One Saturday morning in mid-January 2020, Elika Liftee was getting ready to make a special cup of coffee. He was backstage, behind a row of blue trade-show curtains that had transformed a former factory in Nashville, Tennessee, into the site of a qualifying round for the United States Coffee Championships. Conversations were hushed as competitors consulted with their teams and rehearsed presentations. On the other side of the divide, audience members found their seats while technicians double-checked the equipment. This was one of two qualifying events held across the country that year, and the forty-one competitors in Nashville had claimed their spots by placing in one of dozens of regional feeder rounds. The winners would advance to the national championships.

Liftee’s background is at once cosmopolitan and provincial. Born in Japan to an Air Force mother and a Hawaiian father, he grew up in Oklahoma. It was a typical Midwestern childhood, as he describes it, but with a kitchen stocked full of papaya, guava, and other tropical foods. He attended college for a few semesters, then worked several odd jobs before finally landing a position at Onyx Coffee Lab in Rogers, Arkansas. In a progression characteristic of many coffee professionals, he first visited Onyx as a customer—he was a regular in his college
days—and when they brought him on as an employee, he started as a barista and moved up through the ranks before becoming a trainer. At one point he was promoted to café manager, but he found that he liked working with coffee more than handling people. At Onyx, his interest in coffee became an obsession: after soaking up as much as he could on the job, he would go home and watch YouTube coffee videos and read research reports from the UC Davis Coffee Center.

The Nashville event was Liftee’s third attempt at the Brewer’s Cup competition. Preparing, he explains, always starts with a story, and this time he decided to tell his own story. For the coffee he chose a naturally processed Gesha—a prized varietal of the *Coffea arabica* species—grown on the La Palma y El Tucán farm in Colombia. Onyx paid US $212 a pound for the beans at a time when commodity coffee was trading for $1.04 per pound on the New York exchange, but Liftee was enchanted by its range of flavors, from pineapple nectar to plum and black tea. Natural processing, in which the fruit is allowed to partially rot off the beans, imparts a fruity acidity, and Liftee wanted to use those notes to reflect his heritage.

The Brewer’s Cup is one of five tracks in the United States Coffee Championships; there are also competitions for baristas, roasters, tasters, and mixologists. Contestants train for months, sometimes years, to prepare, investing time and money to hire coaches, search out obscure coffees with unusual flavors, and practice their skills. With detailed protocols covering everything from water quality to grinder specifications, this is no casual contest. Entrants each have ten minutes to brew and present their coffee to a panel of three judges. The coffee will be tasted at three temperatures (70°C, 40°C, and 30°C) and rated on a scale from zero to ten in seven areas (aroma, flavor, aftertaste, acidity, body, balance, and overall taste). Points are added up, along with an evaluation of service and presentation, to produce an overall numerical score. Taste may seem particularly subjective, but the judges have been trained in sensory evaluation techniques, and there is surprisingly little variation in scores.
The organizers go to great lengths to make these competitions as objective as possible, but a lot still rests on the hard-to-quantify art of storytelling, the narrative brewers tell to situate their coffees and justify their choices. When he takes the stage, Liftee tells the story of La Palma and El Tucán while he heats the water and grinds the beans, talking about the couple who run the farm and their dedication to cultivating unusual varietals. He places ten grams of ground coffee in each of the three Kalita Wave ceramic drippers, explaining that the Japanese brand’s unique design helps bring out subtle flavor notes. As he lifts the kettle, Liftee tells the audience that he will use an unconventional quick pour technique—forcing the hot water through the grounds in two minutes rather than the usual three-and-a-half to four—and that the coffee’s floral and fruity flavor notes will become more prominent as it cools. With individual cups presented to them, the judges pull out their tasting spoons, dip into the brew, and slurp loudly, rolling the liquid around in their mouths before spitting it out and contemplating their scores. In the final tally, Liftee earns 162.83 out of a possible 200 points and claims the top spot. He went on to win the national championships the following month with the same coffee and presentation, and he would have been a strong contender in the world championships in Australia, but they were cancelled that year due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

From an anthropological perspective, such competitions can tell us a lot about underlying cultural values and power dynamics. When I first started exploring the world of high-end coffees, it felt at once familiar and exotic. I considered myself a pretty serious coffee drinker, spent a lot of time in coffee shops, and was conversant with trends in artisanal foodstuffs. Still, I felt like an interloper at competitions and trade shows, out of my league among all the professionals and aficionados committed to the craft of coffee, with their own specialized language, customs, and opaque points of reference. Over time, I came to see how the high-end coffee world, as a cultural community, orients itself around certain
values that transcend the beverage itself: a dedication to craft, a quest for quality, a veneration of authenticity, and a commitment to building social relationships through the commercial trade. There is certainly competition and discord, bad actors and better ones, contradictions between ideals and practice, but the most common refrain in my many conversations with coffee professionals was around the common project of finding and producing better coffee—better tasting and better for the farmers who grow it.

For a social scientist, this raises a number of questions: What makes a coffee “better”? What goes into a coffee like the La Palma y El Tucán Gesha to make it worth $212 a pound? At the coffee shop, we are asked to pay more for quality, but who decides what constitutes “quality”? For most customers, selection is akin to looking at a restaurant’s list of unfamiliar wines: the price indicates quality rather than the other way around. Baristas and traders talk about quality as if it were an objective characteristic out there in the world—something to be discovered, ideally in exotic, out-of-the-way places. For many professionals and serious consumers, the quest for quality is a self-evidently virtuous pursuit—progressive, even liberating, in its rejection of lowest-common-denominator mass production.3

The irony is that in looking for quality, these same coffee professionals and enthusiasts are also defining what constitutes quality. Through conversations and competitions, they work out among themselves conventional understandings about which traits should be valued and which should be discounted, the flavors that are in and those that are out, what commands a price premium this season and what does not.4 In this system, the real power derives from the ability to define what quality is—not in the celebrated labor of finding quality, but in determining what gets measured and what gets valued. Put another way, power in these markets comes not from control over the means of production but from the ability to channel symbolic sorts of worth. Many—perhaps most—Third Wave professionals and enthusiasts see themselves as involved in a larger project to liberate food systems from
industrial-scale production, to promote artisanal excellence, and to embed supply chains in more equitable social relations. Yet cosmopolitan quests for authenticity and quality intersect with colonial histories of economic power and racial exclusion in morally complicated and politically fraught ways.  

Using the case study of specialty coffees grown in the highlands of Guatemala and sold by craft roasters in the United States, this book explores how economic gain is realized through translating different conceptions of worth across material, cultural, and political value worlds—and what this can tell us about the twenty-first century global political economy. The high-end coffee trade illustrates the importance of intangible and symbolic attributes in adding economic value; it also highlights how such commodity circuits operate within a neoliberal matrix of power linked to legacies of colonialism. I focus on Third Wave coffees: single-estate, artisanally roasted varietals that command high prices—$20 and up for a twelve-ounce bag of whole beans in the early 2020s. To justify these prices, great emphasis is placed on quality “in the cup”: the way coffee tastes and the terroir, processing methods, and other material inputs that produce sought-after flavors. Beyond that, consumers are also paying for symbolic values—a narrative connection with the grower, the novelty of discovering new flavors, an appreciation of the craft.

My research looks at how people create value. When we say “value” in the singular, we generally mean price, but when we say “values” in the plural, we mean moral and cultural and political and symbolic sorts of value. I am interested in how these different measures of worth are intertwined with one another, how they influence individuals’ decisions, and how they become encoded in social conventions and institutions. Policy and public discourse tend to privilege economic and quantitative values over other kinds of worth—and increasingly so as cost/benefit analyses extend to more and more arenas of life. Certainly, market value has the appeal of being straightforward to calculate: with pounds and kilos, dollars and euros, there are solid metrics to go by,
numbers that can be entered into spreadsheets to compare unlike things. But what about dignity or fairness or love? Such “imaginative values”—whose worth stems from a link to something transcendent, a desired but intangible ideal—resist quantification. Instead, they rely on subjective measures of what is good or bad, better or worse; evaluation in these spheres requires judgment and not just calculation. The rub is that much of life is about balancing substantively different sorts of values, translating moral into economic values, or social into political values—something we all wrestle with every day in our personal and professional lives.

These personal struggles are not just a matter of moral character or free will but take place in particular social, political, and economic contexts that structure individual choices. Third Wave coffee production and consumption emerged from a particular history of liberal modernity and colonial social relations. It has flourished under the conditions of early twenty-first-century global capitalism, including neoliberal deregulation and privatization; accelerated levels of connectivity through communication and transportation; post-Fordist forms of production, with elaborate supply chains and flexible forms of accumulation; the rapid growth of investment in intangible versus material assets; the expansion of market logics into more and more areas of life; and the linking of identity to consumption patterns and marketing narratives.

Economics textbook and business reporters explain that supply and demand determine price, but that simple equation hides the complicated ways that demand emerges and how it is framed by market choices. For their part, consumers often rely on judgment devices to help determine the worth of an item; these are sometimes rational and rigorous (as with cost/benefit calculations) and at other times are vague and loose, based on imaginative values with no numerical equivalents. At the rigorous end of the spectrum is standardization, a hallmark of Fordist mass production of commodities. The essence of a commodity is substitutability—one item within a class and grade is as good as another—made possible by standardization: in selling a gallon of Brent
crude oil or a pound of Kenyan AA coffee on a commodity exchange, the specific producer does not matter, as any lot is assumed to be the same as any other. In contrast, high-end markets are marked by singularization, emphasizing the uniqueness of products, with the greatest gains realized by making an emotional connection with consumers based around shared values.\textsuperscript{11} We see this in domain of origin designations: a Château La Tour St. Émilion Bordeaux, or a natural arabica varietal from the La Palma y El Tucán farm in Colombia, are valued for their distinctiveness. Selling products in these markets requires invoking narrative backstories that can become intertwined with a consumer’s sense of identity, insinuated into people’s lives through their views of themselves and their place in the world.\textsuperscript{12}

Coffee is an ideal subject for a study of the interplay of material and symbolic values. Think of the different economic values that go into a cup of coffee—the price of cherry sold at the farm, the cost of beans bought by a roaster, what you pay at your coffee shop. That cup also likely has other values attached, perhaps paying a Fair Trade premium to support a moral cause, perhaps responding to a claim about the values of terroir or the biography of the grower. There may also be emotional attachments: a comforting morning ritual or the sociability of a shared moment with a friend. The coffee may invoke affective values, the smell and taste triggering memories and associations. Then think also of what the beans that went into that cup mean to those who pick them, how they link to their life projects and moral worlds.

At the heart of this book is a surprising story. For generations, Maya farmers in the highlands of Guatemala—forced off their ancestral lands in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries—were compelled to work under harsh conditions as seasonal migrant laborers on the Spanish- and German-owned coffee plantations that had taken their territory.\textsuperscript{13} The 1990s and 2000s saw a dramatic shift in the international coffee market, part of a quality turn in high-end foods that gave rise to the proliferation of more distinct versions of formerly everyday products, from microbrew beers and artisanal olive oil to exotic salts
and heirloom tomatoes. Coffee has played a significant role in this quality turn, and in a bit of poetic justice, the steep mountain slopes to which the Guatemala Maya had been displaced turned out to be ideal for producing the sorts of coffees the new market was seeking. This market shift created a boom in many Maya communities as former plantation workers began to grow and sell their own coffee. More recently, demand for even higher-quality Third Wave coffees has been the fastest growing sector of the coffee market. These coffees flourish in the high altitude and microclimates of Guatemala's western highlands, producing unusual and subtle flavors that command astonishingly high prices. Such prices are explicitly rooted in terroir distinctions, but just as important are the symbolic values—the stories and rarified language of the artisanal market—constructed around the beans. The emphasis on narrative and symbolic aspects leaves Maya farmers at a disadvantage, as they lack the cultural and social capital needed to participate in the lucrative Third Wave market. Thus, the early quality turn disproportionately benefited Maya producers, but they have been largely left out of the Third Wave.

Third Wave coffee aficionados are earnestly pursuing a passion, trying to find new flavors and to make supply chains more just. For Maya farmers, coffee fits into traditional understandings of cosmological and agricultural cycles of regeneration—as well as providing income to pursue a better life. Connecting the dots, this book links the quest for quality among Third Wave enthusiasts in the United States to the lives and internet-fueled aspirations of Maya farmers who grow that coffee. In the specific contexts of coffee farms and coffee shops, and all the spaces in between, different sorts of values—material and economic as well as moral and social—come together to create the high-end coffee market. While success is often understood in terms of accumulating value, the real power is the ability to define what constitutes value—in this case, constructing quality by translating the material qualities of the beans produced in places like Guatemala into narratives of authenticity, quality, and relationships.
Coffee buyers and roasters like to tell stories about the remote and exotic places they find particularly rare beans, and “going to origin” is considered a badge of honor. Anthropologists also like to tell stories of the distant sites of their fieldwork.

In 2014 Bart Victor and I traveled to western Guatemala with two students in search of what is considered some of the best coffee in the world. Early in the trip, after narrowly missing an oncoming bus barreling around a hairpin curve, we realized that our driver, César, was fearless. That turned out to be a good thing, as drug traffickers largely control this part of the country, which serves as a logistics hub for the bulk of Colombian cocaine heading to the United States. The narcs are better armed and better organized than the national police, and their justice tends to be swift and gruesome. Fearlessness is an attitude that commands respect around here, and César’s swagger went a long way in justifying our presence. A group of gringos exploring back roads and asking questions about local farms could easily be misinterpreted. After several white-knuckle hours with César behind the wheel, we finally crested a hill to get a view of the Huehuetenango landscape, an expanse of green-blue mountains extending north to the Mexican border. Looking a little closer, we could make out coffee farms, large and small, in the canopies.

The helicopters and black tinted SUVs of the narcs contrast starkly with the grinding material poverty of the majority of the region’s Maya inhabitants. On the side of the highway, women in traditional woven blouses, many with young children strapped to their backs, were selling five-gallon jugs of gas smuggled from Mexico. An unintentionally poignant sign pointed straight ahead to Guatemala and left toward La Democracia (figure 2)—this being a country with a long history of right-wing dictators and autocrats. Daily life hums along in places like these, but there is a palpable tension that the drug money and its violence bring. It occurred to us that a white van with “Tourism” stenciled
on the side might not have been the best choice of transportation, but César said not to worry, that he had us covered. The journey was vertiginous and bumpy. At one point we had to transfer to the back of a pickup truck to get over the last crest in the muddy, rutted road. The best coffee is grown high up, and coffee farms tend to be off the beaten path—even here, where the beaten path is off the beaten path.

Its unique geographic and climatic endowments make highland Guatemala ground zero for Third Wave coffee production. High-altitude coffees command significant premiums, and the terroirs of Guatemala’s volcanic slopes produce a wide range of distinctive flavors. On that trip
to Huehuetenango, we were looking for the Finca El Injerto, which had recently set a world record for the highest price received for unroasted coffee beans. Its owner, Arturo Aguirre Sr., is the fourth-generation grower on these lands, and his son Arturo Jr. now helps run the operation. Their coffees routinely place prominently in cupping competitions and have won a number of awards. Arturo Sr., slightly stooped by age and with the wrinkled skin of someone who has spent long hours in the fields, told us that farming is not just a job for him, that it is in his blood, at the core of who he is. The Aguirres’ land starts at about 1500 meters above sea level (masl), stretching up to around 3300 masl, and Arturo Sr. takes pride in pushing the coffee plants as high as they will go (some now grow at close to 2100 masl). Arturo Jr. shares his father’s love of the land, but his real passion is building an internationally recognized brand for El Injerto. Arturo Jr. has cultivated relationships with trendsetting roasters in the United States, established the farm’s online presence, and opened a few upscale coffee shops under the El Injerto name.

Arturo Sr. recounts that he made a conscious decision to keep a full range of coffee varietals and uphold standards of quality during the long periods when the market was down. “Everybody said I was crazy back then,” he chuckles. “They were all going for volume without regard for quality and I was doing the opposite.” It was not easy. As he tells it, they had to haul the coffee down the mountain by mule and would barely earn enough to cover their costs. But now his commitment to artisanal quality has paid off. In 2012 Korean buyers paid what was then a record-setting price of $500.50 a pound for a micro-lot of one of El Injerto’s prized arabica varietals. This entire lot was only eight pounds, but the benchmark New York coffee futures price at the time was just over $170 per hundredweight, meaning that the El Injerto beans sold for about three hundred times the going rate. El Injerto sold that coffee through its own online auction, organized by Arturo Jr. as a way of cutting out the many layers of middlemen in the normal trade.

I did not try the coffee that cost $500 a pound, but even El Injerto’s more reasonable (if still pricey) beans are exceptional. Their Bourbon
varietal—if you like a rich, classic coffee taste—produces an almost perfectly balanced cup, with a deep chocolatey base and highlights of dark berries. Are their coffees worth the astonishing prices they command? Seemingly objective measures of taste and quality are called upon to justify price, but a significant part of the economic value comes from subjective and symbolic factors, such as the vicarious personal relationship with a producer, that play to a market shift among the global affluent toward artisanal and rare products.17

El Injerto is on the cutting edge of high-end coffee production, but there is also a whole commercial apparatus of roasting, marketing, and brewing that fuels Third Wave consumption. Roasters, baristas, and marketers—as well as the growing number of passionate amateurs and aficionados—play an active role in defining what quality is, how a different taste becomes a more valued taste. Third Wave enthusiasts are always chasing something new. One roaster I know recently marveled at a new find with a distinct cotton candy flavor. Such descriptions are far removed from how Maya farmers in Huehuetenango think about their coffee.

And there is the rub, for while sought-after coffees are now being produced in the Maya highlands of Guatemala, smallholding Indigenous farmers are largely excluded from the highest-value Third Wave trade. Producing exceptional coffees requires certain geographic conditions (soil, rainfall, altitude, and other elements of terroir), and Maya coffee farmers, like farmers around the world, highly value control over their land as a form of security in an unstable world. In its early days, the move toward quality coffee fueled an economic boom to which many smallholding producers in Guatemala attached aspirations for a better future for their families and communities. While the growing market affords many a degree of economic autonomy, farmers’ sweat, toil, and devotion—of a sort less romantic than usually imagined in distant coffee shops—are but one part of the creation of value. The largest percentage of economic value extracted from the rarified prices of Third Wave coffees comes not from control of terroir but translating the material qualities of beans into the symbolic and imaginative narra-
tives of affluent consumers. The Aguirres of El Injerto come from a different tradition than their Maya neighbors—their native language is Spanish and they embrace their European heritage. They comfortably straddle the realities of the farm and the desires of consumers in upscale coffee shops. This social position allows them to profitably translate different measures of worth across symbolic value worlds.

On neighboring lands, Indigenous smallholders produce equally good coffees, but they lack the social and cultural capital to tap into the highest-value segment of the market. Their investment in terroir seems to give them some degree of power, but the means of symbolic production are largely held by northern tastemakers. With affluent consumers valuing the unalienated fruits of labor, they often assume that paying high prices for coffee helps to counter the inequalities of the low-paid, unskilled agricultural economy. Maya farmers may be blessed with the auspicious geographic and climatic endowments to grow high-end coffee, but market-setting power rests with those controlling the symbolic means of production. While apparently rewarding objective “quality,” Third Wave trends structurally disadvantage small-holding Indigenous coffee farmers in Guatemala, who suffer from a dearth of the social and cultural capital that could help them convert their material endowments and technical expertise into economic rewards. This is a case where the consumer quest for artisanal excellence inadvertently reproduces inequalities, with the greatest gains in high-end coffee made not through control over the material means of production but through a capacity to define quality and translate its worth across value worlds.

THREE WAVES

In April 2019 the Specialty Coffee Association (SCA) held its annual trade show at the Boston Convention Center. The cost of entry can top $1000 with all the extras, but this is a must-attend event in the high-end coffee world, bringing together growers, importers, roasters, baristas,
equipment manufacturers, and scientists from across the globe. More than just a trade show, the Coffee Expo feels like both an academic conference and a fan convention. It is a place where those for whom coffee is a way of life as much as a business can get together and geek out over their shared passion. The main exhibition, held in a cavernous hall with seemingly endless rows of vendor booths, lasted four days, but the whole program stretched to a full week with pre- and post-expo options. Peter Giuliano, who had been recently named the SCA’s scientific director, asked me to give a talk, and I readily accepted; the Coffee Expo is the sort of place that an anthropologist does fieldwork for a book like this. A working paper floating some of my ideas had been picked up by the coffee industry press, with one headline reading “A Marxist Takedown of High-End Coffee’s Value Structure.” While I draw on several of Marx’s insights, a takedown had certainly not been my intent, and this forum was the ideal opportunity to set the record straight. In fact, I have great respect for coffee people like Giuliano, Liftee, Bob Bernstein (who runs Bongo Java in Nashville and helped start Cooperative Coffees), Aaron Duckworth (a master taster at Parisi Coffee in Kansas City), and the many others I met in the course of my research, all devoted in their own ways to the craft of coffee. Over the last years, I too have become a coffee nerd of sorts, relishing in the arcane minutiae and in-group feeling produced by shared sensory experiences.

All the same, as an anthropologist, I see this community and its rituals as cultural phenomena, and in that working paper I observed that the Third Wave’s rarefied conventions of “quality” are social constructions linked to prestige hierarchies. The specialty coffee industry has built up elaborate scientific protocols to ground their definitions of quality in empirical terms, creating new metrics and standards for cupping and lexicons of taste. Coffee merchants, roasters, and tastemakers talk about “discovering” quality, as if it were independently out there in the world. There are certainly noticeable, objective differences in flavors between beans, some of them stark, but what those taste differences mean is learned, and what is considered quality changes over time. For example,
the fruity acidity of naturally processed Ethiopian coffees, once seen as a defect, was celebrated at the 2019 Coffee Expo.

When I first started drinking it, good coffee was a fresh pot of Folgers, which came preground in foil packets, brewed in a stalwart commercial Bunn drip maker. It was the late 1980s and I was studying anthropology in college in Birmingham, Alabama, and waiting tables at a local steakhouse. I observed that more sophisticated customers, who also tended to be the best tippers, usually drank their coffee black. Likewise, the best waiters—the group of slightly older, somewhat world-weary full-time staff—also drank their coffee unadorned. These preferences carried an implicit moral disdain for adulterating quality: creamer in good coffee, or sauce on a fine cut of beef, was seen as hiding the very characteristics one was paying for. At the time I was deep into the works of sociologist Pierre Bourdieu, which led me to see the value judgments behind drinking coffee black and that such taste was a form of cultural capital, in this instance a mark of distinction shared between the most knowledgeable staff and the most cosmopolitan guests. Then and there, quality was denoted by the brand name label and the freshness of the brew.

That Folgers, which many restaurants still serve and you can find on your grocery store shelves, is emblematic of “First Wave” coffee: consistent if unexceptional blends mostly roasted by large firms and sold under familiar brand names that assure a standard level of quality. This First Wave of coffee consumption, which began in the early twentieth century, familiarized and normalized coffee, moving it from its exotic beginnings to an everyday staple. In its rise as a global commodity, coffee turned into a volume product, requiring huge economies of scale, and cheap labor, to produce significant returns. The plantation model of First Wave coffee was an agricultural variety of Fordism: capital intensive, regulated, and supplying a standardized and mass-produced commodity.20

Starting in the late 1960s and 1970s, but really taking off in the 1980s and 1990s, a new vanguard of U.S. coffee purveyors offered a Second Wave reaction to the bland uniformity of the major labels. Places such
as Peet’s in the San Francisco Bay Area and the Coffee Connection in Boston led the way, and by the late 1980s hundreds of local roasters and coffee shops in urban areas around the United States were acquainting consumers with higher-quality specialty coffees, espresso-based drinks, and added flavorings. This movement paved the way for Starbucks’s mass-market version.21

The Second Wave was organized around post-Fordist strategies of decommodification: roasters set their offerings apart from the standardized uniformity of the commodity-grade trade by focusing on broad geographic origins (such as Kona and Blue Mountain) as well as emphasizing more just labor relations through fair trade. Molly Doane writes, “The profit that derived from enormous efficiencies of scale in the Fordist coffee market [was] replaced by profit derived from premiums assessed for quality and originality.”22 Second Wave buyers seek out higher-quality, and higher-altitude, beans and offer significantly higher prices for them. The Specialty Coffee Association, which held its first meeting in New Orleans in 1988, developed a one-hundred-point quality scale that serves as the industry standard. Coffees scoring above eighty are considered “specialty,” and Second Wave coffees generally place in the mid-eighties. The Second Wave emerged alongside the demise of the International Coffee Agreement (ICA) quota system in 1989—a year that saw the fall of the Berlin Wall and peak employment at General Motors. The ICA had regulated supply and demand between producing and consuming countries, and its dissolution allowed for more competition in production, lowering barriers for new producers, and fed into the “quality turn” in affluent markets toward more distinctive products (in contrast to the homogeneity of Fordist mass production). The Second Wave shift in consumption fundamentally changed the face of Guatemalan coffee production in the 1990s and 2000s.

In no small part a realization of and reaction to the exploitative conditions of Fordist production in the First Wave, the Second Wave coffee market began to place a higher value on moral provenance, assuring customers that their coffee was bought at a fair price to compensate
those whose labor produced it. In her work on the value chain of New Guinea coffee, anthropologist Paige West documents how images of “poverty and primitivity” add value in marketing Second Wave coffee, playing with symbolic and affective qualities while eliding structural inequalities.

In 1990, when I moved to New Orleans to start graduate school, there was a thriving Second Wave coffee scene in the city. Many associate New Orleans’s coffee with a brew that includes chicory—as in the café au lait famously served with beignets at Café du Monde—but the city has a storied tradition of straight black coffee as well. It has long been an important port for beans from Latin America, and it is where Folgers has been roasting on an industrial scale since the early 1960s. A natural addition to the city’s vibrant food culture, one of the first specialty roasters was PJ’s Coffee, founded in 1978. After moving to town, I became a fixture at the PJ’s on Magazine Street, spending long hours on the back patio studying and writing. Like most Second Wave shops, PJ’s offered whole beans from named regions (such as Antigua, Kona, and Blue Mountain) as well as different blends, roasting styles, and types of drinks, from espresso-based mixtures to cold brew. PJ’s opened my eyes to a whole new way of experiencing coffee, although, conditioned from my time as a waiter, I avoided the flavored syrups that were also a Second Wave staple.

I was living in Nashville (birthplace of First Wave pioneer Maxwell House) when a new sort of coffee spot began to open up in the 2000s—small roasters that dealt in single-estate varietals that scored in the upper eighties and nineties on the SCA scale. This Third Wave emerged along with broader turn-of-the-millennium alternative food movements seeking to de-alienate food chains and stressing purity, authenticity, and artisanal, natural, and organic qualities. By 2011 there were hundreds of artisanal roasters in urban areas across the country, including Crema and Barista Parlor in Nashville, and the Third Wave movement had its own national brands in Counter Culture Coffee, Intelligentsia, Stumptown Coffee Roasters, and Blue Bottle Coffee.