



## Patience, Passion, Devotion

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In 1624, John Donne's "Devotions upon Emergent Occasions" caused a tectonic shift in the world's concept of isolationism. "No man is an island, entire of itself," wrote Donne, "every man is a piece of the continent, a part of the main." Seriously ill as he wrote, it's doubtful Donne knew that at the same time, the Dutch were arranging to purchase the New World island of *manahátaan* from its inhabitants, the Lenape Native Americans. The Dutch purchase of the island was undoubtedly one of history's greatest bargains; an exchange of beads, knives, trinkets, and guilders for prime Atlantic real estate. Quickly, *manahátaan*—first as New Amsterdam, and later as Manhattan—became the center of the world, a city built on global import and influence. It wasn't long after 1624 that the piers of Manhattan Island were piled high with sacks of green coffee imported from Europe.

"The city ran on coffee," Erin Meister writes in her book "New York City Coffee: A Caffeinated History." Lower Manhattan became the "Coffee District," and was a port of distribution for the bean to the rest of North America and abroad. Four hundred years later, it remains an axis of the industry, its cafes and baristas influencing global change in the coffee trade. As Meister writes, there's a piece of the city in "every cup of coffee and every bag of beans in the United States."

Meister's book opens with the 17th-century arrival of coffee in Manhattan, the sacks of beans already piled on the pier. But that is not the bean's true beginning. It's an understandable oversight—coffee flows through our consciousness not as an agricultural commodity, but rather as roasted beans falling into a grinder, the steam and squawk of an espresso machine, and the patterns scribbled into milk froth. A cup of coffee in Manhattan is to the Colombian mountain terraces what a loaf of bread in a Lower East Side bakery is to a Kansan wheat field. Made unrecognizable by the journey from bush to cup, the beans ground for a flat white can't communicate the labor-intensive picking involved any more than the battles farmers wage with *broca* (a beetle that bores into the coffee berry) and *roya* (leaf-rust), outbreaks of which constantly threaten production. And nothing along a Cupping Chart suggests the ongoing coffee pricing crisis brought on by oversupply and hedged futures traded in Manhattan's stock exchanges. Like *manahátaan*, coffee has been colonized, and its story does not begin with the arrival of the European on the scene.

Pulled from eastern Africa and shipped around the world to be grown in the verdant mountains lining the equator, coffee has always been an unevenly distributed agricultural product. Of the top coffee-producing countries, only Brazil ranks among the top consumers, far behind the caffeine-drenched countries of the U.S.A., Canada and northern Europe. This is rare among other agricultural products like beef, corn, wheat, and rice, where production aligns with consumption. Nine of the top ten producing countries of beef and wheat eat more steak and bread than anyone else, while the citizens of the top ten rice growing countries are the top rice eaters. This is not to say that coffee farmers are not coffee drinkers (they are), but that the forces governing coffee production lie well beyond the reach of the mountain terraces.

The aforementioned coffee crisis has already caused the abandonment of coffee farms in Central America, where for the past ten years, over 60% of farms have experienced food insecurity (according to the Specialty Coffee Association of America).

"The more consumers learn and understand about farming, the more they understand the nuances and complexities of the supply chain," says Erika Vonie, a coffee consultant and 2017 NYC Coffee Master. "Being an informed consumer means they can make ethical decisions on where to spend their money." The implication is that, as coffee drinkers, we are each a customer of the 21 million families around the globe who earn their living growing coffee. And that means we're equally responsible for their viability.

Though vital, awareness itself does not alleviate the difficulty of coffee production. Vonie points to the current pricing structure, which ties market (and therefore consumer) prices to points assigned by a coffee specialist during quality appraisal. This assessment, called cupping, evaluates beans systematically on various characteristics such as flavor and aroma, and assigns a valuation on a scale that slides from 0 to 100. To qualify as a specialty coffee, a bean needs to score 80 or above. While this methodology puts pressure on farmers to create higher scoring (and therefore higher selling) coffees, Vonie says that many farmers may not have the infrastructure, labor, or capacity to do so.

The physical labor behind a cup of coffee has depreciated into a mirage of hillside figures and Juan Valdez caricatures. The gloss and glamor of roasting and barista work has become the zenith of the coffee lifecycle, greatly overshadowing its cultivation on steep mountainsides, or the time spent drying on a dusty roadside. Where does this leave the Ethiopians, Sumatrans, Colombians, Brazilians, and others who are the roots of the coffee network? Can the rural-urban divide of coffee be bridged?

At least one Manhattan enterprise thinks so. In the Flatiron District, Devoción cafe is attempting to bridge the gap with speed and freshness. Averaging just ten to 30 days from dry milling to roasting, the coffee served by Devoción may be the freshest coffee found anywhere outside the coffee belt.

The process is similar to the path taken by other green coffee beans, only expedited. After harvesting, the coffee cherries are dry-milled (where the parchment is removed and the bean becomes “green”) in Colombia, then loaded onto a plane to be overnighted to New York, where they are roasted and served. That quickness minimizes the heat, pressure, and humidity to which the green beans are exposed, preventing the oxidation that erodes quality.

That speed has been the result of operating with a narrow but deep focus. Working exclusively within Colombia, Devoción sources beans from some 2,000 farms throughout the country, many of them outside the country’s ‘coffee axis.’

“We went to the most inaccessible places,” says Devoción’s Colombian-born founder Steven Sutton. “The red zones, the conflict areas.” Although it means sometimes traveling five to ten hours between farms, it has a payoff. “That’s where the best coffee was,” says Sutton. “The original Arabicas were still there. There were bourbons, tipicas, caturras, all of them untouched.”

Colombia’s climate allows for year-round coffee production and a steady flow of beans, something other countries can’t provide. “If you’re drinking Ethiopian coffees in August or September,” says Sutton, “it says a lot about how old your green coffee is.” While most companies are happy to sit on their green beans for months, or even years, Sutton says the wait comes at the cost of quality. “Most green coffee is around six months old,” he says. “By then, the embryo has died, oxidized. You lose a point—an 87 becomes an 86.”

The loss of a point on the cupping scale may not seem like much, but to Sutton, it’s a matter of pride and respect. “Why lose the points? It’s a disservice to the farmer and the client.” There’s also quality of taste to consider. While green beans can last up to five years if kept within strict conditions of humidity, temperature, and pressure, it’s unavoidable that over time, aromas and flavors in a fresh bean will be lost. “If the coffee bean is fresh before roasting,” says Sutton, “the characteristics of the coffee are more powerful than if it’s roasted six months after dry milling. And the longer you wait to roast, the more points you lose.” Deciding to use less-fresh, stored beans like other specialty coffee roasters might alleviate the pressure of relying solely on weekly imports of straight-

from-the-bush beans, but that is a compromise Sutton is unwilling to make: “You charge the customer for the coffee you buy from the farmer, not the coffee you sell at the cafe.”

And Devoción is there from the beginning, acting as its own coffee buyer and exporter, roles that put it on the front lines with the farmers. It’s a relationship that requires a deft hand—coffee farmers are all too familiar with companies that wave offers of cash, but vanish when times are tough. Many of the areas with which Devoción works were once controlled by FARC, a revolutionary guerilla movement, and the potential for violence is still there. Regardless, Sutton believes it’s important that no communities get left behind in the search for business. While its beans are not stamped ‘fair trade,’ Devoción upholds a standard of paying production plus a premium. It has also instituted educational and social programs for the farmers and their families, providing schools with tablets, recycling centers, and courses on quality control. “Communities make coffee. If you’re not there among the community,” Sutton says, “you’re just a cash cow. There’s no attachment. We want the young generation to stay in the local areas and become leaders.”

Commitment to these remote agricultural towns trickles down into the coffee. Devoción’s speed allows for the presentation of coffee just as it would be drunk on the farm, something that honors both farmer and consumer. “You can taste the sweat of the farmer,” Sutton says. “You can taste that minerality in the coffee.”

Bringing consumers around to associate coffee with a farmer as much as a barista will take time. Vonie advocates for the education of consumers to help them see behind the roaster. “About 70% of all coffee comes from smallholder farmers on two hectares or less,” she says. “Outside of the harvest, farmers often face food and financial insecurity. With climate change ravaging available land for growing coffee and a price crisis happening at the same time, many of the farmers who make the coffee we drink daily face an uncertain future.”

Agriculture will always be steered by the will of the customer; “I am a coffee drinker” holds considerably more market capital than “I am a coffee farmer.” But even markets, bent far enough, can break. Farms can be abandoned, generations separated. It has already happened. And it is happening now. The streets of Manhattan are rife with the fruits of the world’s laborers. In the intervening 400 years, *manabátaan* has become wildly more valuable than the handful of beads and trinkets for which it was traded. So too is the coffee that now plies its streets. Paying a pittance for hard grown beans is proof that as consumers we know the price of a cup of coffee, but not the value.

Of course, coffee will continue to flow through Manhattan regardless, just as it has since the city’s founding. But the gap between the city that never sleeps and the farms that provide the caffeine to fuel it will need to be bridged to ensure the continued survival of the farmers. What we need to realize, Vonie says, is that “our coffee is definitely worth \$4 or \$5 a cup.”

Coffee is not an isolationist venture—it is a drink of the world. Donne knew that isolationism in any sense is untenable, that the earth is made lesser for any clod of dirt washed out to sea. Devoción knows it too, and the sacks of fresh green beans slumped alongside its New York City roaster are proof of that. The dates stamped onto those bags—none older than a month—represent a commitment to providing Manhattan with the best Colombian farmers have to offer.

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