



Face to Face with the Farmer: Narratives of Specialty Coffee Production Between the United States and Guatemala

Tara Brown, ENVS 400, Spring 2012

**Contradiction in Your Cup:
A Brief History of Specialty Coffee**
Starbucks transformed coffee from a commodity to a **status symbol** and affordable luxury. At the same time, **neoliberal policies** were causing a dramatic price slump for coffee in the developing world.

Consumers felt **uncomfortable** paying a price premium for coffee while growers toiled in poverty. This created the space for **private regulatory arrangements**, such as Fair Trade and Direct Trade to take off.

Fair Trade: The Fair Trade label has been **trademarked** by **third-party** auditing organizations. Fairtrade Labeling International standards specify that Fair Trade coffee must come from **cooperatives of smallholders**.

Direct Trade: “Direct Trade” has **no formal industry-wide regulations** in the coffee industry, but is usually referring to direct communication and price negotiation between roasters and producers.

Fair Trade Coffee in Guatemala: Beyond an Idyllic Peasantry

Fair Trade attempts to **empower producers** by **cutting out “middlemen,”** in coffee supply chains, but these middlemen perform specialized tasks that requires knowledge of international finance and accounting principles.

Fair Trade cooperatives are meant to take over these tasks, but many Fair Trade farmers in Guatemala have **not completed elementary school**. Thus, community members find it **difficult to complete these tasks** accurately, or evaluate the performance of hired managers.

Mismanagement and corruption are not uncommon within Fair Trade cooperatives, which **lowers farmer incomes** and the percentage of the Fair Trade price that is returned to farmers.



Direct Trade

At Stumptown Coffee Roasters, “Direct Trade” means standing face-to-face with the farmer, year-in and year-out. It means asking for the best coffee, and paying an unparalleled price. The process begins at origin, and it continues harvest after harvest as we nurture the relationships to bring each coffee to its fullest potential, and in turn, its fullest value. [Read more.](#)

A Legacy of Colonialism

The profitability of coffee, which was introduced as an export crop in the 19th century by Spanish colonizers, “awoke a growing need for land,” among the elite.

The government seized land from indigenous Mayans, and distributed these lands to wealthy foreign investors and recent immigrants..

Understanding the history of Guatemala means understanding that many of the Direct Trade family farms that have been passed down for generations were seized from the indigenous Mayans whose ancestors are the landless peasants who work the land today.

Trading Directly with Whom? Coffee and Class in Guatemala

Stumptown has worked hard to develop a reputation as a roaster that takes customer education seriously. Any vendor who wants to sell Stumptown espresso must complete a training course complete with a video made on Finca El Injerto, in Guatemala. In the video, **everything at Finca El Injerto seems slow, idyllic, and from another time.**

As with most narratives, what is most interesting here is what is missing: the Aguirre family, the owners of the **720 hectare estate** on which this video was filmed. **The farmers that Stumptown deals directly with at Finca El Injerto are nowhere to be seen.**

“Some of the poorest farmers I’ve seen in my life were Fair Trade farmers. The cooperative managers were living well, but not the majority of the farmers.” Stumptown founder Duane Sorenson

Stumptown
“deals
directly with
the producers
themselves”

“Even relationship coffees raise equity concerns, because they are easier to establish with estates than with smallholders or cooperatives.”
-Daviron & Ponte, *The Coffee Paradox*

For all of the Direct Trade marketing materials showing Mayan hands picking coffee cherries at the peak of ripeness or Mayan backs carrying 100 pound bags of coffee, these are not the producers that roasters are forming direct relationships with-- roasters are forming direct relationships with *their bosses*.

Towards a “Story With Shade of Grey” Concluding Thoughts

Actors in the specialty coffee industry are uniquely positioned to take advantage of consumer enthusiasm for “relationship coffees” and serve as innovative leaders in a broader food movement.

Strengthening relationships between individuals in specialty coffee value chains is important and positive, but an *exclusive* emphasis on **interpersonal relationships and trust as an informal regulatory arrangement** will lead roasters to form relationships primarily with growers who have similar back- grounds and experiences as roasters-- in short, with **producing countries’ cosmopolitan business class**.

This isn’t in and of itself problematic, but it can become exploitative and **misleading** if it is combined with a marketing campaign that highlights an image of indigenous **peasant farmers**.

Each community organization or individual farmer that roasters and importers form relationships with has **its own complex history and identity**, and so the true story behind that organization or individual will always be what Sustainable Harvest founder Dave Griswold calls a “**story with shades of grey.**”

Trusting consumers to understand the challenges and complexities of specialty coffee sourcing, rather than simply painting them rosy pictures, is a truly innovative approach to customer education.

References and Acknowledgements:

I would like to thank Professors Jim Proctor and Robert Goldman for their assistance, as well as the coffee producers, importers, and roasters who took the time to share with me what they do. For more information, please see:

Daviron & Ponte. 2005. *The coffee paradox : global markets, commodity trade, and the elusive promise of development*. London; New York : Zed Books in association with the CTA ; Distributed in the USA by Palgrave Macmillan.
Giuliano, Peter. 2011. “Welcome to the Issues Issue,” *Specialty Coffee Chronicle*, October 17th.
Lyon, Sarah. 2011. *Coffee and community: Maya farmers and fair-trade markets*. Boulder, Colo. : University Press of Colorado.
Weissman, Michele. 2008. *God in a cup : the obsessive quest for the perfect coffee*. Hoboken NJ: J. Wiley.

Background Image found at: <http://www.etsy.com/listing/24553193/1906-coffee-plant-chromolithograph> (Accessed April 23, 2012).
Other imagery found at: www.stumptown.com (Accessed March 17, 2012).