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How Coffee Can Be Better

The unfiltered truth about the world's most popular drink



Paul Greenberg · Follow

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As readers of this page know, I occasionally ask writers from various backgrounds to contribute their thoughts. This week's essay comes from Edward (Edie) Mukiibi president of the global Slow Food movement. Edie lives and works in Uganda where he and his

family run an agroecological farm. An astronomist, food and agriculture educator and social entrepreneur, Muk

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Slow Food Uganda.

What brings people to coffee? When a steaming morning brew infuses its way into our daily routine, we become part of a collective ritual involving billions of other people. Whether in the form of an Italian espresso, a filter coffee, a Turkish coffee or an Ethiopian ceremonial brew, coffee is second only to water as the world's most consumed drink (and few enjoy the former unless they brew it with the latter).

My family has been intercropping coffee for generations, and many of my childhood memories concern its cultivation and consumption.

The varieties of coffee that my grandfather cultivated are dying out and being replaced by new industrial varieties whose higher yields come at the cost of their environmental impact

In the Ugandan community I grew up in, it was common practice to offer coffee as a welcoming for arriving visitors or returning travelers, or to infuse local distillate and roasted coffee beans from local Robusta or Nyasaland Arabica varieties. But for most people coffee is a prepackaged commodity that sits on the shelves of large retailers, or a beverage ordered in the outlets of large international chains.

When we purchase coffee from our supermarkets, we complete the last of a long series of economic transactions, beginning with the cultivation of the crop. Coffee, like other agricultural products, is a commodity, which is traded on the stock market whose value is determined by financial speculations resulting from future contracts.

Coffee consistently ranks among the world's most traded commodities and is the sole source of income for more than **25 million** farmers in Central and South America, Africa, Asia and Oceania. A staggering 56.4% of the global coffee supply is concentrated in Brazil, Vietnam and Colombia. But a large part of the GDP of more than 50 countries is heavily dependent on its price fluctuations on the global stock exchanges, where the rules of the game are dictated by a handful of corporations.

Make no mistake that we are facing a turning point: both for the global coffee economy and for our ~~de~~ To make Medium work, we log user data. ge is impacting the livelihoods of coffee pro By using Medium, you agree to our in fact, that according to the Proceedings of the ~~National Academy of Sciences~~ Privacy Policy, including cookie policy. by 2050 our coffee-suitable areas will be **reduced** 73–88%.

Changes to the suitability of land for coffee production are increasingly driving deforestation and forest degradation throughout the landscapes in which coffee is cultivated. Conflicts over the use and distribution of productive land, along with deforestation, water use and pesticide applications have profound detrimental effects on food, health, human rights and global sustainability.

And here I speak from personal experience.

My late grandfather's coffee plantation Lwanyonyi was grabbed and converted first into a maize monoculture and then into a lavish housing estate. His plantation was situated in one of the few low-lying hills once known for its dark green vegetation that separated my hometown from the northern shores of Lake Victoria at the heart of central Uganda, a predominantly Robusta coffee growing region. The tragedy we face today is that old varieties like the kind he cultivated, which were once responsible for the glory days of Uganda's coffee trade, are dying out and being replaced by new industrial varieties, whose higher yields come at the cost of their environmental impact. Producers who continue to cultivate local varieties have to find ways of withstanding the enormous amount of stigma from proponents and adopters of the new, whose product is deemed to be more modern and of higher economic value.

The Arabica and Robusta coffee varieties listed on the stock exchange represent very little of the vast biodiversity of coffee. In fact, these monocultures overshadow the many minor species that have no commercial value but belong to the traditions of their respective producing countries and offer very different tasting experiences.

Does sustainable coffee production still exist?

The preservation of ecosystems and the environment is a key factor of resilience to the climate crisis, and the preservation of biodiversity requires a systemic approach to the environment, communities and local products.

Let's take an example of how sustainable coffee production works.

We can achieve food security for coffee producers by applying **agroecological principles** to land management. To make Medium work, we log user data. By using Medium, you agree to our Privacy Policy, including cookie policy. Industry systems are vital for building resilience and food products for producer families from the same land where they grow cash crops such as coffee.

While more than 10 Arabica coffee varieties grow in Uganda, the oldest and most unique remains the Nyasaland Arabica. This coffee originates from the Geisha region of western Ethiopia and was introduced to Nyasaland, a former British protectorate now known as Malawi before being brought to Uganda by British colonialists in the early 20th century.

Here it adapted perfectly to the agroforestry and intercropping systems being practiced on the slopes of Mount Elgon as well as the western mountain ranges.

Nyasaland coffee grows on steep slopes at altitudes between 1,260 and 1,550 meters where it is intercropped with bananas, cassava, pumpkins, beans as well as other coffee varieties such as Kilimanjaro, fruit trees and ginger (an effective natural pest repellent).

Smallholder coffee plots extend up and down the cliff faces, making use of natural water gullies and the traditional agroforestry system to ensure the coffee trees are nourished throughout the year. Many of Mount Elgon's producers belong to the **Mount Elgon Nyasaland Coffee Community**, which puts these agroecological principles into practice through safeguarding this local variety and preserving biodiversity.

What consumers can do to help improve sustainability of coffee?

How to source food products like coffee in a way that is socially and environmentally sustainable has become a global hot topic in recent years.

One way to become a more conscious consumer is to follow the work of the **Slow Food Coffee Coalition**. The coalition is an open and collaborative international network which unites everyone involved in the coffee supply chain, from farmers to consumers. Some of the network's main objectives are the creation of direct links between roasters and farmers, educating consumers about sustainability in coffee and offering free training to farmers on alternative certification systems.

Creating a more sustainable supply chain will be more resilient in the long term.

Traceability is fundamental for the growth of the coffee production sector because it gives an unsegmented c To make Medium work, we log user data. d helps to focus on critical issues. And it is By using Medium, you agree to our Privacy Policy, including cookie policy. n turn our attention.

A win-win tool for certification

Being involved in the certification process is one of a farmer's more bureaucratic tasks. But certification is essential for farmers who wish to showcase sustainability and a useful tool to help conscious consumers make the right choice.

Third Party Certification (TPC) systems are established by the International Organization for Standardization (ISO), and generally consist of norms to be applied and controlled by external technical actors (e.g. inspectors) using globally-applied generic guarantee forms. Organic certification is one of these. However, in between TPC and farmers' self-certification lies a third way, called "Participatory Guarantee Systems" (PGS).

PGS are low-cost, local systems for product or value chain quality assurance. They are based on diffused technical knowledge, inclusion and collective accountability and include stakeholders as well as producers in the process. Most importantly, PGS are rooted in trust, social networks and knowledge exchange, drawing from the same social elements that make the production and consumption of good coffee such a unifying collective ritual.



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