

The True Price of a Cup:

COFFEE POLITICS



One shot of espresso. A simple pleasure in the world's most developed countries which many of us enjoy with little thought to how—and who—ensures a consistent flow of java is available to satiate our daily desire. Behind posh latte orders, there is an intricate global network of coffee growers, suppliers and buyers. A complex web riddled with environmental and human rights violations, often a trigger for cancel culture in other major industries, but frequently ignored in regards to coffee production. How does the average consumer ascertain if they could be purchasing a more ethical cup of coffee? Four small businesses divulge what it means to be a change agent disrupting the status quo by giving customers access to sustainably-grown coffee—sans the hidden cost of cheap human labor or environmental degradation.

For a coffee to be ethical, Madison Chocolate Company founder Megan Hile believes several factors come into play, the primary one being traceability. Which can be assessed by, first and foremost, considering where the coffee you're drinking comes from as well as who grows it. "Many of us have no idea where our coffee is grown or the face behind it. I know it sounds cliché, but 'know thy farmer' is important," she states. Answers to those two questions, Hile insists, are a necessary precursor to learning how much the cultivators are paid.

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Coffee growers for centuries have been paid below commodity rates for their hard work. In particular, Hile thinks more consumers should question why all of the work and people involved in coffee production are consistently devalued. She also encourages other business owners to buy coffee from people they know (whenever possible), in addition to taking the extra step to inquire if the farmers are paid above fair-trade established value.

"We are fortunate enough to work with Royal Coffee and Catracha Coffee Co. who make it their mission to educate the buyer on who the producer is. It has become Mayra Orellana-Powell's mission to educate small producers within the Honduras community she started a cooperative in about the value of their product and how to continuously improve upon their work. Everyone who grows for them receives an extra \$1-2 per pound. They in turn receive education on farming, land improvement, product valuation and more," Hile explains. "The money is reinvested directly back into their community. We just helped them launch their third 'payment' coffee program. The consumer pays an extra dollar per purchased bag of coffee, which we send directly back to a fund that is being instituted for microloans or emergency medical funding for those in the coffee community."

Check Your Sources

A lack of transparency in regard to how coffee is imported and exported has plagued the industry for decades. Roasters rarely purchase directly from a farmer—the initial producer. An importer, exporter and/or other third-party vendor often negotiate both sides of the transaction, frequently taking a significant portion of the profits in the process. Because of this seemingly perpetual imbalance in the revenue stream, Estación Colombia is intentionally creating a new model for coffee exportation and distribution by prioritizing one of the most lucrative parts of the coffee chain: the roasting. Their coffee is roasted in Colombia so that this income stays in the country, thereby helping the industry to expand locally, since historically, premium coffee has only been exported to be roasted abroad.

Founder Maria Clara Ruiz Zapata reveals the coffee growers she partners with are paid an additional revenue from the sales of their final product, now getting 45 cents for every pound of roasted beans sold. This extra income is paid to them every month in an effort to help them during the seasons when they don't have income. Her company also gives the coffee growers the opportunity to participate actively in the commercialization of their product abroad. Ruiz Zapata and her partner foster connections between the farmers and the people who are buying their product by helping to organize and host farm tours for interested customers whose purchases are financially supporting this alternative business model.

“Coffee growers need to be paid on top of their production cost to make a real income. This means that the whole chain needs to balance the equation on how to divide the profit,” says Ruiz Zapata. “Prioritizing water as a resource with high value is also key. Coffee



Coffee berries straight from the hands of Estación Colombia.

uses large amounts of water to be grown and milled. An ethical coffee supply chain should properly sustain the ecosystems, water springs and communities that protect the water resources.”

Ecosystem Externalities

Environmental impact is a growing concern across numerous sectors. And the agricultural methods used to grow and harvest coffee are no exception. According to data verified by The World Counts “the coffee required for one single cup of coffee takes 140 liters of water to produce.” Another alarming statistic is “by some estimates, every cup of coffee consumed destroys roughly one square inch of rainforest, making it a leading cause of rainforest destruction.” Therefore, the global expense of a daily cappuccino is much greater than the average consumer would ever imagine.

Progeny Coffee co-owner Maria Palacio affirms, on a macro-level, the biggest “blindness to abuses” in many coffee supply chains typically involve not going beyond the obvious to really consider the whole ecosystem surrounding what is being sourced, plus the challenges involved. Doing so is “really the only way to make better, more informed choices,” Palacio insists. “Consumers have the power to shift companies’ behaviors. It starts by asking and demanding more transparency and questioning current systems. There are many resources out there where consumers can get more information like the Specialty Coffee Association (SCA), which regularly publishes information about the state of the coffee industry.”

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Purchasing Power

Increasingly, the onus is on each of us to find out more about how staple goods and products like coffee are continually funneled to our doorsteps. A broken system cannot—and will not—be fixed or severed overnight. Willy Street Co-op communications director Brendon Smith admits the need to recognize “that there is an inherent, and at times, uncomfortable tension” between different ethical shopping frameworks. “For example, products that are organic, fairly-traded, humane, and environmentally sustainable are not always within the financial reach of some of our co-op owners and community members,” Smith shares. “And some items that are culturally appropriate for some owners may not fall within the organic guideline. Whereas items that others value for their convenience may not have packaging that is ecologically-minded. So we have chosen to lean into this tension, finding a balance that is constantly evolving as our ownership and food systems grow and change.”

Which means our collective purchasing power, if put to proper use, can stimulate a shift in the politics of coffee at every level. Because a “supply and demand” paradigm has value from an inverse perspective, too. We can still savor our fave morning sip, while also ensuring no one else—nor the planet—is paying too steep a price on the back end. eM

Top: Progeny co-founder Maria Palacio works with Colombian coffee farmer Hector Castro. Bottom: Maria Clara Ruiz Zapata, founder of Madison-based specialty coffeeshop, Estación Colombia.



Photos courtesy of Progeny Coffee and Estación Coffee