

Jerusha Klemperer:

For the conscious consumer, buying local products is a way to shorten that distance between us and what we eat or drink, and maybe even learn more about how it was produced, by talking to the people who made it. But what about something like coffee, which doesn't grow anywhere near those of us living in the continental United States? Do you know where your coffee comes from? And if you do know what country it comes from, maybe from the bag or canister you bought your beans in, do you know how it was grown or who grew it or how it transforms from a berry on a branch to the brown roasted beans you grind for your cup of joe?

I'm Jerusha Klemperer and this is What You're Eating, a project of foodprint.org. We aim to help you understand how your food gets to your plate and see the full impact of the food system on animals, planet, and people. We uncover the problems with the industrial food system and offer examples of more sustainable practices, as well as practical advice for how you can support a better system through the food that you buy and the system changes you push for.

Dakota Graff:

I'm Dakota Graff. I'm the director of coffee for Onyx Coffee Lab. Onyx Coffee Lab is a specialty coffee roaster in northwest Arkansas in the United States. We specialize in the best roasted coffee that we can get our hands on, and we have four or five cafes, we serve coffee directly to retail customers in Arkansas, and we distribute most of our roasted coffee all over the US and globally.

Jerusha Klemperer:

I was first introduced to Onyx Coffee when we did our episode on milk and plant-based milk, because in one of their cafes, they serve oat milk by default and people have to pay a surcharge for cow's milk. I was struck by their careful consideration of sustainability, as well as their deep coffee nerdery.

Dakota Graff:

I spent so much time in coffee shops in high school, that they just ended up handing me a broom and being like, "Here you go. We're going to start paying you to help out, because you're here so often." And that really speaks to the comfortability of third-wave coffee and having that, and I feel like this term is a bit played out at this point, but having that third place, where it's like you have your home, you have your work, and then you have a spot where you can go and do kind of whatever, either write or do a little bit more work or even just relax and talk to a friend. And that, for me, especially at that time of my life, was extremely important. And so, that's kind of what drew me in, and then coffee product was just fascinating in and of itself, and that really kind of pulled me in and I've been here since then. I was 17, and now I'm 30, so it's been a long time.

And that's the thing about the specialty coffee industry, is that it is quite a young industry, both in terms of age of people working in it, but also just the industry itself, it's a very new thing. So a lot of people who are in the industry are kind of my age, so I feel like I'm actually middle-aged for this industry, as funny as it sounds.

Jerusha Klemperer:

Okay, so you mentioned third-wave coffee. For people who don't know, what is third-wave coffee?

Dakota Graff:

Third-wave coffee is sort of a movement that generally values quality and some level of transparency. And when I say some level of transparency, I speak mostly to the first two waves of coffee. Coffee is a global commodity. It mostly came around the time of World War II, and mostly to do with the Industrial Revolution of things moving really quickly, really becoming commodified in a sense that these things need to be, more or less, cubed into a thing, and then brought into every household. And you really saw that happen around World War II, with the rise of just a lot of global uncertainty and a lot of industry at the same time.

And so, coffee, before that, was sort of a specialty beverage and it was very regional in the places that it was culturally significant, meaning that it was grown in that place, it was consumed, relatively, in that place, but of course, we know that coffee has really close ties to colonialism, as well, which is a whole other kind of thing. But all of these things kind of wrap themselves together in the sense that, as coffee moved into a commodity, it began to lose its luster, in the sense, that it was an exotic product from somewhere that most people have never been.

And, for me, third-wave coffee, most of the time, I just refer to it as specialty coffee, has kind of tried to bring that back as much as we can. One, to bring honor and kind of value to the places that it's grown and the people who grow it, but also to really showcase its quality and coffee is regarded as a really beautiful drink in many, many cultures, especially even in the US. I mean, we're a coffee drinking culture. As you bring these things forward to people and integrate it into people's lives, specialty coffee is the driving force behind representing the things that make it so great, which is the people and the plant the that places that it comes from.

Jerusha Klemperer:

The places that coffee comes from are inhabited, primarily, by Black and Brown people, but third-wave specialty coffee in this country, has tended to be kind of a white, hipster thing, with white people dominating the retail space, both behind the counter and in front of it.

Bartholomew Jones:

We wanted to create Cxffeeblack to provide an opportunity to make coffee Black again, and to imagine what does that look like and what is necessary to create that future for folks of African descent and for people of the world to be able to be to draw from Black contributions to coffee in a way that's generative. (singing) My name is Bartholomew Jones. I'm an educator, I'm an emcee, I'm a coffee nerd, co-founder of Cxffeeblack, alongside my wife, Renata Henderson, who's our head roaster and COO, HR, graphic designer. She does a lot. Yeah, together we started Cxffeeblack. (singing)

So there are multiple entry points to my journey into being a coffee nerd. One of them is church as a kid. I was a junior deacon at my church, very proud about that. One of the cool things about being a junior deacon is that you could leave and go to the little coffee stand that was outside of the sanctuary and I used to get a styrofoam cup and fill it with a bunch of powdery cream and sugar, and then a little bit of coffee and mix it up. Looking back, I feel like that was kind of like a trapuccino.

I had a mentor in high school, this really nerdy white guy, love him to death. He was film nerd. He would take me to these places that I just would never go growing up in my neighborhood in Whitehaven. He'd be like, "Let's go to Starbucks." And I remember thinking it was so cool, and I used to order a strawberry Frappuccino, and then eventually got real bougie and got the caramel macchiato. I thought I was doing something with that. Who knew I would, 10 years later, be ranting about how a macchiato is not a large milky drink, right? But that was a part of the journey. My dad went to Kenya to do a student exchange program, when he was in college at LeMoyne-Owen, which is an HBCU here. And so, there's also a layer

of him trying to get me to drink Kenyan coffee growing up and me being like, "That's gross. I don't want to drink that. Give me a Frappuccino."

And all those things culminate with me going to college at Wheaton College, right outside of Chicago, and kind of getting immersed into, I guess you could say, the tangential arms of Chicago specialty coffee, right? So we're in the suburbs, we're not directly next to an Intelligentsia, but it's close enough to where Intelligentsia is influencing the way people think about coffee, plus La Spiazza, which was the local college town café, which eventually turned into a specialty coffee roasting company. And then, friends who would go into the city and bring a Chemex back and invite us to try it, all that stuff kind of led me to a point where I was more curious about my coffee. I'm just naturally a curious person, and so all the little nerdy breadcrumbs would lead me into a place where I wanted to learn more about coffee for myself.

And so, I started buying whole bean coffee, asking a million questions to every barista I met, which led me to a point where I was like, "Hmm, all these coffees kind of have names of other countries on them, and a lot of them have the names of African countries on them. I wonder why that is?" And so, that led me down the journey to create what Cxffeeblack is today. The best way I can explain Cxffeeblack is that that Cxffeeblack is a multimedia coffee educational company. So what does that mean, right? We have the goal of using coffee and communicating about coffee through various mediums, with the goal of educating people about coffee's African origins and collectively imagining its African future. Right? And so, we do that through, of course, roasting and selling beans. We also do apparel.

One of our best-selling products was just a post I made that said, "Love Black people like you love black coffee," and it was kind of in response to the assassination of George Floyd and our feelings about it, and then that turned into one of our highest grossing products outside of the coffee, and we put that on a bunch of stuff, shirts, cups, mugs, I'm working on a tattoo. We also do music, so all the music for our marketing, we create in house. Like I said, I'm an emcee, I'm an independent hip-hop artist, and that precedes all my coffee nerdiness, so it's just part of our DNA. It's how we communicate, it's how we process pain, it's how we imagine until the songs have become kind of like a soundtrack for the movement. (singing)

We're creatives at heart, and so we also do films. So we did a documentary about precolonial coffee culture. We're working on a docuseries about that, kind of following the slave trade through coffee. Ethiopian coffee is a gateway drug. The coffee plant was stolen from Africa in 1616 by two Dutch spies. Three years later, the first stolen bodies landed in Jamestown, Virginia. And then, we also have a café space in our neighborhood. Hey yo, welcome to the Anti-Gentrification Cxffee Club. I know, it's kind of crazy. We also call it the AGCC for short or some folks say the not a coffee shop. You know what I mean? But whatever you call it, we're home to your friendly neighborhood hope dealers, brought to you by the good people at Cxffeeblack, we got your hood coffee vibes popping every single day of the week family. We do educational opportunities, we're on the third round, third year, of an internship in our community, where we train people from the city, of African descent, about coffee's origin, its history. We do entrepreneurship training, CPG, people who are interested in kind of doing consumer packaged goods through their website, to make a social impact. Yeah, all that stuff kind of happens inside of Cxffeeblack. We have a podcast. The podcast is on hiatus right now, because I'm currently trying to raise capital for our company, so we can exist for 100 years or 200 years. Yeah, so I'm working on that. But yeah, we do a lot, we do a lot.

Jerusha Klemperer:

So much. I'm feeling very lazy right now. Thank you.

Bartholomew Jones:

I'm thinking community development. I'm like, "Nobody is helping my community." There's an injustice here, and so I'm trying to solve this injustice by providing resources, by providing experiences, by providing products that would make people feel seen and make people feel like it was a safe space to be curious and that there was something worth being curious about in this space. Little did I know that this same problem was a problem... this lack of access to curiosity, a lack of an on-ramp to curiosity was a global problem. I didn't realize that this was the case for people of African descent, and honestly for producers in general, but the same kind of land lock that my community experienced with being able to be adjacent enough to coffee to become curious about it, when you look at history, the original finished product, the Ethiopian coffee ceremony was the first finished product in coffee history. Ethiopian people discovered the coffee, and developed a myriad of beautiful and interesting ways to present that raw product to the world in a place where it could be consumed.

But when coffee was taken from the African continent, and then taken from the county of Yemen by the Dutch, those ways were not deemed interesting enough to continue, as it was presented to the world. And so, the Black foundations of coffee became invisible, and I think that's one of, if I dip into my sociology bag, shout out to sociology minors out here, one of the unfortunate side effects of consumerism and hypercapitalism is that it renders the cultural roots of something invisible once it enters the market, so that it can kind of be presented as a clean slate for people to consume, and I just think that's boring. I think that's a much less interesting version of the world and it's not the world that I care to participate in. And so, Cxffeeblack has been our endeavor to, through the very small thing of coffee, introduce more curiosity about what people of African descent have to contribute to our collective palate.

Jerusha Klemperer:

Not only is coffee's history as an agricultural product unknown to the average coffee drinker, but most people probably don't even know the story of the precise coffee or latte right in front of them. You might see a country of origin on the packaging, like Ethiopia, Brazil, Guatemala, but how did it get from there to you? And why is some coffee pretty cheap and some quite a bit more expensive? And why is there so much flavor variety in the different coffee you buy and drink? I asked both Bartholomew and Dakota to break down the coffee supply chain for us.

Dakota Graff:

Coffee comes from what is often referred to as the coffee growing belt in the world. So oftentimes, especially in specialty coffee companies, the supply chain is referred to as seed to cup. So wherever it's grown and however it got there is the entire supply chain. I'm sure, with the research that you've done for this, that you've already discovered that this is a complex issue and a complex supply chain. And really, the answer to the question, "Where does our coffee come from?" is the whole driving force behind this specialty coffee movement. And more specifically, at Onyx, our coffee comes from kind of all over the globe. I think, at the moment, I don't even have a secure count on how many countries we work in, but it's as many as 12. And I travel to most of those countries myself. I'll fly there, I'll spend time on farms, I'll spend time with coffee producers, and we'll taste coffee together, we'll talk about our needs our wants, we'll figure out how to do business together, and then, from there, it's my job to get it into the US, so we can roast it and distribute it.

So coffee is most often grown in, and I'm going to be really general here, in South America, Central America, and East Africa. Those are really the driving regions of high-end specialty coffee. Now, Vietnam and some other places of that nature, grow a large amount of coffee, which is *coffea canephora*, which

is often referred to as robusta coffee, which is a higher caffeine content, also a higher bitterness, so it often goes into a really large, big, instant coffee or some type of large coffee blend, which is not really what specialty coffee is about. So oftentimes, we'll gravitate towards those places in South America, places in East Africa, and Central America. Our two largest countries, which I'll focus on just for the ease of simplicity in this conversation, is Ethiopia and Colombia.

Now, Colombia, it's a bit easier to get coffee into the US, because we have really easy supply chain routes, but oftentimes, coffee is grown on a small farm and either consolidated into a larger blend, or sold as what we refer to as a microlot. And those microlots are usually higher price, higher quality, and super traceable, meaning that we know who grew it, how it was grown, how it was processed, what it is, and those things are really highly valued in the specialty coffee industry. It's kind of like the pinnacle of what specialty coffee and third-wave coffee is striving at.

Jerusha Klemperer:

For Cxffeeblack, the supply chain is very similar, but it's been set up with some very intentional criteria in mind. Everyone they partner with is of African descent.

Bartholomew Jones:

The supply chain starts in the town of Uraga, which is in the Guji Zone of a part of Ethiopia called Oromia, which is in the southern region of the country. It starts with Indigenous farmers who are growing the coffee there. They're contributing to a collective lot call the Green Spring Lot. That lot is led, kind of the general area of the land, is led and cared for by a farmer named Tomaru, who we had the pleasure of heating hot water cornbread greens with in his house, which was a big surprise for me, because I didn't know that that was an African thing to do, but apparently my grandmother had been keeping this very African tradition alive all those years in Alabama. And he and his family are leading that lot. You have Ture Waji, who is the community leader, he's also an agronomist, he's also a coffee scientist, and he's making sure that the farmer's have access to the educational resources and things they need to be able to accurately farm and adjust to environmental changes and things like that.

He also owns Sookoo Coffee, which is the company that does a lot of the milling of the coffee. So milling basically means coffee starts off as a cherry. You look on my shirt, it says, "Coffee is the African fruit." Right? So there's a picture of the fruit. That fruit is then taken to washing stations and drying stations where it's set out on these large raised beds where it's placed in the sun, and if you're doing a natural processed coffee, you leave the flesh of the fruit on, and it dries onto the seed. It contributes a really beautiful acidity. And Ture Waji is known worldwide for the quality, the cleanliness. If you're a wine person, if you've ever had a natural wine, you can know that those wines can be a bit muddy. There is more acidity, there is more there, but you kind of deal with the good and the bad, right? So the best way I can contribute is like culinary static, right? There's a lot of other things going on around the flavors that you're looking for, and sometimes people like that, and sometimes people don't.

Ture Waji is known for the clarity of the natural process coffee's that he produces, and a lot of that goes into cherry selection, a lot of that goes into sorting, a lot of that goes into the growing practices. He's a genius, and I don't want to pretend to understand his process, but I did have the opportunity for him to explain it to me twice, and I got maybe 1% of that, so that's what you're getting right now. So this is all before the coffee cherries leave the town of Uraga, right? So this is happening. Once the products are finished and they've removed either the dried mucilage, is the word for it, around the coffee seed, it's not a bean, it's a seed, beans grow in pods and seeds grow inside of a stone fruit.

Once all that happens, it's shipped off to Addis Ababa, which is the capital of Ethiopia where Mike Mamo, who owns Addis Exporters, receives those seeds from the countryside. They're in 60 kg burlap bags, and so those burlap bags are then stored. They do quality control. They may work with somebody like Getu Bekele, who's a world-renowned agronomist and coffee scientist, as well. He actually worked for Counter Culture for a while, too, and basically wrote the book, literally, on Ethiopian coffee. You should check it out.

And so, they'll go through this process called cupping, which does quality control. Essentially, for coffee, the person who's the cupper is called a Q grader, which is like the coffee equivalent to a sommelier in wine. And so, that person's going to do a rigorous amount of testing and examination and brewing, to make sure that the seeds are up to par. Then, once that happens, the coffee is purchased by Equatorial Coffee Consultants, which are two African-American brothers who live in the States, that we partner with, and they ship the coffee to America, and then we buy the coffee from them.

Dakota Graff:

Once that coffee is harvested, it also has a window in which you're going to want to use it to have a high enough quality in order to really make it a special product for people, because buying specialty coffee as a luxury good is very accessible in terms of luxury goods like wine, it's going to have a high price. You can get one of the best coffees in the world for somewhere within the realm of \$20 to \$30 a cup, which is a lot for a cup, but in terms of any other luxury good, it's very accessible. So in terms of supply chain, you want to make sure that that investment is being fulfilled by the efficiency of supply chain. It's not always the most interesting discussion that you can have of trying to get coffee into the US as fast as possible, but really it's almost just as important as how it's roasted and how it's served. I spend a lot of time just figuring out supply chain issues and really focusing on how we can get that coffee into the US as fast as possible.

Jerusha Klemperer:

Is coffee always roasted at its destination or is there any part of the supply chain that it's like, "Oh no," and then they roast all that and maybe it leaves the country roasted, as well?

Dakota Graff:

100% of the coffee I get is green, and really the process behind that is that shelf stability. So what we know about coffee and post-harvest processing is that coffee, as an agricultural product, it starts out very wet and then ends up very dry at the end of it. So all coffee's exported anywhere from 9% to about 12% moisture content, which we found to be more or less shelf stable, in terms of what we refer to as lipid oxidation, meaning that once we get the coffee, we'll taste it, and if it tastes like cardboard or like paper or just kind of generally woody and hollow, that's going to be lipid oxidation, and that's going to be either dried incorrectly or it's just old. I mean, coffee has a shelf life, just like anything else, be it spice or flour or grain or any of these things that you often have in your cupboard that could be years and years old that you're unaware of. That is kind of the force behind exporting green coffee, is keeping it shelf stable and it's in a hermetically sealed bag.

Taking those green coffees and running them through a roaster does a number of things, but really it transforms coffee from an insoluble kind of hard seed that is really not usable for much, into a beautiful beverage that is done through a chemical change. Some drying happens during the roasting process, but really what happens is Maillard reaction that is what we call the sugar browning phase, which will take all of these acids and sugars and convert them into something that's water-soluble and into a beautiful beverage. So roasters buy green coffee and roast it to have a number of variables controlled in their

house, meaning cash flow is a little easier to operate when you have green coffee buying roasted from another person, especially if you're a café. But also, you kind of get to own your own destiny as far as the outcome of your coffee.

You can buy a coffee, and I could give it to three of my friends who are also roasters, and we're going to roast them different ways, and that's really an expression of what we find in the coffee and how we want to represent it. Oftentimes, roasting is sort of... it's like the lens in which you view the coffee. So there are a number of ways to do that. I always kind of go the route of what I would say is peak enzymatics, which just means you're going to get the most beautiful aromas while also have a balanced coffee experience, meaning all the acidity and the sweetness and the aftertaste, all of those things are going to be harmonious while also representing exactly what I hope was grown at the farm, and we're not doing harm in terms of maybe overroasting or underroasting or any of that, it's just going to be a beautiful coffee experience. My goal is that you don't even think about how this was roasted, because it doesn't even come into your mind.

Jerusha Klemperer:

And what are the factors that a roaster can play around with?

Dakota Graff:

The things that we focus on are duration of roast, so anywhere from, let's say, seven and a half to 15 minutes is our batch duration, depending on the size of the batch and the size of the coffee roaster we're using. And then, you have temperature, so temperature of when we put it in, and then when it comes out. And those two things work together in terms of getting data on a screen that we can interpret to say, "Are we roasting this like we roasted it before, in terms of consistency?" Because people oftentimes come back to us for the same coffee over and over. We have subscription services and people who come into our cafes every day and expect a very similar product than the one that they first fell in love with. And we take data on many points of the roast, in order to interpret that and roast it exactly how we wanted it.

Bartholomew Jones:

There's a ton of variables involved from how the coffee grows to what grows around the coffee to how the coffee's picked to how it's processed to how it's shipped to how it's stored to how it's roasted and to how it's brewed, and then if you add anything to it after it's brewed. All those things comes into play, like why we picked the coffee that we picked and specifically this one, I think, is very framework shifting from what people think a coffee should taste like. My wife, who's our coffee roaster, does a ton of work to create a really interesting flavor profile, one that has body, which, I think, is what people want out of coffee when they say they want bold coffee. Well, they generally mean three different things, but one of the things people want is a good mouthfeel or viscosity is the nerdy term you would use.

And so, we do a lot of work, we use air roasting, specifically, outside of drum roasting, because we believe it contributes to a fuller mouthfeel. But then we also roast the coffee a bit lighter than most people are used to, because that preserves the natural acidic compounds within the coffee that can contribute to a more fruit-forward and floral taste in the cup. And we worked really hard to find partners in our supply chain who are all of African descent. And you may be asking why is that important? Coffee is a \$400 billion industry globally and currently, according to the president of Uganda, less of one percent of that money goes to continental Africans. If you were to include the diaspora, so Afro-Colombians, Afro-Brazilians, people in the Caribbean, African-Americans, I don't imagine that

number gets much larger, considering the history of how those people of African descent ended up in these countries. Slavery, right?

So then the question is, well, where is the money going? Well, some of the money is going to producing countries that deserve that money. We don't want any farmers to be paid less, I believe all farmers need to be paid more. But a lot of the money is going to middlemen and going to people of, I guess you could say, colonial descent, European countries, American countries that were established at the beginning of coffee becoming a global product, and these countries don't really do anything more than pass the buck along and they control, with a pretty tight grip, access to a lot of the middlemen industries exporting, importing coffee trading, and don't allow people of African descent or any farmers, to be honest, to get in on the money that's made there, which is why you're heard the term direct trade become very popular, because people want to pay the farmer directly.

Now, what we claim to do is not direct trade. Direct trade, in a lot of ways, is extremely difficult for a small business, much less a small Black business. You essentially need to be able to buy boats or rent boats to ship large shipping containers full of \$150,000 of green coffee across the ocean. We are not at that point yet. But what we did want to do is make sure everybody we was spending money with were a part of the community we wanted to empower. And so, if you think about buying locally, the whole idea of buying locally is not to exclude anybody else, but it's to say, "Let's make sure the money we spend supports this specific community." Right? Not to the exclusion of others, but to intentionally include people who have traditionally been excluded because of hypercapitalism and giant, commercial entities and corporations that control the market. And so, by us choosing to say, "Let's be even more specific and partner all the way from seed to cup, literally, with people of African descent," we're making sure that this money from this particular seed that was discovered in Africa is going, in some small way, to benefit people who come from that community, as well.

Jerusha Klempere:

It struck me, in talking to these two men who care about their product so intensely and who really try to honor the work that the farmer's have put into this crop, that their coffee has no fair trade certifications. And that left me wondering about what role those labels and certifications play in the world of coffee right now, and if they're even useful or meaningful.

Anna Canning:

My name's Anna Canning and I'm currently the director of communications at the Worker-Driver Social Responsibility Network, but I'm probably here today because I spent probably a dozen years in the coffee industry, really having done pretty much everything from buying green coffee, the roasting, the distribution of the coffee, done some work with sales and distribution, helped open a coffee shop, kind of everything along the way, except the actual picking of the coffee itself, and really doing that with companies who are working within a system of fair trade and really trying to change the giant imbalances that we see in the coffee industry, the global food system, the global trade systems. So that's part of my background. And then, I ended up working for a number of years, for a watchdog of ethical labels. So I spent a lot of time looking at all the different labels that exist and ranking and comparing them.

And coming out of that background, I think I have a lot of thoughts on this whole model of ethical labels and certifications, and the ways in which it doesn't work on a number of levels, the ways in which it's really failing to do the things that it claims to do. Overall, in the world, about 70% of the world's coffee is grown by small scale farmers. And that's farmers who are tending... the average is about 2.2 hectares, so that's around five acres of land, so that's really small. In the US, we would probably talk about those

people as hobby farmers, but those are people who are really trying to make a living off of that little piece of land that crop that they're cultivating on it.

So if we're talking about fair pay, fair prices, the majority of those people who are growing coffee in the world, are thinking about how they make their living is how much they get per pound for their crop. So that's when we talk about a fair price per pound. That other 30% is plantations, large-scale farms where hired labor is a much bigger part of the labor equation, and that's where you start talking about fair wages. We can get blurry in there, there is definitely hired labor that participates some on small scale farms, and honestly, most certification systems actually just those people really recede to the sidelines and they don't get covered much, because they are at the lowest tier. And again, it's really a question of who as a seat at the table, determining standards, and those people are not at the table at all.

Jerusha Klemperer:

Fair trade labels are intended to ensure that producers in the Global South get a more equitable place to trade their goods than they can normally access on the global commodity market. And while fair trade can cover any number of items, in the food system, it tends to focus on tropical products like cocoa, coffee, bananas, but there isn't just one fair trade certification, there are a few, and they all have similar names, and similar logos. But fair trade arrangements usually group producers or workers together into cooperatives, where they can ensure that their meeting certain production standards and targets for worker welfare. And then, businesses and brands that buy from fair trade producers agree to pay a higher price for those goods with the money going back to the producers.

Anna Canning:

So coffee is one of those crops that's traded on global commodity markets, right? So you hear price of oil goes up, down, that happens with coffee, too. And coffee is traded on commodity market exchanges in New York and London, and some of the things that you would expect that make the price go up and down, right? Like weather means a good crop, prices go down, high supply, bad year, prices go up. But then, there's also stuff that's just really detached from coffee farmers realities. I was in the coffee industry back in the financial crisis where suddenly real estate was just crashing, and suddenly all these pension funds and stuff were investing in commodity markets as this new, stable thing, which meant all this market volatility, market prices going up and down, nothing to do with coffee farmers, and they are at the end of the chain just getting jerked around.

I think that, overall, throughout the history of coffee, coffee farmers have really been set up to be price takers, not people who get to choose what price they are charging for their product. And part of that is, coffee is fundamentally a colonial crop, a crop that is rooted in colonialism. It has its origins in Ethiopia and then was spread by colonial traders around the globe, and every community that you go into that grows coffee, there's kind of a different relationship that has its roots, really, in that. And I was talking about how I spent a lot of time ranking certification labels and kind of doing that watchdog work, and that really led me to the fundamental recognition that the certification model doesn't work on a number of levels, that it's just failing to do the things it claims to do.

And one of the problems is, when you're ranking certification labels, there are definitely differences between those labels that you see on a package and what they mean, but the one's with the stronger standards are barely on the shelf. Small producers symbol, probably the highest standard for coffee labels. What the label looks like, there's two little hands snaking around it says small producer's fair trade on it, and I went and looked and, at this point, there is one very small company in the entirety of the US that is using that label, right? And so, that is not even a practical recommendation for folks, and

the ones with the weaker standards dominate the market. That really gets to the heart of the issue, right?

Jerusha Klemperer:

To clarify, Canning is talking here about fair trade certifications, and she says that, as result of this lack of faith in that fair trade system, a lot of third-wave and specialty coffee has kind of moved past those fair trade certifications and just established direct relationships with the farmers.

Anna Canning:

Certification has been relegated to a PR exercise, and has so much more to do with marketing, at this point, than it does with changing the purchasing practices of a corporation. And so, we all know there is this global race to the bottom for lower prices and lower worker conditions across pretty much every industry at this point. And likewise, there is a race to the bottom for certifications, which means that the certifications with lower standards and lower requirements tend to win out. That's one key takeaway for me, from that watchdog work. And the second key takeaway is really the model is flawed, because the idea that we can take the real work of transforming our exploitative food system and the unequal system of global trade and put all that onto one person's choice in the grocery store, and then that those little choices will add up and trickle down to farmers and workers. There is a decade of research, now, to show that that trickle down isn't happening, and that the promises of certification are not being kept for farmers, for workers, for consumers.

And academic researchers have really made that step to saying certification does not work, but I would say the corporate social responsibility industry hasn't gotten there yet. Except, in coffee, I think that conversation is further along, which has led to some other challenges, really, for all of us trying to make sense of it. At the beginning, you would find fair trade products in these little fair trade shops, right? So you would be like, "I am going to go and get my fair trade things," and that would happen outside of where you would go to get your groceries. So the idea of certification, initially, was we can mainstream these products, is the language often used around it, put them onto the shelf beside conventional coffee and show people that there's a difference. At this point, like I was saying, the differences between those labels have become really blurred.

A key talking point for fair trade for a long time was that it meant fair prices for farmers, but I would say that, at this point, we're so far from that being universally true about what it means to say something is fair trade. But I talked about how coffee is traded on the commodity market, which fluctuates really wildly, so one of the key parts of fair trade certification was to establish a fair trade minimum price. So commodity market goes up, goes down, there is at least a stable minimum that people could count on, but that price has stagnated for years compared to rising costs. That dynamic is actually playing out right now, that the international fair trade system has just gone forward with raising that price, and this month there's actually drama because Fair Trade USA, the big US certifier, has chosen to freeze those prices.

Jerusha Klemperer:

The issue seems to be, is that baseline wage living one? And have these certifications actually raised the standard of living enough for coffee farmers, and many critics say no. She did mention that there are cooperatives that work better for farmers, and specifically called out Equal Exchange Coffee, which is available at a lot of grocery stores, as a decent option on that front. Now, what about some of the other labels and certifications you might see at the grocery store, like USDA certified organic or the label shade-grown?

Anna Canning:

Coffee is naturally an understory plant. Coffee grows in this very specific area around the equator. In the process of kind of industrialization, to make it more compatible with large scale production, it's been hybridized to be adapted to more growing in full sun. To grow coffee organically without chemical pesticides, synthetic pesticides and fertilizers, means you have to grow it in a setting that is a little closer to what it's naturally adapted to.

Jerusha Klemperer:

You're using this word understory. For people who don't know, what does this mean?

Anna Canning:

Yeah. So if you're thinking about a forest, there's the canopy up top, the big, tall trees, and then coffee itself is more of a shrub, a shorter bush that grows underneath those big trees, so that would be the understory of a forest. So I've gone to coffee farms and you'll see bananas, oranges, various nitrogen fixing trees all grown around an undercrop of coffee.

Jerusha Klemperer:

So hearing that or seeing on a label that coffee has been shade-grown, is kind of a nod to the larger practices. It's telling you that it was grown in that sort of more diverse ecosystem instead of more like a monocrop? Is that the idea?

Anna Canning:

It really has no technical definition that is set in a standard for what shade-grown means. I've personally been to things that are called shade-grown that look really different. It could be some trees on the sidelines, it can be [inaudible 00:42:26] cover. In terms of there being actual standards, I wouldn't say being grown organically is synonymous with being shade-grown, but there's a lot of chance for there to be more overlap there. I think one of the values of organic in coffee, is the rules around there's no synthetic pesticides or fertilizers used for the last three years, so integrated pest management, organic fertilizers. There are some requirements for shade in that system. Organic doesn't necessarily mean the coffee is healthier for you, but it does mean that it's healthier for the people in the environment who grew it. And that's a big deal, because overall on our planet, we are in a climate crisis, and deforestation is one of the things that is driving that.

But the presence of trees and all of that and a crop that people can grow without more deforestation or even grow as part of a reforestation project can really be part of a climate solution. So I think it's worth thinking about organic, things around that, that is a value that we can look for, I think, as we're choosing coffee, that doesn't have a real downside to it. Well, there's always a downside, I take that back. Organic certification can definitely be inaccessible to very small scale farms, especially if they don't have a market associated with it. Organic standards do not require that buyers pay more for farmers, they they are not required to be compensated for the additional work of paperwork of organic certification or cultivating to a higher standard. So that's a big downside of that system.

Bartholomew Jones:

What we found is by being this intentional about our production and our process and our partners, it's generated trust in our consumers. Our consumers trust us to say, "Hey, I might not even drink coffee. I might not even like coffee, but you care this much about me, as a person of African descent, I'm willing

to try it" or "You care this much about me as a person who didn't really care about coffee, but I care about social justice, I care about helping to be on the right side of history. I don't really think that much about coffee, but you obviously did, and there must be a reason for it, I'll try it." And then, what people find, is because we're sourcing specialty grade coffee, that scores basically an 88 out of 100 on a cupping score, by those individuals I mentioned who were the Q graders. Most commodity coffee, for example, like Folgers, things like that, are 60s, 70s, right? So 88 is a very, very... so 1% of coffee in the world, right?

By doing the work to also make sure the coffee's very high quality, people find out, "Wow, this coffee is actually the most amazing coffee I've ever had in my life, and it doesn't taste anything like what I hated about coffee." That's a nice little side effect there of the intention, as well, is the quality. And so, then people turn into lifelong consumers, and they become a part of a supply chain that is intentionally investing in people of African descent, that also is taking 10% of the profit from that seed and reinvesting it back into the communities that we come from, so half of that goes to the community in Guji, to invest and compensate them for their contributions and their marketing analysis and their pictures and all those things. And the other half goes into the hood in Memphis, where we do a lot of free educational opportunities, like the internship and a pay-what-you-can drip option here at our café. All that kind of stuff comes from the supply chain that we built out.

Jerusha Klemperer:

Listening to Bartholomew talk about how his company invests in his local community, I started to wonder what it means for coffee to be local in a place like Tennessee or Arkansas or California or New York, when coffee doesn't grow in any of these places. Part of that can be, simply, if it roasted locally, but it can extend beyond that.

Dakota Graff:

We have all of these systems that we've kind of built, especially over the last century, if not two centuries, of these strange colonial systems in which coffee came from all over the world and ended up in people's houses. And now, people are starting to look at food supply systems and supply chains and saying, "You know what? I actually probably shouldn't be able to get mangoes in Arkansas at this time of the year." And that just means that where were these grown, how were they grown, and how do they get here? And also, do I need this? I spend a lot of time, just kind of my free time, I spend a lot of time with local farmers and people who do food systems that are hyperlocal, meaning that run CSAs and they do all these things, and I find it super interesting.

And I, myself, grow a little bit of food at my house, just because I am fascinated with that system, and I do think a lot about our food chain systems. Coffee, I have to kind of hold separate from that, meaning that I know that this coffee in El Salvador needs to get to us, and that is by no means local, but you can treat coffee like it's a local product by giving it the same care that you would when you're buying things at the farmers' market. People oftentimes now, especially the ones who are inspired by the people doing modern work in the food systems, oftentimes they'll know their producers. It feels really good, as part of the human experience, to consume a product where you're like, "You know what? I know who grew this, and I care for them and I pay them a good wage."

And that's really what specialty coffee is about, it's creating what we now live in as a global society, in a global market, it's creating that global market into, more or less, a local market when I know that Raul Rivera grew this coffee in Santa Rosa in El Salvador, and that the person who's buying it on behalf of me, who wants it, is doing a great job and caring for him and making sure that this supply chain systems are taken care of, and that's as local as it's going to get until we start figuring out how to grow coffee in our

backyards, which I don't think is going to happen. But the other side of that is buying coffee from a roaster that you're not shipping roasted coffee all over. If you're wanting to be that hyperlocal and sensitive person, where you are thinking about caring for your community, there are a lot of coffee roasters in the US that are doing great work and partnering with great producers and not buying from big, big, big conglomerates that don't have a name on the bag and don't value coffee producers.

Bartholomew Jones:

The most important part of being accessible is being able to be accessed easily, and so we moved into our neighborhood, right? We moved into this neighborhood that I went to high school in, low-income, historically affected by redlining. We moved there, right? So one, you can touch me. I'm your neighbor. I'm not a guy driving from the suburbs to talk about something. I live here, and so the issues we face, I took those same issues on, my family is there, so one and so forth. Number two is we put our shop in our neighborhood, so I didn't put my shop downtown. It's a coffee club, but we didn't put it downtown, we didn't put it in the hipstery kind of midtown, gentrified... We went into our neighborhood where there's really not a market for coffee, and we decided to do the hard work of like, "Let me just go talk to people and tell them about what's going on, and let them try it for free." And if you don't like it, cool, and if you like it, great. We listen to people.

But when I started off, I was very anti-espresso. I was very anti pretty much anything colonial, so I was like, "We can't use the espresso machine, that's the colonizers' machine. Look at the language. Espresso, macchiato, cappuccino. We're going to use African words and go back to traditional Indigenous terms for things." And some of that stuff is still around, but when you serve a brown sugar oat milk latte to my neighbor who's been drinking all night and you just see a smile on his face, I'm like, "Okay, I'm being an ideologue here. Let me chill out." And so, I think the community kind of helps to give you feedback on that. It's also led us to create innovative products, so one product I'm really proud of is called gold brew. Gold brew is a product, to me, that makes what I have grown to love about coffee, accessible to people who don't have the privilege to be able to spend seven years building their palate, right? To really get to some of these harder to discern flavor, flavanoids within coffee. Right?

And coffee's a very complex fruit, and so what I've decided is we need to basically take those things that I like about coffee, the florality, the acidity, the sweetness, and turn it up, turn those things up, but turn it up without adding cream and sugar. So if I want florality, I'm not going to add a floral creamer into it, to try to turn it up, how do we do that subtly, allowing you to kind of piggyback on the additives to get to the natural notes? So gold brew was the drink we created and we spent a lot of time playing around with low glycemic index sweeteners and natural citric acid from other fruits that would compliment what we love about Guji Mane. And what I love about Guji Mane is, currently, it has these really beautiful passion fruit notes and it has this interesting kind of florality there, with the passion fruit, there's concord grape kind of sweetness, acidity to it. There's dark chocolate vibes. How do you let somebody taste that without making them go through a coffee tasting class for two years, right?

So we basically made a drink that adds flavor modules there, essentially, and allows people to experience it in what is, essentially, a low glycemic index coffee refresher. In teaching we call it scaffolding, right? It's kind of like a scaffold into what I find interesting about coffee, and it's a juxtaposition with what most people think about when they think about coffee, from a flavor perspective. You think about smokiness, you think about deep chocolate, you think about maybe caramel, but mostly these kind of dark, smoky, tobacco, bitter flavors. Well, this drink isn't bitter at all, it's bright, it's floral, it's refreshing, it's sweet, but not too sweet, not an overpowering sugar cane, because we're using low...

Anyway, all this stuff is great, so when I give it to somebody and they say, "Wait, this is coffee?," that is the first step, to me, to everything else we want to do. It's about more than enjoying coffee with no sugar and cream and enjoying black coffee with no sugar and cream, but it's about enjoying ourselves, enjoying blackness, and the world being able to see blackness from a perspective, not as something that's bitter and astringent and something to be tamed and to be diluted, but as something that's beautiful and bright and floral and complicated and complex, and something that's worth enjoying on its own, on the ground that God created it on.

The coffee plant was discovered in 850 B.C. by a goat herder in Ethiopia and it has developed into a myriad of beautiful traditions. But the coffee ceremony, I think, is one that is pretty consistent across all the 80 different ethnicities in Ethiopia. It's a way to make coffee more than just a beverage, but really to become a community foundation and a standpoint for how we think about what the community is supposed to do. In the Guji Zone, specifically, there's a blessing called Buna fi Nagaa hin Dhabiinaa, which means may your house lack no coffee nor peace, and this blessing is roughly 2,000 years old and it comes from a traditional roasting method called buna qalaa, which comes out of the Guji Zone, and the idea is that coffee represents peace.

There's an idea that coffee kind of grew from the tears of God and that it was given to produce peace between humans and creation and humans and each other. But the idea is that there should always be peace when coffee is consumed, and it kind of serves as a metric to know if we're consuming it correctly. Right? And just the idea that there is a correct way and an incorrect way, I think it's kind of a radical notion in the space, but yo, if you're consuming it and the people around you don't have peace, stop. Reset, dialogue, and then let's get back into enjoying this together.

Jerusha Klemperer:

What You're Eating is produced by Nathan Dalton and foodprint.org, which is a project of the Grace Communications Foundation. Special thanks to Dakota Graff, Bartholomew Jones, and Anna Canning. You can find us at www.foodprint.org, where we have this podcast, as well as articles, reports, a food label guide, and more.