhaps even bold. But “milk chocolate and caramel with baked apple on the finish”? Highly unlikely. Such a nuanced palate is made, not born. And it is made most directly through the ritual known as cupping.

Coffee cupping is the coffee industry’s preferred method for sampling and testing various coffees, providing a standardized mechanism for evaluating coffees while minimizing participant bias. While cupping is a daily practice at most good roasteries, functioning as the first line of quality control, it also can function as a powerful teaching tool for coffee newcomers and enthusiasts.

How does cupping work? To begin, a series of small cups is placed around a table, where uniform scoops of coffee are saturated with near-boiling water for approximately three to four minutes.<sup>17</sup> Ted Lingle, former director of the Specialty Coffee Association of America, recommends a ratio of 7.25 grams of coffee to 150 milliliters of water,<sup>18</sup> but the



specific ratio is less important (for non-professionals) than its consistent application across all samples.

As infusion continues, coffee grounds will rise to the tops of each cup, settling to the bottom as time goes on. A “cap,” or crust, remains at the top of the cup, and the first task of the cupper is the breaking of this crust. The novice is instructed to take his spoon and gently stir the grounds into the cup, getting his nose close to the cup in the process and deeply inhaling the coffee aroma. Experienced cuppers will often gain important clues as to origin simply from the aromatic properties of the cup.

After the crust is broken and the surface of each cup is skimmed to remove loose grounds, the actual tasting takes place. Each participant takes a cupping spoon and brings a small portion to their mouths. The trick to a successful tasting is *the slurp* – slurping the sample allows for a broad coating of the mouth, and it also allows the sample to undergo aeration, maximizing the aromatic component of the taste experience. After the slurp comes *the spit*, familiar to anyone who has done any wine tasting. The process ends with the rinsing of one’s spoon, and the transition to the next sample to be cupped.<sup>19</sup>

Let’s examine what a cupper experiences in those few seconds between slurp and spit. A small amount of liquid is introduced into the mouth and rolled about, coating the tongue and the back of the throat. Perhaps the coffee has a distinctive mouthfeel, or perhaps some aspect of its flavor immediately manifests itself. The great mystery for most beginners is the specificity with which an experienced cupper can pinpoint some element of the taste experience. I remember vividly how perplexed I was when, at my first cupping, the lead instructor proclaimed that he got notes of plantain in one cup, and graham cracker in another. Plantain and graham cracker! To me, such descriptions smacked of unadulterated hucksterism – all I could taste was *coffee*. Part of me thought that they were simply having fun at my expense. Why couldn’t I taste the plantain?

Now, of course, I know that there was nothing wrong with me. I had not begun to develop the necessary experience or vocabulary for such accuracy. As time progressed, and as I cupped more regularly with others, I began to pick up some of what they were talking about. I would ask others what notes they got from a particular cup, and compare my findings with theirs. Slowly, I began to connect words with specific flavors, and certain coffees with their defining characteristics. For all of this, I must confess that I have yet to taste the plantain or the graham cracker.

This example also helps to make clear the two interrelated aspects of the aesthetics of coffee. Coffee aficionados are not born, but made. More



specifically, they become *initiates* through an educational process that reshapes their coffee understanding and perceptual experience. Once you have become accustomed to specialty coffee, there's no going back. What was once normal becomes abnormal and undrinkable. Such a perceptual shift depends upon the insertion of the consumer into a specific understanding of coffee, one that is not merely intellectual but infiltrates the most basic functioning of the sense organs.

The success of third wave is thus built upon the creation of a coffee *hermeneutic*. Here I borrow from the work of Martin Heidegger (1889–1976) and Hans-Georg Gadamer (1900–2002), two of the pioneers of the contemporary philosophical movement known as hermeneutical phenomenology. In hermeneutics the goal is to account for the ways in which all modes of human understanding presuppose some kind of familiarity with the world by means of reflective consciousness or interpretation.

Heidegger, for example, believed that human beings are always-already thrown into a world that is pre-laden with meaning. The world is thick with received meaning, so that all of our experience is already shot through with historical and cultural norms, expectations, and so on. Even our most basic perceptual experience is pre-colored or “fore-seen” due to historical and cultural situatedness. That we experience the objects of the world as integral and important already implies for Heidegger the constitutive role played by such situatedness.<sup>20</sup>

We know that chairs are for sitting just by looking at them, and we know that cups are for drinking from. Such pre-knowledge does not operate on the level of conscious experience – we don't pause for a moment while looking at a chair in order to categorize it. Rather, our situatedness in a meaning-laden world means that chairs and cups are disclosed immediately in normal experience *as* chairs and cups. So long as the cups and the chairs remain in good working order, we need never problematize their use again. We expect them to hold liquid and support our bottoms, and we are shocked when they fail at either task.

Third wave coffee, in educating its customers through conversation and cupping, actively creates a hermeneutic for its product. What was once a black, bitter liquid becomes an aromatic delight filled with notes of plantain and graham cracker. It is not merely that we interpret the brute perception of the liquid differently – *the experience itself changes* in light of the new set of expectations and standards we bring to the cupping table. Our experience of coffee is no different in this regard than our experience of the chair. For a properly educated customer, specialty



coffee becomes the new normal. The success of third wave coffee depends upon the continual creation of a hermeneutic and the initiation of its customer base into it.

At last we begin to understand the peculiar naïveté of the quote above, where Cho proclaims the primary goal of the third wave as “letting the coffee speak for itself” and “enjoying coffee for what it is.” No human experience speaks for itself. No experience is immediately given without filter or condition. Instead, all of our experiences are mediated by time and place, history and culture. We approach each cup of coffee just as we experience a chair. Both are encountered in light of a set of non-thematic preconceptions and expectations, or what I have been describing as our hermeneutical situatedness.

Cho’s quote is doubly curious given the emphasis placed by third wavers on customer education. Because customers do not tend to want to spend upwards of \$20 for a pound of coffee without good reason, they must be taught to appreciate the nuances of specialty coffee. Much time and money are spent on educational outreach, websites, and cuppings. Why such expense and investment if the coffee speaks for itself?

Perhaps a better model for understanding the third wave emphasis upon customer education and the crafting of a coffee aesthetic is found in the ancient art of ventriloquism. The ventriloquist is an illusionist, creating the appearance of an inanimate object speaking through misdirection and the throwing of her voice. If coffee speaks for itself, as Cho maintains, it does so only through an act of ventriloquism. What we hear, and what we taste, when we encounter specialty coffee is not entirely attributable to the coffee – there is always someone behind the scenes, feeding our cup its lines.

## Ethics and Aesthetics in Action: The Roast

Third wave coffee, I have argued, brands itself as a new kind of capitalist entity, as interested in altruistic causes as it is in corporate earnings. Such branding is, at least on the face of things, fundamentally at odds with the realities of the marketplace. The cardinal rule of any business is that it must move product if it is to survive. Talk about ethical sourcing and precision roasting is all well and good, but if the company fails to make money, no amount of branding will keep it in business. Why the apparent subterfuge?



This is, in part, a question of perspective. What appears to outsiders as altruism is almost certainly better understood as careful brand positioning. Nevertheless, we should not underestimate the novelty of companies like Intelligentsia. What we witness in third wave coffee are some of the most successful attempts yet at social entrepreneurship, where free enterprise is combined with social activism in the interest of amelioration. All of the decisions made by a third wave roaster – from purchasing beans to roasting to marketing – must serve the dual ends of profit and justice. While I do not want to contribute to the myth of the roaster as rock star or genius,<sup>21</sup> I cannot over-emphasize the difficulty in successfully navigating the Scylla and Charybdis of profiteering and simple do-gooding.

Here I want to briefly consider the ways in which the roaster must continually keep both the aesthetic and ethical elements of branding in mind if he or she is to succeed economically. From ordering beans, to the roast itself, to marketing and education, the roaster must always be mindful of the ways in which his or her decisions affect the bottom line.

We see this in something as simple as ordering green beans to roast. A roaster may rely on the advice of his broker, of course, and can cup samples sent by his importer. The most important factor in choosing which lot to buy is marketability, or the potential for steady sales. If costs are similar, I'd take some kind of certified bean over its non-certified twin for this very reason. Certification sells coffee because it positions your brand as socially conscious. That certification means a producer is paid a fair price for her product is an incidental side benefit. Subverting neoliberalism is nice, but in the end, there's payroll to meet every week.

Roasting is often seen by outsiders as some kind of mystical practice or high art. Here again, however, appearances do not resemble reality. Anyone can learn the rudiments of roasting in a day or two. A “paint by numbers” roast on a Diedrich roaster, for example, boils down to three tasks. The roast should hit two time/temperature targets (280°F at 4–6 minutes, 340°F at 8–10 minutes) without much intervention. In order to control the speed of the roast, the roaster should alter the airflow through the roasting drum. There are also audible clues (the first and second cracks) that inform the roaster as to the progression of the roast. Everything else – the charge temperature, roast level, etc. – is up to the discretion of the roaster.

Expertise is nevertheless necessary to wring the last bit of potential from green beans. For the expert roaster, the three tasks I've just described are not discrete events but components of an organic process guided by a knowledge of his or her clientele.<sup>22</sup> I have a friend, for example, who



roasts just about everything in his shop very darkly because he thinks that's what his customers want. But the roaster, if he is striving for quality, cannot simply roast according to the whims of his customers – not everything that can be roasted dark should be!

The roaster must therefore effect a dialectic between customer education and catering to existing taste. Here, however, is where the third wave sometimes over-extends itself. Just as my friend really should try to lead his customers toward a more nuanced understanding of coffee through education, some third wavers move too far in the opposite direction and ignore customer demand. Flavored coffee is anathema to many in the specialty coffee world, but smart roasters will sell it – and lots of it – without hesitation.

## Conclusion

Is it really possible for a company to do good *and* make money? This, I have argued, is the ultimate test of the third wave and for specialty coffee more generally. As we have seen, some companies are better at enacting this ideal than others. Starbucks has seen its branding discredited to some degree, despite its good-faith efforts to roast ethically sourced, fairly priced beans. The best third wave companies have carefully avoided some of Starbucks' growing pains, but the true test of their business model lies in the future.

This vision of hybrid capitalism, balancing the profit motive with social entrepreneurship, is increasingly common in the specialty coffee world. From Stumptown to Intelligentsia to my own *alma mater*, Columbia Street Roastery in Champaign, Illinois, such hybrids are reaping the benefits of their dual commitment to ethical practices and a delicious cup of coffee. As we enjoy their products, we coffee snobs are both literally and figuratively in their debt.

## NOTES

- 1 Here I follow Trish Skeie in her drawing of distinctions between first, second, and third wave coffee. Briefly put, the first wave involved the industrialization of coffee roasting and production. The second wave saw the birth of specialty coffee, including Starbucks. The third wave emerged largely as a





- reaction to the excesses of the second wave, emphasizing artisanal roasting and a commitment to ethical practices over and against commercialization and commodification. See Skeie's "Norway and Coffee," in *The Flamekeeper: Newsletter of the Roaster's Guild* (Spring 2003).
- 2 Bryant Simon, *Everything But the Coffee: Learning about America from Starbucks* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2009).
  - 3 Critics point to the abject lack of recycling initiatives for such consumables, as well as poor in-store water usage policies. See Angela Balakrishnan, "Starbucks Wastes Millions of Litres of Water a Day," *guardian.co.uk*, October 6, 2008.
  - 4 Consider the fact that Intelligentsia, one of the first movers in direct trade, still must rely on coffee purchased from specialty brokers to meet production needs, especially in its blends. Careful observers will note the lack of any direct trade or in season branding on a number of blends and the occasional single-origin coffee.
  - 5 In 2008, approximately 81.2 million pounds of organic coffee were imported worldwide, while another 145.1 million pounds of Fair Trade Certified coffee were sold. (It is unclear as to whether coffees that are both Fair Trade Certified and organic are double-counted in this statistic.) Starbucks could not have bought enough certified beans to meet its production needs, as it reported purchasing approximately 345 million pounds in 2008 on its website. See Ellen Pay's report for the United Nations Food and Agriculture Organization, "The Market for Organic and Fair-Trade Coffee" (September 2009) for more on this topic ([http://www.fao.org/fileadmin/templates/organicexports/docs/Market\\_Organic\\_FT\\_Coffee.pdf](http://www.fao.org/fileadmin/templates/organicexports/docs/Market_Organic_FT_Coffee.pdf)).
  - 6 Scientific Certification Systems, "Responsible Sourcing Strategies – Starbucks C.A.F.E. Practices," [http://www.scs-certified.com/retail/starbucks\\_documents.php](http://www.scs-certified.com/retail/starbucks_documents.php).
  - 7 Slavoj Žižek, *The Sublime Object of Ideology* (London: Verso, 1989), p. 33.
  - 8 [www.cupforeducation.org](http://www.cupforeducation.org).
  - 9 [www.croptocup.com](http://www.croptocup.com).
  - 10 We should not solely attribute the move toward ethical sourcing to Starbucks, of course. Both Starbucks and the third wave are, in part, responding to broader cultural trends toward conscientious consumption. The Whole Foods phenomenon and the popularity of Michael Pollan's work are both symptomatic of this trend.
  - 11 Josh Ozersky, "Is Stumptown the New Starbucks – or Better?" *Time*, March 9, 2010, <http://www.time.com/time/nation/article/0,8599,1970653,00.html>.
  - 12 TransFair USA, "Trade Overview," <http://www.transfairusa.org/content/about/overview.php>.
  - 13 Daniel Jaffee, *Brewing Justice: Fair Trade Coffee, Sustainability, and Survival* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007).



- 14 Ibid., p. 198.
- 15 Ibid., p. 152.
- 16 Nicholas Cho, "The BGA and the Third Wave," *CoffeeGeek.com*, <http://coffeageek.com/opinions/bgafiles/04-02-2005/>.
- 17 Experienced cuppers will also note the aroma of the dry coffee grounds before introducing water into the cups. Beginners, however, will often skip this step.
- 18 Ted R. Lingle, *The Basics of Cupping Coffee*, 3rd ed. (Long Beach: Specialty Coffee Association of America, 2003).
- 19 It should be noted that I am here describing an educational cupping for consumers or for internal quality control. There is an evaluative process used by cuppers to grade coffees, with scores ranging from 50 to 100. (Specialty coffees are not supposed to receive scores below 80.) Such numerical evaluations, while critical for the grading of large numbers of samples for potential purchase, are not necessary for beginners, and may not be desirable more generally.
- 20 See Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time* (New York: Harper and Row, 1962).
- 21 See, for example, Michael Weissman's dreamy, if otherwise interesting, paean to the third wave: *God in a Cup: The Obsessive Quest for the Perfect Coffee* (Hoboken, NJ: John Wiley & Sons, Inc., 2008).
- 22 In this I basically agree with Evan Selinger's amendments to Hubert Dreyfus's phenomenology of expertise. See Selinger's "Chess-Playing Computers and Embodied Grandmasters: In What Ways Does the Difference Matter?" in Benjamin Hale (ed.) *Philosophy Looks at Chess* (Chicago: Open Court, 2008), pp. 65–87; and Selinger and Crease's "Dreyfus on Expertise: The Limits of Phenomenological Analysis," in Evan Selinger and Robert Crease (eds.) *The Philosophy of Expertise* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2006).

