

In Praise of Bad Coffee

By Liam Greenwell

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It was after a night I couldn't sleep, thanks to the crowing of the neighborhood roosters that started announcing sunrise at midnight, as well as the drugs in my bloodstream that had set me off on hours of giddy storytelling, talking and talking as the afternoon wore on, that I finally rose from the bed and decided to make coffee. We were staring down a four-hour drive back to the city, me and her, and even though I had not been able to sleep all night, I was worried that the exhaustion would creep up on me over the course of the morning. It was either more drugs or some coffee, and there weren't any more drugs.

The machine was the same that's found in every hotel room—that small white thing, the glass beaker stained with years of use and misuse, caked in coffee dust and smelling of mildew. We had also run out of water, I should mention, so I filled it with the tap—always a risk in that country—and turned it on and waited. What came out, when I got over my anxiety about the underheated bacterial water and pathogen dustings on the device itself, was, I can say confidently, the worst cup of coffee I've ever had. We took alternating sips, finding obscure complexities of sawdust and grime each time. And so that awful coffee became, like the drugs the night before, another shared connection for our new affair.

Since I started drinking coffee in college, I have had bad coffee around the world, from Vietnam to India to Mexico to my own kitchen. I love great coffee, to be sure: my favorite beans are from Ethiopia, my go-to order is a cortado, I've worked as a barista, and early in the pandemic I spent \$150 (!) on a burr grinder. But I have also come to believe, to paraphrase Tolstoy, that good coffee is all alike, while every bad coffee is bad in its own way.

These days, third-wave coffee shops sling cold brew from Nairobi to Peoria. But the cups of coffee that I remember—that have burned themselves into my mind, whether I like it or not—are the ones that tasted of gasoline, that smelled of dead animals, that were served in chipped cups wiped down by surly grandmothers. In cramped studio apartments in Mexico, I have choked on coarse grounds. In a cafe in Vietnam, I forced down sweetened sludge made with instant coffee and years-old molasses. Those bad

cups of coffee have often marked moments of movement in my life: of change, transition, graduation. On the trail, on the road with a new lover, in a just-rented apartment where I do not yet own filters.

Coffee gained popularity in the Middle East as a social lubricant, an alternative to alcohol for observant Muslims. But today, coffee culture has the feeling of a science project, and a joyless one at that, more akin to the work of a disgruntled laboratory technician cruelly testing shampoo on rabbits than a mad scientist creating charming explosions that darken her eyebrows with soot. One of the most popular coffee YouTubers, James Hoffman, spends his time measuring obscure statistics about the flow rate and temperature of even more obscure coffee machines; in cafes around the world, I have at times found more scales and gauges than social connection.

There is also now a growing orthodoxy about correct coffee brewing, with scientifically-backed guidelines for temperature, weight, and time for each individual method. We look down on those who use Folger's or K-cups, or even those who make their French press in the "wrong" way. What started as a reasonable desire to extract more flavor out of a staple beverage now turns everything into an exam. Sometimes it seems we must have a collective fetish for being told that we're doing things that bring us joy incorrectly.

One laudable aspect of the third-wave movement is the increased emphasis on sustainability and fair labor. But the unfortunate reality is that even those beans that claim to be "fair trade" rarely pay farmers what they're worth in the global marketplace. A [2017 study](#), for instance, measured the livelihoods of fair trade coffee farmers in seven major producer countries, and found that in only *one* could the farmers support their families on coffee production alone. For all the marketing in third-wave cafes that highlights producer-consumer relationships, the reality is that farmers continue to receive laughably little for their work. It's a reality, too, that those third-wave coffee shops are frequently on the [vanguard of gentrification](#). As they tout sustainability and responsible consumption, they serve as exclusionary spaces in neighborhoods, for their prices if not also their whiteness.

On that front, I think of my hometown pride: Dunkin', which, for me as a Bostonian, is bad coffee par excellence. Growing up, Dunkin' was one of the few places in a rapidly-gentrifying city where people of different class backgrounds still interacted on equal footing. A finance guy in a Patagonia vest would wait for his iced coffee next to a construction worker speaking like Ben Affleck in *Good Will Hunting*. Dunkin'

is a parade of terrible coffee, terrible food, and all the troubled humanity one can find. For that humanity, I love it.

Bad coffee, then, in my experience, has often felt more *humane* to me than the good stuff. We drink it because it's there, or because it's fuel. But whether it's lukewarm swill in a styrofoam cup at an AA meeting or "cowboy coffee" made in a saucepan with the grounds still in it, it never distracts us from the real reason we're drinking it in the first place: other people.

I'll keep trying to perfect my Moka pot brew, and I'll still buy fancy Ethiopian beans. But when the beans and brew start to matter more than those we enjoy it with or make it for, I think we've lost our way.