
Edward FISCHER, *Making Better Coffee: How Maya Farmers and Third Wave Tastemakers Make Value* (Oakland, University of California Press, 2022, 296 p.)

Making better coffee does not mean making coffee better—that is, better for the smallholder Maya farmers in Guatemala that Edward Fischer has studied. Instead, Fischer argues, the shift from “second wave” specialty coffees (the higher-quality beans of the 1990s–2000s, with their attendant certifications) to “third wave” ultra-specialty coffees (with highly localized origin stories and direct relationships between roasters and farmers) tends to leave Maya farmers behind. The reason is that the construction of symbolic value in the third wave requires a kind of cultural capital that is more abundant among the owners of mid-sized coffee estates than among Maya farmers struggling to escape poverty, even when they are growing comparable beans at similarly high altitudes. The relationships between high-end coffee roasters and distant agricultural producers are real, but they are increasingly bypassing Maya farmers who have long been marginalized but who had greater chances for upward mobility in second wave coffee markets.

At its core, this book is about the interplay between symbolic markers of quality, authenticity, status, and *terroir* in affluent consumer markets on one hand, and the political economy of coffee growing in Guatemala on the other. Fischer, an anthropologist, starts the book with an emphasis on the construction of quality among third wave coffee roasters, cuppers, and tastemakers. In these parts of the book, sociologists of valuation will find a lot that sounds familiar—as entrepreneurs compete over minute differences in quality, and tastemakers introduce new justifications and vocabularies.

It is in linking these symbolic dynamics to the political economy of coffee growing that we arrive at something more unique and valuable. In Fischer’s telling, it is not simply that trends in affluent markets forced disruptions among Guatemalan coffee farmers, though he is certainly attentive to the power differentials at play over time. Instead, he shows how agricultural elites in Guatemala turned toward differentiated, specialized coffee growing and marketing—in part due to their love of Austrian school free-market economics, he argues—rather than seeking to maintain a more stable national profile (as coffee growers in Colombia did). This ended up providing new opportunities for Maya farmers, who

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had earlier been pushed onto high elevation land, which was now prized for its ability to produce higher quality coffee. Yet these opportunities began to fade as specialization went even further in the third wave.

Also valuable is Fischer's historical account of German coffee oligarchs and their quasi-colonial activities in Guatemala (roughly 1888-1944). Here, we see how the development of coffee plantations, fueled by the forced labor of Maya populations, led to Guatemala's rise in the first wave of coffee production. The struggles that ensued also set the stage for Cold War-era violence, civil war, and eventually the fusion of neo-colonialism and neoliberalism that has characterized Guatemala's incorporation into global markets in more recent decades.

While not romanticizing second wave coffee production—harsh labor conditions continued and smallholder farming remained a precarious livelihood—Fischer argues that this period and style offered meaningful opportunities for Maya farmers. After the International Coffee Agreement's quotas and price supports were dismantled in 1989, prices of raw coffee beans fluctuated wildly—and fell to especially low levels in the early 1990s. This stimulated new strategies among coffee oligarchs and their quasi-governmental association, Anacafé, to pursue the “quality turn” rather than relying on international commodity prices. This period also saw the rise of Fair Trade certification, which Fischer argues helped Maya farmers to cope with price fluctuations and establish a foothold in the specialty coffee market. Cooperatives, which were supported/required by Fair Trade, helped to spread risk and provide milling services that small farmers could not afford on their own. Even weaker sustainability initiatives seem to have contributed to improvements in this period, and some Maya farmers saw their incomes and children's life chances improve.

At the same time, as demand for high quality and highly localized beans grew, farmers were tempted to bypass cooperatives and sell some of their beans to traders who offered higher prices. While cooperatives pooled farmers' beans, coffee roasters were increasingly looking for provenance down to the level of the specific farm—and a compelling story to tell about the people and places involved. Third wave coffee, then, is more relationship-driven and includes significant premiums for the highest quality, but it is also more difficult terrain for smallholder Maya farmers and their cooperatives.

To be clear, the first, second, and third wave are partly chronological designations, but they also represent different segments of the current coffee market. Coffee plantations for mass-produced and low-cost robusta beans or robusta-arabica blends still exist, though rarely in

Guatemala. Second and third wave specialty coffees are still produced in Guatemala, though it is difficult to tell from Fischer's analysis how stable the second wave niche is.

There is a lot of valuable material in this book, and the account of Maya farmers being left behind is especially important for scholars seeking to understand how changes in tastes, styles, and strategies in consumer markets can have dramatic and non-obvious consequences upstream in the supply chain. While some scholars have celebrated the relational turn in coffee supply chains, this book is a powerful reminder of its exclusions and limitations. On an analytical and theoretical level, the book usefully blends a cultural analysis of taste and valuation with a historical political economy of agriculture. Yet it does not integrate these into a particularly distinctive theoretical frame, and repeated references to neoliberalism sometimes obscure rather than clarify the different market structures and principles at play.

I was also left wondering about exactly why the symbolic values of third wave coffee are out of reach of smallholder farmers and their cooperatives—and whether they might be able to adapt. We have a brief account of the cosmopolitan networks of Guatemalan coffee estate owners who are able to compete in this segment, but little sense of exactly what is required. Could cooperatives adapt to this new market segment by investing in cultural/symbolic work or segregating farmers' beans while still sharing costs and risks? Relatedly, I wanted to know more about whether third wave coffee is actually providing stability for mid-sized coffee estates in Guatemala—which are better off than Maya smallholders but seemingly still capturing a small share of the value of their coffees. Is the talk of close relationships and careful provenance mostly self-serving for coffee importers/roasters, or does it represent a meaningful alternative to cutthroat competition in agricultural supply chains?

On the consumer end, we find several portraits of the tastemakers and expert cuppers that drive the third wave, as well as the winner-takes-all character of this market—where tiny differences in quality or status lead to dramatic differences in rewards. (Indeed, Fischer and colleagues ingeniously had Maya farmers' beans roasted and blind-tasted by experts, finding that nearly half could have competed with the highest quality third wave beans.) But I was left wanting a fuller analysis of the conditions that have allowed the third wave coffee market to flourish—whether rooted in wealth and status or subcultural style.

Despite a few limitations, this is an insightful book that deserves to be read by scholars interested in coffee—on either the production or consumption side—the cultural dynamics of valuation, or specialized

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agricultural value chains more broadly. The book is well-written and engaging, despite a few sections with too much theoretical jargon. The introductory chapter might make a useful extract for students, since it provides a glimpse of both the consumption and production elements of the evolving coffee market. For me, the historical chapter on coffee oligarchs (chapter 3) and the detailed look at Maya coffee farmers (chapters 5 and 6) are where the book's distinctive contributions come through most clearly.

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