

**A  
DOUBLE TALL  
TALE OF  
CAFFEINE,  
COMMERCE,  
AND  
CULTURE**



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*To Gina,  
my little sis,  
a great lover of coffee —  
even if she drowns it  
in vanilla syrup*

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## INTRODUCTION

### The Experiment

**D**epending on your ideological tilt — and, really, on how much you like coffee — it was either an assault on decency itself or the most brilliant decision Howard Schultz ever made.

In early 1991, just a few years after he had scraped together the money to buy a fledgling Seattle coffee company called Starbucks, Schultz's most profitable café sat on a bustling intersection in the chic Robson Street shopping district of Vancouver, British Columbia. Aesthetically speaking, the coffee-house was unimpressive; it occupied a dilapidated, musty old space, and it had next to no room for patrons to sit down. Yet the store was a living testament to the world's sudden, intense, and puzzling thirst for expensive coffee drinks. In an age when concoctions like the latte still seemed exotic and obscure, this tiny Starbucks served ten thousand people *each week* — and those were just the ones who could get in. The café was so busy, its lines so endless, that the store's employees were certain they were turning away hundreds of potential customers every day.

Which didn't sit well with Schultz. A young and ambitious former house-wares salesman who grew up broke in Brooklyn's housing projects, Schultz had been racing to snare customers and expand his chain since the day he bought it. When he acquired Starbucks in 1987, the company's store counted stood at eleven; barely three years later, he had increased its size nearly eightfold, to eighty-five cafés. So Schultz was not one to take lost customers lightly. For years, he had been pressing his Vancouver Realtor to find another space in the neighborhood, but nothing suitable turned up. And to make matters worse, Schultz learned that the landlord of his Robson Street store was planning to close down and gut the building within a few years, which would leave Starbucks without its main cash cow for as long as it took to complete renovations. For a company still struggling to break even selling coffee drinks that many considered as faddish as fondue or fanny packs, this was distressing news. In 1988 alone, Starbucks had lost \$1.2 million; it couldn't afford to lose much more.

But as unwelcome as this information was, it gave Schultz an excuse to try an idea he'd been mulling over privately for quite a while — something that, as far as anyone could remember, had never been attempted before; something any sensible businessman would have called outright crazy. One day, while talking to his real estate agent about options for locations nearby, Schultz revealed the proposal.

“What about the restaurant across the street?” he asked.

“What are you talking about?” the Realtor said.

“The one kitty-corner from us. I've been in there, and it's dead.”

“I don't think they're going to make it, and I doubt you could afford the rent,” the shocked Realtor replied, “but are you saying you'd open another one across the street?”

“I would.”

With that, Schultz set in motion a peculiar experiment: what would happen if he put a Starbucks literally within spitting distance of another Starbucks? (Their addresses were 1099 Robson Street and 1100 Robson Street — they were that close.) Schultz justified his plan to skeptical employees and investors in two ways. First, he explained that the move was guaranteed to generate dozens of new stories about the coffee chain that was insane enough to put two cafés across the street from each other, which would amount to free advertising for their cash-strapped company. Second, he argued that the twin Starbucks stores could develop completely separate clienteles if they looked different enough — essentially, if the company minimized the impression that someone had placed a giant mirror in the middle of the intersection. To this end, Schultz gave the new location a darker, more subdued design, with tones of black cherry, deep green, and white, which was at least marginally dissimilar to the first café’s touches of chrome and its emphasis on the loud colors of the Italian flag. On March 2, 1991, the dual-Starbucks intersection opened for business.

That a Starbucks could open across the street from another Starbucks at all is strange enough, but the truly mind-boggling part of the story is this: instead of laughing Starbucks out of town for doing something so presumptuous, customers flocked to the new café as if the nearest alternative were out in the wilds of the Yukon. Schultz expected the two stores to eat away at each other’s sales, but nothing of the sort happened. As he’d hoped, they attracted mostly different crowds; the new café lured the well-heeled business set, while the original drew a hipper, more relaxed clientele. And both groups turned up in droves. Schultz’s gamble had hit the jackpot — amazingly, his two Robson Street coffee houses soon became the best- and second-best-performing stores in the chain. The bizarreness of the point begs to be reemphasized: Starbucks’s top two stores were *fifteen yards* away from each other.

On that street in Vancouver, Schultz saw what no one else saw. He saw that each corner of the intersection had its own unique traffic flow. (“It wasn’t a different neighborhood, but it had a different vibe,” he later told *Newsweek* — referring, incredibly, to the other side of Robson Street.) He saw that he could snag thousands of new customers just by making his store a few steps more convenient. But most important, he saw the sheer magnitude of society’s thirst for gourmet coffee drinks. As Al Wahl, an early real estate broker for Starbucks, put it to me, “After that, we said to ourselves, ‘Oh my god . . . We can put these things closer together than we ever imagined.’ ”

Today, of course, the multi-Starbucks nexus is a common sight. For instance, in Portland, Oregon, when people wander through the Pioneer Place mall and see the Starbucks on the first floor and another hovering directly above it on the third floor, the spectacle doesn’t even merit a double take — despite the fact that a mere twelve feet of space separates them. If you stand in the right spot on Manhattan’s Astor Place, you can make out *three* Starbucks: one by the subway entrance, another across the square, and a third in the bordering Barnes and Noble. We’re now so accustomed to the chain’s ubiquity that its café cluster bombs have become more a source of comedy than concern. Take the movie *Best in Show* (2000) in which two characters playing a married couple explain how they first met at Starbucks: “Not the same Starbucks,” the husband clarifies. “We were at different Starbucks across the street from each other.” This could actually happen. It probably *has* happened.

So again, depending on your particular worldview, you could see any number of things about Schultz’s Robson Street gambit. Some view it as a victory for gourmet coffee or even as a welcome convenience. Others consider it a stroke of entrepreneurial genius, a monument to one of the great business stories of the past half century. And then there are those, like the comedian Lewis Black, who believe it foretells something far more dire.

“Things went fuzzy for a moment,” Black wrote of his first double-Starbucks sighting, in Houston

“but when my head cleared, it felt as if God had reached down and bestowed upon me all the knowledge ever gathered since the beginning of time. I was indeed looking at the much-sought-after end of the universe.”

## *The Call of the Siren*

Some things people need. Even the most Spartan lifestyle requires food, water, shelter, clothing, and so forth. No one in the history of humanity has ever needed a latte — much less a double tall vanilla soy latte, no foam, extra hot — yet the world’s thirst for them appears unquenchable. Twenty years ago, you couldn’t fill a high school gym with the number of Americans who knew what a macchiato was, but good luck finding a convenience store or gas station minimart that doesn’t offer espresso drinks today. Modern society accepts a level of coffee micromanagement that would have appalled our forebears. When we see someone giving more attention to the precise, scientific application of Splenda to their morning cappuccino than they seem to bestow on their own personal hygiene, do we even bother to raise an eyebrow anymore?

Ours is a caffeinated nation. We buy more coffee than any other country in the world — almost a third of the planet’s supply — and consume somewhere around 110 billion cups of it per year. There is no shortage of impressive-sounding statistics that demonstrate the little brown bean’s dominance over our lives: coffee is the second-most-traded physical commodity in the world, after petroleum; four out of every five American adults drink the beverage regularly.

But these are just factoids. A better illustration of the pervasiveness of coffee in American life is currently floating around in Boston Harbor. In 1998, two researchers from the University of Massachusetts Boston performed a comprehensive chemical analysis of the harbor, and they learned something surprising in the process: its waters contain a significant amount of caffeine. The concentration was low — not even enough to give the fish a buzz — but its very presence was puzzling. Caffeine forms in only a few land-dwelling plants, so how did it get into Boston Harbor? The polite answer: human waste. Every day, the Boston metropolitan area ingests one thousand pounds of pure caffeine, a substance so potent in its crystallized form that one must don a hazmat suit before handling it. Human bodies absorb only 95 percent of this, which means that a huge dose of caffeine enters the waste stream and trickles into Boston Harbor every day. The net effect of this is comparable to dumping around a million cups of coffee into the harbor each week. In fact, caffeine shows up in hundreds of the nation’s rivers, lakes, and bays — as well as in treated drinking water. Edward Furlong, a U.S. Geological Survey researcher, even has a nickname for this phenomenon: “the Starbucks effect.”

Starbucks didn’t invent coffee, of course; it just did something with it that no one thought possible. The company took a commodity that Americans could get for a quarter at carts and diners and reshaped it into a luxury product, convinced customers to buy it at hugely inflated prices, and built stores only a few blocks apart in every major city, yet patrons continue to line up in ever-greater numbers to fork over their money. Indeed, Starbucks has grown so popular with consumers that it even has the power to turn them from sinners into churchgoers. When one Southern Baptist pastor in Cooper City, Florida, set out to boost attendance at his church’s 2006 Easter service, he decided to send out a mailer promising a ten-dollar Starbucks gift card to every new parishioner. As the *Miami Herald* reported, the bait was devastatingly effective. On Easter Sunday, eighty-five hundred people

— almost double the church’s typical Easter attendance — showed up for the service; the church staff actually had to turn people away at the parking lot. In the twenty-first century, apparently, the path to salvation includes pit stops for Frappuccinos.

Fueled by this cultlike popularity, Starbucks now owns its market like few other companies in recent memory. Here’s a challenge: try to name the number two coffee-house chain in America. Any ideas? The question is especially tough to answer because the company’s closest competitor, the Minnesota-based Caribou Coffee, is just one twenty-fifth the size of Starbucks. In fact, if you merged all of its rivals (that is, chains with more than three stores) into one patchwork coffee goliath, it still wouldn’t be even half the size of Starbucks. “It’s like McDonald’s with no Burger King or Wendy’s or Subway,” said Kevin Knox, a longtime Starbucks roasting expert who is now an industry consultant. “It’s total domination.”

With \$7.8 billion in annual revenues, forty million customers a week, and more than thirteen thousand stores, Starbucks is no fondueesque fad. It’s a new American institution.

Actually, given the chain’s breakneck international expansion and its ability to reshape coffee drinking habits the world over, Starbucks is more like a global institution. Hyperbolically titled books abound these days, telling us *How Velcro Shaped History* and *Why Paprika Matters*, but with Starbucks, it’s no stretch to say that the company has changed the dynamics of the modern world. Starbucks influences automotive traffic patterns, affects the welfare of some twenty-five million coffee farmers, and sways the cultural customs of entire nations toward espresso consumption. It has inserted itself into the American urban landscape more quickly and craftily than any other retail company in history, and it has forever changed the way Western companies market themselves to consumers. Former Starbucks CEO Orin Smith, speaking to *Fortune* magazine, stated all of this even more boldly: “We changed the way people live their lives, what they do when they get up in the morning, how they reward themselves, and where they meet.”

When you think about it, this whole phenomenon is baffling. How could a simple coffee company attain such wide-ranging influence on society, with its luxury-priced products becoming a fixture in daily life virtually overnight? In 1989, the United States could claim a grand total of 585 coffee houses, according to statistics from the Specialty Coffee Association of America, and most people considered the idea of a business dedicated to selling coffee by the cup to be absolute lunacy. For years, business pundits thundered predictions of the coffee-house’s impending demise; yet today America boasts twenty-four thousand of them and counting. After decades of exponential growth, the industry is still expanding faster than ever. This sustained café explosion has been an incredible moneymaker, but it’s far more than that: it’s a legitimate social movement. All around the globe — both in countries with their own centuries-old café culture and in those where coffee drinking was virtually non-existent twenty years ago — the coffee-house template pioneered by Starbucks is becoming dominant and pervasive. Millions of people the world over have integrated cafés into the fabric of their lives, making them into second homes. So surely, there must be some astonishing secret behind the coffee-house’s raw, bewitching magnetism.

Luckily, we have the British government to help us figure these things out. In 2002, Britain’s Economic and Social Research Council gave two Glasgow University professors a \$250,000 grant to investigate the social factors driving the rise of café society in England. The researchers, Eric Laurin and Chris Philo, conducted an exhaustive three-year campaign into the very heart of human behavior: they became “regulars” at a coffee-house, videotaped customers in their native environment, took extensive field notes, trained as baristas, conducted interviews with patrons and staff, and plumbed library archives for historical and literary context. The project’s staggering conclusion? Coffee-house



are comfortable, welcoming places where people can enjoy time alone or with others. Among Laurier and Philo's crucial findings is the insight that the music played changes throughout the day (at night "There is more funk. It is a hearable thing") and that a café visit is "a sequential object with beginning, ordering, seat selecting, occupying the table, and leaving."

From this, we can draw a couple of conclusions: first, that the British government evidently plays it fast and loose with grant money; and second, that coffee-houses appeal to us on a deeper level than it might appear. Laurier and Philo's results feel underwhelming not only because they're painful, obvious and simplistic, but also because they fail to address exactly what it is about coffee-houses that makes them so enthralling to consumers. After all, cafés aren't the only warm and convivial places in Britain — so are pubs. What's more, the findings don't speak to why coffee-houses have such strong allure all over the planet, even in countries that have long avoided coffee altogether, like China and, well, England. Starbucks has certainly had a lot to do with glamorizing and popularizing the coffee house in America and abroad, but could it all be thanks to the company's Midas touch? Why would the concept work just as well in Shanghai as it does in Seattle?

Perhaps more important, do people *want* Starbucks to work just as well in Shanghai as it does in Seattle? For many, the answer is a resounding no. Starbucks likes to envision itself as a global good Samaritan, sprinkling community spirit and glee hither and thither like pixie dust, but the company has also kicked up a sandstorm of conflict. Foremost among the complaints are those about the chain's ubiquity; Starbucks often tests the boundaries of what consumers will accept. To illustrate, consider this question:

*Which of the following places does not have a Starbucks?*

- A. Guantanamo Bay Naval Base in Cuba
- B. A Christian church in Muncie, Indiana
- C. Beirut, Lebanon
- D. The town of Starbuck, Washington
- E. The Great Wall of China

The correct answer, which was probably obvious since it doesn't seem likely to enrage anyone, is D. The tiny eastern Washington town of Starbuck lies forty long miles from the nearest Starbucks, though hundreds of tourists pop in each year and are shocked to learn that Starbuck is not the company's ancestral home. If Starbucks appears inescapable now, just wait. Howard Schultz likes to say that his company is only in "the second inning of a nine-inning game," and his goal of forty thousand stores worldwide would make Starbucks the biggest chain on the planet.

But it's not just Starbucks's ubiquity that riles tempers. To some, the company embodies all that is reprehensible about major corporations. Various critics have accused Starbucks of pillaging the environment, mistreating employees, fleecing Third World coffee growers, crushing independent-owned cafés, sucking local economies dry, peddling a harmful product, and homogenizing the world. These are only the greatest hits. Not even the chain's *cups* have escaped controversy; the thought-provoking quotations Starbucks prints on its signature white paper cups have twice drawn protest, once from conservatives over a line by gay author Augusten Burroughs and once from liberals over evangelical pastor Rick Warren's statement that "You are not an accident. Your parents may not have planned you, but God did." Just about the only part of Starbucks that is *not* contentious is the bathrooms, which noncustomers in a state of extreme duress are generally free to use. \*

All of these things — the Starbucks neighboring a Starbucks, the caffeinated harbor, the inquisition into the coffee-house's seductive appeal, the heated ethical debate over the actions of Starbucks — are signs of one company's subtle impact on an entire planet. That essentially sums up the purpose of this book: to tell the story of how a major corporation, peddling a simple, age-old commodity, influences the daily life and culture of the world.

And Starbucks is a more important company than you might think. Throughout history, all civilized societies have had places where people could get together and socialize, share gossip, discuss ideas, or just unwind. These public gathering places are vital to a culture's health, and they have always reflected the unique national character of their patrons: London had its boisterous pubs, Paris its relaxed sidewalk cafés, Beijing its formal and proper tea-houses, 1950s America its wholesome soda fountains and malt shops. Today, we have the cozy, indulgent coffee-house as our social hub, and Starbucks is the first company ever to have taken this kind of communal place, standardized it, branded it, and sold it to the world at large. In effect, it's turning America's living room into the planet's living room. That customers across the globe have seized onto the chain and made it such an entrenched part of their lives says something significant about us all. It says that the things Starbucks provides — feelings of extravagance and invigoration, of social connection, of safe refuge — are things people desperately want. But as Starbucks spreads this American-born social institution around the world, a host of uncertainties follow. It still remains to be seen whether the company's ever-growing influence is for better or for worse.

*Starbucked* is divided into two sections. In part one, we investigate the mystery of why Starbucks and coffee culture gripped America so tightly and so suddenly, and we examine some related curiosities along the way. Why did Seattle become the planet's coffee epicenter? Why did Starbucks pay a firm to hypnotize its customers? Why doesn't Starbucks have any noteworthy competitors? Part two explores the ethical issues that swirl around the company as it pursues its goal of global coffee domination. Does Starbucks prey on independent cafés, as critics claim? Should we feel complicit in the plight of impoverished coffee farmers each time we buy a vanilla latte?

With every passing week, Starbucks looks more and more like a permanent fixture in the global landscape, thanks in no small part to the six new stores it opens daily. To some, this ubiquity is the height of convenience. To others, it's a sign of the impending apocalypse.

For those in the latter group, there is some consolation. If this truly is the end of the universe, at least there's comfortable seating.

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## PART ONE

# **The Rise of the Mermaid**

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# 1

## Life Before Lattes

**N**early a century ago, mankind discovered the secrets of the perfect cup of coffee.

These eternal truths revealed themselves not through ghostly messages in the steam of Wisconsin secretary's cup of Yuban, but instead through a modern-day prophet of foodstuffs: Samuel Cate Prescott, a Massachusetts Institute of Technology professor who, in the first decades of the twentieth century, was one of the world's top food scientists. Prescott liked to imagine a future in which scientific analysis would make foods not just safer but ideal. A contemporary *Boston Daily Advertiser* story on him even predicted that one day, thanks to his efforts, the "application of growth-producing rays will bring forth cows the size of brontosauri, roosters the size of pterodactyls."

In 1920, Prescott's talents attracted the attention of the National Coffee Roasters Association, a group that had long been searching for a novel way to boost sluggish coffee sales. After bankrolling a string of ineffective publicity campaigns, the roasters decided it was time for a shift in tactics; coffee, they concluded, needed "a college education." Thus inspired, they issued Prescott a challenge: the group would build and staff a state-of-the-art coffee research laboratory for him at MIT if he would devote himself to uncovering the scientifically exact principles for creating the ultimate coffee elixir. Prescott accepted the mission. Armed with the very latest in beaker and Bunsen burner technology, he set out to bring coffee's Platonic ideal down to earth.

So how exactly does one go about perfecting a beverage? Prescott's answer to this was simple: you prepare it in every way you can possibly imagine and then have taste testers judge the results. At the lab, he and his staff played with all of the conceivable variables in the coffee-making process. They brewed it in pots made of copper, aluminum, nickel, glass, and many other materials; they dripped it, pressed it, and percolated it; they toyed endlessly with temperatures, grinds, and steeping times. Almost every day, Prescott would appear in MIT's main cafeteria bearing a tray loaded with cream, sugar, and two beakers of experimental coffee to try out on his crack "tasting squad" — fifteen people with expert, discriminating palates (that is, women from around campus). For three years, he watched them take their thoughtful sips, tallied their preferences, and adjusted his brewing accordingly.

By 1923, Prescott had zeroed in on perfection; his virtuosic coffee-making skills, he believed, simply could not be improved. That year, he announced his findings, a set of rules as unbendable as the laws of physics:

1. *Use one tablespoon of freshly ground coffee for every eight ounces of water.*
2. *Force these grounds through water that is a few degrees short of boiling, inside a glass or*

*earthenware container.*

~~3. Never, ever boil or reheat coffee, and never reuse the grounds.~~

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That was it, the culmination of years of painstaking research. Brewing the coffee of the gods was almost as easy as making toast. Anyone could do it. The elated roasters rushed to publicize the results in hundreds of newspapers and magazines, while the triumphant Prescott went on to try his hand at creating the optimal banana, ice cream, candy, milk, and cow. His guidelines for “the ideal cup of coffee” reached nearly forty million readers — and, incidentally, the formula still holds true today.

So it’s not like we didn’t know how to make coffee. We knew. And thus, it’s truly a testament to the indomitable American spirit that we managed to violate every shred of Prescott’s advice for the next fifty years.

We boiled countless pots of coffee into oblivion on stove-top percolators. We sat idly by as dining waitresses in hairnets poured us cups of mysterious brown sludge that could easily have been used as industrial paint thinner. Grim-faced, we downed concoctions that made us want to scour our tongues with sandpaper, having resigned ourselves to a fate of acrid and generally awful coffee. By the 1960s, the only true devotees of the brew left standing were truck drivers, traveling salesmen, and, well, other people. With this crowd representing the bleeding edge of coffee connoisseurship, it was no surprise that the American coffee habit soon plummeted to a historic nadir.

“I was born in 1945, and none of my buddies drank coffee,” said Donald Schoenholt, who runs the Brooklyn-based Gillies Coffee Company, America’s oldest roaster. “My friends would grab a Coke and have a cigarette in the morning because coffee tasted terrible! People would just run the tap water as hot as it could go, put a teaspoon of instant coffee in the cup, and shake it up.” The situation grew so dire in the sixties that Schoenholt’s father even tried to convince his seventeen-year-old son not to go into the family business — then in its 122nd year of operation — because he feared the avalanche of terrible coffee would utterly destroy the public’s taste for decent beans. For many bitter years, coffee languished in beverage purgatory.

The brew’s decline was particularly tragic because coffee has long been the quintessential American drink, a position it arrived at through one of the greatest public relations coups in history. In December 1773, fifty Bostonians dressed as Mohawk Indians registered their frustration with British rule by raiding three English ships and pitching the cargo, 342 crates of tea, into the harbor. The event is commonly known as the Boston Tea Party, but all of the rejoicing and merrymaking really took place in the homes of coffee importers. Suddenly, coffee drinking became a patriotic act; loyal Americans now had to resist the fondness for tea they had inherited from the British. “Tea must be universally renounced,” proclaimed the revolutionary and future president John Adams — to which he added in a letter to his wife, Abigail, “I myself must be weaned, and the sooner the better.”

Spurred on by this anti-tea imperative, Americans took to coffee in dramatic and decisive fashion. Boston’s Green Dragon coffee-house soon grew so popular that Daniel Webster dubbed it the “headquarters of the revolution.” Almost immediately, the new national coffee habit blossomed into full-blown addiction, complete with uncontrollable cravings. In a July 1777 letter to her husband, for example, Abigail Adams told of how a group of Boston women dealt with a merchant who was rumored to be hoarding coffee beans:

A number of females — some say a hundred, some say more — assembled with a cart and trunk, marched down to the ware-house and demanded the keys [from the merchant].

Upon his finding no quarter, he delivered the keys, and they then opened the ware-house, ~~hoisted out the coffee themselves, put it into a trunk, and drove off. A large concourse of men stood amazed, silent spectators of the whole transaction.~~

Coffee, a drink that symbolized productivity and vigor, soon became fused with the American way. Try to visualize the following scene: a group of grizzled cowboys gathered around a prairie campfire at nightfall, rifles leaning against their knees, talking in low voices as they brew a nice pot of tea. It seems absurd, doesn't it? Coffee is a vital part of that picture, just as it is a vital part of our national identity. The drink helped define us as a nation — industrious, energetic, and efficient — and provided the fuel of American ascendance. By the turn of the twentieth century, we were drinking half of the world's supply.

But if the coffee bean was so crucial to our lives, how did we let it decline in quality to the point where Starbucks's offering of a decent brew could spark a nationwide cultural revolution? More than anything else, the advent of gourmet coffee purveyors like Starbucks was a protest against the decrepit state of the once-proud American cup, carried out by a small band of amateur epicures who still remembered that coffee could taste good. These scattered and slightly batty men, tinkering in their spare time with beans and brews, knew nothing about coffee except that they wanted it to taste better than battery acid. Yet their experiments sparked a modern phenomenon.

To fully understand the dramatic redemption of coffee, the saga of Starbucks, and the ascendance of café culture, though, we must first travel back in time to the period when the whole caffeinated shebang began.

## *A Brief History of Coffee*

Coffee is so pervasive in our lives and so simple to prepare — you just roast some beans, steep them in water, and drink — that the beverage seems to have been almost historically inevitable. Many of us shudder at the very idea of a world without coffee, our daily savior from the merciless ravages of fatigue. But considering all that the coffee bean had to go through in its centuries-long journey to reach the American “World's Greatest Dad” mug, we're actually lucky we ever got the drink at all.

First, there was the problem of finding it. *Coffea arabica*, the stout, leafy tree that generates all the planet's palatable coffee, hails from the remote highlands of Ethiopia, which wasn't much of a high-traffic region in days of yore. According to one legend, humanity's first experience with coffee occurred sometime around the sixth century, when a young goatherd named Kaldi noticed that his normally placid goats were suddenly dancing jigs and turning pirouettes; they'd been nipping at the coffee trees. Kaldi popped a few berries in his mouth, found himself energized — as well as strangely inclined to talk about politics and write bad poetry — and thus the world discovered the coffee bean.

So now that we had a hard, bland seed that made goats hyper, what were we supposed to do with it? The Ethiopian natives tried fermenting the beans into a cold wine, making them into a porridge, and mashing them into dense pancakes that they sautéed in butter. Members of the Galla tribe would grind the coffee berries into pulp and blend them with animal fat, then roll this mixture into billiard-ball-sized orbs that they would store in leather bags and take with them on war parties. Galla warriors claimed that one of these pulp-lard delicacies could fend off hunger for an entire day. It took several centuries of culinary experimentation before the Yemeni mystic Ali Ibn Umar al-Shadhili found the

perfect use for the beans, in about AD 1200: steeping them in water. The drink, he found, helped him stay awake during prayers, and thus coffee brought him closer to God.

Coffee soon voyaged east to the greater Arab world, where it swiftly established its supremacy over every other liquid in the land. Sixteenth-century visitors to the Middle East, mystified at the rage for this bitter brown drink, nicknamed coffee the “wine of Islam”; since Muslims weren’t allowed to drink *real* wine, a caffeine buzz was the best they could hope for. No less a personage than the prophet Muhammad purportedly claimed that after a dose of coffee, he felt he could “unhorse forty men and possess forty women.” Wealthy Arabs often constructed sumptuous rooms dedicated to the beverage in their homes, but it was the Turkish who truly set the standard for opulent coffee consumption. Ottoman sultans liked to lounge on cushions as a slave brought a gilded, diamond-encrusted demitasse of coffee — perched on a bejeweled saucer called a *zarf* — to their lips. The men of Constantinople would gather in plush dens to drink coffee brewed in huge cauldrons and seasoned with cardamom, saffron, or opium; the venti java chip Frappuccinos of today look positively austere by comparison. This Turkish coffee addiction was not to be toyed with. Sultan Selim I once punished two doctors who claimed coffee should be banned by ordering that they be sliced in half at the waist. Failure to provide one’s wife with coffee was even considered sufficient legal grounds for a divorce.

The Turkish enthusiasm for the drink eventually kindled the two most famous and ornate coffee cultures on the planet, the Parisian and the Viennese — in the former through inspiration and in the latter through invasion. In 1669, the Turkish ambassador Suleiman Aga journeyed to Paris to deliver an important message from his sultan to Louis XIV, the enormously powerful and extravagantly vain monarch known as the Sun King. (When he received the Turk at court, for instance, Louis appeared in a new multimillion-franc robe, covered in diamonds, that had been commissioned specifically for the occasion.) Besides being vain, Louis was also a bit impetuous; after receiving the sultan’s letter, Louis told his guest he’d get to reading it whenever he felt like it, which meant the Turkish emissary had no choice but to wait around for the imperial whim to strike. During his stay, Suleiman Aga turned his charm on the Parisian society women, inviting them to his lavish quarters for elaborate, dimly lit coffee ceremonies, complete with Oriental rugs and exotically dressed Nubian servants. These gatherings became the most prized invitations in town, which stoked the fashion-conscious Parisians into a frenzy for over-the-top imitations of his coffee service. In salons all over the city, Frenchwomen donned turbans and ornamental robes, taking their coffee “à la Turque.” A couple of decades later, after they had lived down the embarrassment somewhat, the Parisians opened their first proper café.

The ambassador wasn’t just entertaining for fun, however; he was also collecting intelligence from the loose-lipped aristocrats, trying to discover if Louis intended to support his sultan’s secret plans to invade Vienna. Louis didn’t. The Turks invaded anyway. In July 1683, three hundred thousand Turkish troops descended on Vienna and surrounded the city with tents, intending to starve the Austrians into submission. Vienna’s population shrank, its rulers fled, and the Viennese were left with only one hope: a small band of Polish soldiers who had come to their fellow Christians’ aid. But with a force of only fifty thousand troops, the Poles needed to know the perfect time to strike or the Turks would crush them. Enter Franz Kolschitzky, the seventeenth-century Slavic James Bond. A Polish journeyman living in Vienna, Kolschitzky had served as a translator in Ottoman lands and knew how to pass for a Turk. Disguised in a Turkish uniform and fez, the spy sweet-talked his way through the enemy camp, quickly finding out the date the Turks planned to attack — information he soon slipped to the hidden Polish forces. As the invaders began storming the city on September 8, the vastly outnumbered Poles set off fireworks overhead and attacked the Turks’ unguarded rear, sending them

into such a panic that the mighty Ottoman forces fled the scene without collecting their belongings.

Among the odd effects the Turks left behind — including guns, gold, and thousands of camels — were many sacks of pale green beans, which the Austrians assumed to be camel food. The only one who recognized it as unroasted coffee was Kolschitzky. When the grateful Viennese asked the hero to name his reward, he baffled everyone by asking for the beans, later using them to open Vienna's first coffee café, the Blue Bottle. So goes the legend, this battle also gave coffee its most stalwart past companion. Seeking to remind customers of his own valiant role in the war, one Viennese baker began making rolls shaped like the crescent on the Turkish flag, and thus the croissant was born.

This newfound taste for coffee represented an enormous improvement over what Europeans were sipping with breakfast before: beer. In fact, since their drinking water was so often contaminated, most Europeans downed beer with pretty much everything. The average Elizabethan-era Briton — children included — drank more than six pints of beer every day. Even Queen Elizabeth I knocked back a few each morning with her meat stew. But if you worry that you've missed out on the merriment of an ages-long frat party, ponder this recipe for a typical breakfast dish of the time:

### **Beer Soup**

*Heat beer in saucepan.*

*Add a hunk of butter.*

*Add cold beer.*

*Pour mixture into a bowl of raw eggs.*

*Add salt, and whisk to prevent curdling.*

*Pour mixture over scraps of bread.*

*Serve with beer.*

Given this continuous bender, Europeans generally lurched through their daily existence in a state of mild intoxication. Drunkenness was *normal*. So one can imagine the great sensation coffee ignited: this was a drink that could revolutionize your life. For the first time in history, humans could easily regulate their waking and working hours — all it took to lift oneself out of the fog of grogginess was a life-giving cup of coffee. Sleep, long a cruel and domineering mistress, fell under our control. As any modern cubicle dweller can confirm, coffee almost single-handedly made office work possible. A few centuries later, the brew would fuel the industrial revolution, especially once factory managers learned that filling workers with free coffee boosted productivity. Coffee made people feel smarter, helped them do better work, and enabled them to punch in at a consistent time every morning.

Some refused to accept this caffeinated future. “Everybody is using coffee,” grumbled Germany's Frederick the Great in 1777. “If possible, this must be prevented. My people must drink beer.” But that resistance quickly crumbled. Strangely enough, some of coffee's biggest early boosters were religious conservatives. Many members of the clergy clamored for widespread coffee use because they were annoyed that so many parishioners fell asleep during their sermons. The Puritans in particular campaigned for coffee as a great soberer and as a promoter of the mental effort necessary to understand the Bible's teachings. (As a bonus, they also thought it killed the libido.)

Horrible fates befell those who spurned coffee. Consider the following trend. What happened to Napoleon's army once the diminutive emperor insisted that his people substitute chicory (which grows in France) for coffee (which they imported)? Defeat. During the Civil War, how did the Confederate fare after the Union blockade deprived them of their morning cup? Poorly. Nazi-occupied territories during World War II were so starved for coffee that, according to the coffee historian Mark Pendergras



British Royal Air Force planes sometimes scattered tiny bags of it over towns to remind the locals just how awful life under Hitler was. Need we ask why the Germans *really* lost?

Once the thinkers of the Enlightenment caught on to the bean's powers, the Western world's rich tradition of tweaking on coffee began in earnest. Artists, writers, and intellectuals came to see the drink as the key to their success, and they treated it with a corresponding level of obsession. Every day, Beethoven counted out exactly sixty beans for his ideal cup. Voltaire threw mugs of it back by the dozen, and the French novelist Honoré de Balzac reputedly drank as many as sixty cups daily — a claim that sounds absurd until one reads his acid-trip account of coffee's effect on his mental faculties: "Ideas quick-march into motion like battalions of a grand army to its legendary fighting ground, and the battle rages. . . . Forms and shapes and characters rear up; the paper is spread with ink — for the nightly labor begins and ends with torrents of this black water."

These trembling, caffeine-addled thinkers needed a place to unleash the lightning bolts darting around their minds, and they found it in the coffee-house culture of eighteenth-century London. Here coffee-houses reached their pre-Starbucks pinnacle. In 1652, London harbored one solitary coffee house, but by 1700, the city claimed more than two thousand of them; they grew so popular that patrons often used a favorite coffee-house as their mailing address. London's coffee-houses were more than just places for heffed-up citizens to claw at the wallpaper and babble incoherently, however. This was *important* babble. The vibrant coffee-house gossip industry ultimately spawned the world's first modern newspapers — the *Tatler* and the *Spectator*, two compendiums of the juiciest hearsay. One coffee-house birthed the first ballot box, which allowed patrons to air their views anonymously, without fear of the government spies who prowled the premises in search of traitors.

For their frenetic intellectual activity and egalitarian atmosphere, these establishments were called "Penny Universities," because for the price of a cup of coffee, patrons could hear the latest news, participate in debate, or witness, say, Adam Smith writing his "Wealth of Nations." If a Londoner was in the mood for science, he could wander over to a place like the Grecian Coffee House, where Isaac Newton, the astronomer Edmond Halley, and the physician Hans Sloane once dissected a dolphin that had wandered into the Thames river. Edification came free with every purchase.

Historians disagree about why the Brits switched so abruptly to tea, terminating the London coffee-house phenomenon, but one possible cause is this: the coffee tasted repulsive. \* Since the government taxed coffee by the gallon, proprietors had to make it in advance — first roasting the beans in frying pans over a fire, which left them half scorched and half raw — and then reheat the brew later. Thus, the gastronomes of the day dubbed the beverage "syrup of soot" and "essence of old shoes" and called its flavor reminiscent of "Dog or Cats turd." A few hundred years later, displeased Americans started making the same kinds of complaints.

## ***Salami Slicing***

At least every visit to a London coffee-house included an invigorating element of chance: the coffee could taste repulsive in a variety of unique and shocking ways. But postwar America faced the opposite problem. All of the coffee was the exact same kind of awful.

By the 1950s, coffee had become a standardized product, just like spark plugs or paper clips. Over the past fifty-odd years, a diverse cornucopia of regional coffee roasters had merged into a handful of conglomerates, and the differences between their brands were slim; the only effective way to tell one

coffee from another was by looking at the can it came in. Each brand used mediocre Brazilian beans, roasted them in massive batches, with consistent flavor (not quality) as the goal, and vacuum-sealed them in steel cans that were sturdy enough to withstand a tank assault — yet they couldn't keep the coffee from going stale as it sat on shelves for months. "Coffee was terrible back then," Jim Stewart, the founder of Seattle's Best Coffee, told me. "It was all the same thing with different names: Folger's, Maxwell House, Hills Brothers — just disgusting. It was the fact that it was so disgusting that gave rise to the specialty-coffee business."

Which brings us back to a question from the beginning of this chapter: why did decent, coffee-loving Americans let their national beverage slide so far into ignominy? Odd as it may seem, they likely had no idea anything bad was happening. Consumers thought science and mass production were giving them *better* coffee, while in reality the major brands were methodically slicing it apart and saving themselves millions. The coffee giants had discovered that as long as Americans were boiling their coffee to death in percolators, cuts in quality went virtually unnoticed — if they made the process slowly enough. And to help carry out the systematic task of corrupting our coffee, nature gave the corporations a tool: *Coffea canephora*, also known as *Coffea robusta*, the Styrofoam peanut of the coffee world. Unlike its pleasant-tasting and expensive cousin, arabica, robusta is a high-yield, low-maintenance crop that produces coffee so bad that companies have to steam out the flavor before using it. To cut costs, the major roasters began adding robusta to their blends as filler in ever-greater amounts. The race to produce the cheapest can of coffee had begun.

In keeping with the great American custom of total corporate honesty, the conglomerates publicly denied using robusta; yet in private, they boasted of their prowess at bilking the consumer. At one 1980s coffee industry conference in Costa Rica, the gourmet coffee pioneer George Howell listened with astonishment as a marketing agent from a major brand frankly discussed his employer's approach. "He said the large companies were salami slicing — said it outright," Howell recalled. "They'd cut quality five percent and nobody noticed, so they'd cut quality another five percent and still nobody noticed."

To be fair, the major coffee companies slaughtered their product partly at the behest of other forces. Supermarkets and restaurants put relentless pressure on the roasters to sell for less, because they were both using the promise of ultra-cheap coffee to lure in customers, often selling it below their own cost. Grocery stores promoted low-priced coffee as a loss leader, since they knew it was one of the few products every house-hold used daily. In diners, the bottomless five-cent cup of coffee was a nonnegotiable requirement for business; customers went into revolt if you tried to raise the price even a cent or two. But endless free refills threatened profits, prompting diner owners to dilute the product and demand the cheapest coffee possible from manufacturers. Over time, the country built up a tolerance for what amounted to acrid, coffee-flavored water, stewed from mulchlike beans and tortured for hours upon hours on hot plates.

And that was the *real* coffee. After the hardships of the war, Americans thirsted for technological marvels that would fill their lives with low-cost comforts, and what could fulfill this promise better than instant coffee? Here was the truly modern way to make a cup: from tiny granules that looked like asteroids under a microscope, dense with potent "flavor crystals." The victorious Allied troops practically lived on instant, and many of them returned to the States with a taste for it. Why would any right-minded person put up with the fuss of percolators and ground coffee when he could just heap a spoonful of patriotic minimeteors into hot water and stir?

Well, because instant coffee was pretty revolting stuff. Most soluble coffee is produced through the "spray-dry" process, a method that would have given Samuel Prescott nightmares. In spray-drying

companies brew superconcentrated batches of coffee in vats, squeeze every last bitter particle of flavor from the grounds, and then flash-heat the liquid with air so scorching hot that the coffee immediately turns into brown dust. Next comes the most insidious step of all. Just before sealing the powdered coffee in the cans, manufacturers inject a simulated coffee aroma, so when consumers open the container, they get a whiff of fresh coffee, which, because it's entirely fake, instantly vanishes. This being the age of Tang, when the idea of condensing real oranges into an enhanced superdrink seemed magnificent and credible, consumers vacuumed up instant coffee despite the awful taste. One contemporary review from a 1950 issue of the *Consumers' Research Bulletin* even declared that instant coffee was "hot and wet and looked like coffee" but "any resemblance to coffee is purely coincidental."

When it came to shoppers deciding between brands, though, the stuff inside the can didn't matter — it was what was on the outside that counted. With all of the brands deadlocked in price and quality (or lack thereof), people bought based on which advertising campaign they liked best. As coffee became ever worse, consumers encountered a flurry of ads claiming it had never been better. Companies boasted that technological advances had made their blend more potent than that of the competition; some went so far as to claim that a pound of their coffee could make eighty or a hundred cups. And when they weren't trumpeting Incredible New Discoveries, midcentury coffee ads played havoc with the anxieties of house-wives. In the Folgers television commercials of the 1960s, for example, husbands taunted their wives for making bad coffee: they withheld good-bye kisses, claimed the "girls at the office" made it better, and all but said the dreadful brew was destroying their lives. One TV husband is so brutalized by the coffee his wife hands him that he flings it into the garden and screams, "Oh, this coffee is criminal!" — to which his horrified wife responds, "Honey, you killed the petunias!" The only way to halt this senseless floral massacre is to rush to Papa Eddie's grocery store or Mrs. Olsen's kitchen and discover the marriage-healing power of "mountain-grown" Folgers.

The ads were remarkably effective, but they wouldn't work forever. As the quality-cutting derby thundered on, consumers — not being nearly as stupid as the coffee giants assumed — made a wise decision: they stopped drinking coffee. "So the consumer was faced with coffee that was tasting worse and worse, that was more expensive because of advertising, and plus, he had fewer choices because the smaller roasters were going out of business," said Gillies Coffee's Don Schoenholt, who is a sort of folk historian of the gourmet coffee movement. "We were falling into a deep pit, which people only realized in 1963. In one industry survey, which was based on 1962 data, per capita coffee consumption went down for the first time in U.S. history."

By the time the major roasters noticed something was amiss, it was too late. Their degraded, mass-produced beans had forced consumers to look elsewhere for a jolt. America found a replacement in soda, which offered a shot of caffeine in a liquid that, unlike bitter coffee, wasn't an acquired taste; it was drinkable sugar. Soon, soft drinks passed coffee as the nation's number one beverage. Rather than fight to stop the downward slide, coffee brands chose to cut more product costs and spend more on advertising, which, of course, led to more people losing patience with their morning brew. And so went the cycle.

What we might call the dramatic climax in the story of the decline and fall of coffee took place in 1975, in a courtroom in Long Island, New York. One night that April, a traffic court judge named William Perry asked his deputy to pick up a couple of coffees from the vending truck parked outside the court-house. When the deputy returned with the provisions, Perry found the coffee so infuriatingly "putrid" that he demanded that the deputy and two plainclothes policemen bring the vendor, Thomas Zarcone, "in front of me in cuffs." According to court records, Perry "tongue-lashed" the handcuffed

Zarcone for twenty minutes in front of the officers and a court reporter; the judge “threaten[ed] hi with legal action and the loss of his livelihood,” admitted the coffee cups as evidence in the pseudotrial, and forced Zarcone to apologize for the ghastly coffee. “Mister,” Perry growled before releasing him, “you’re going to be sorrier before I get through with you.” An hour later, Perry was still so angry that he had Zarcone hauled in again.

Something had to be done about America’s coffee.

## *Going Dutch*

Right around the dawning of the Age of Aquarius, help for the beleaguered coffee market began to appear. It came first in the form of Alfred Peet, the headstrong son of a Dutch coffee roaster, who had immigrated to America in 1955 in search of his fortune. Peet had reasonably assumed that in such a modern and prosperous nation, he would find others who shared his obsession with coffee quality. But when he took a job with a San Francisco coffee importer, Peet quickly grew disgusted with the moribund state of the American brew. “After a couple of years, I said to one of the tasters there, ‘Harvey, I came to one of the richest countries in the world, and they drink the lousiest coffee,’ ” Peet told me in his unusual brogue, which sounds equal parts Dutch and Scottish. Now eighty-six and still possessed of a fiery temperament that tolerates no flattery or glad-handing, Peet takes bad coffee personally. During World War II, he watched from a Nazi labor camp as the Germans pilfered all of Holland’s decent coffee, leaving the Dutch with chicory and spoiled old beans — “just the memory of good coffee,” he said. The United States had endured no such adversity, yet the coffee was still awful. This was unacceptable.

Peet resolved to do his part for the cause by opening a small coffee market and offering the kind of gourmet beans his father had roasted; he even imported a European-made roaster, since he considered American coffee know-how so shaky. Taking the advice of a woman he knew from his Scottish dancing club, Peet chose the counter-culture enclave of Berkeley, California, as his business’s home. On the morning of April Fool’s Day, 1966, Peet’s Coffee and Tea — a business that would one day serve as the inspiration for a vast coffee kingdom — opened its doors on the corner of Berkeley’s Vine and Walnut Streets to zero fanfare. “The only advertising I ever did came out of my chimney,” Peet said. “When I was roasting, people would come in and ask, ‘What smells so good?’ They didn’t even know coffee could taste like that. I always let the coffee speak for itself.”

Though the store had a few stools and customers could buy sample cups of coffee, Peet’s was not a coffee-house; Alfred Peet’s mission was to sell whole-bean, fresh-roasted, *good* coffee to the masses for at-home preparation. A notoriously difficult man, Peet berated customers who used percolators and informed any who violated his edicts that there were two kinds of coffee in the world: the kind he made his way and the bad kind. Since no one else could possibly carry out his exacting standards without fail, Peet put in an endless string of fifteen-hour, micromanagement-filled work days. His daily shouting matches with his employees made many of them quit in frustration.

In the few scattered cafés of the midsixties, such behavior would have killed many a buzz. At the time, Starbucks-style coffee-house culture — lattes, velour couches, and the like — simply didn’t exist; America’s handful of pioneering espresso bars were known not as providers of gourmet coffee but as havens of art and rebellion. Coffee-houses like Café Wha? in Greenwich Village played host to defiant literary types and young folk luminaries, including a fresh-faced Bob Dylan. And as the

beatniks merged into the hippies, coffee-houses increasingly became the haunts of scruffy hipsters who smoked pot, tried to pick up girls, and declaimed amateur poetry — often inspired by their patron saint, Allen Ginsberg, who was a constant, voluble presence at Caffè Trieste on San Francisco's North Beach.

Consequently, many of Peet's early devotees were of the unshaven, patchouli-scented persuasion, a fact that sometimes bothered the stern Dutch proprietor. "Some of those guys, my god, they were unkempt!" Peet told me, a touch of shock still in his voice almost forty years later. "I'd think, 'You'd better go to the Laundromat next door, and then I'll give you some coffee.' But the funny thing was they understood what I was doing. It was big business they were fighting, and they appreciated that I had a good product at modest prices. So spiritually, I was one of them." Even Peet had to laugh at the thought, coming as it did from a man who once removed his store's stools in an effort to keep his more free-thinking patrons from hanging around. (They sat on the floor instead.) But the Dutchman's theories on coffee roasting actually resided on a deep, far-out astral plane the hippies would have appreciated. "The coffee talks to me," he explained. "So I ask it, 'How do you want to be roasted?'"

As it turned out, the coffee wanted to be roasted darker. Because of their focus on the bottom line, the major brands chronically underroasted their product; more weight equals more profit, and shorter roasting times meant less of the beans' mass burned off and floated out the chimney. Peet corrected this by letting his beans roast longer and lose more moisture in exchange for a bolder, fuller flavor. The result was far from an overnight success. Most patrons winced when they first tried Peet's industrial-strength brew, but almost against their will — legs striding involuntarily toward Vine and Walnut, arms flailing cupward — their bodies demanded more. Lines slowly swelled, then twisted around the block. Loyal customers (who called themselves "Peetniks") scoffed at those who drank inferior coffee, and they structured their lives so they'd never have to go without.

Alfred Peet wasn't the only person in America trying to roast good beans, but he was the first to attract the kind of cultlike devotion to coffee that later boosted Starbucks, among others, to prominence. In effect, Peet made coffee a religion. "Coffee wasn't new, but it was very much a rebirth of something old," explained Schoenholt. "The birth of specialty coffee was much more like a cat giving birth to a litter than a mother to a child, in that there were multiple births all over the place with lots of screaming."

Beset by processed foods and homogeneous coffee blends, Americans craved something different: something robust and aromatic and genuine that master roasters scooped out of huge burlap sacks before their very eyes. For years, we deemed foods *gourmet* not if they were high in quality but if they were *exotic* — things like chocolate-covered butterfly wings and roasted kangaroo tails. Eating pickled rooster comb was no doubt a fascinating culinary adventure, at least insofar as it can be. Fascinating to look at a bearded lady or the world's largest petrified cow pie, yet one didn't exactly feel compelled to repeat the experience on a regular basis. After a decades-long hiatus, food that actually tasted good started making a comeback in the 1970s at stores like New York's Zabar's and Dean and DeLuca. Thanks to a key technological innovation, coffee shared in this gourmet boom. In 1972, the nation first met a gentleman called Mr. Coffee, an affordable home drip coffee brewer that rendered the percolator obsolete and let consumers actually taste the differences between coffees for the first time.

All over the country, small roasters started popping up, unified by two common bonds: they all wanted better coffee, and none of them had any idea what they were doing. They were, almost without exception, idealistic white men in their thirties who had liberal arts backgrounds and a disproportionate fondness for afros; Schoenholt termed them "Berkeley dressers," with all of the

hemp clothing and Birkenstocks that phrase conjures. John Blackwell, a veteran espresso machine mechanic, explained the phenomenon to me: “We were just a bunch of old hippies trying to figure out which drug to sell, and coffee was the only legal thing we could come up with.”

They started with little in the way of coffee knowledge, but since the veteran coffee men were busy sucking up the cheapest beans they could find, no one else was going to change things. Ed Kvetko, who founded Gloria Jean’s Coffee Bean in Illinois, was a contractor. Martin Diedrich prowled around the jungles of Guatemala as an archaeologist before founding the Diedrich Coffee chain. Jim Stewart opened an ice-cream and coffee shop called the Wet Whisker — which later became Seattle’s Best Coffee — after studying to be an optometrist. “Let’s just say that when we started, this wasn’t what we had in mind,” Stewart said, referring to the enormity of the gourmet-coffee business today. “We were all so stupid, we didn’t really know *what* we had in mind. We just didn’t want to work for the phone company.”

A series of amateur science experiments ensued. In 1969, for instance, a Bronx-raised social worker named Paul Katzeff loaded a woodstove, a waterbed, and a few belongings into the back of a Mack truck, took a hit of acid, and let the voices guide him to Aspen, Colorado. Surrounded by hippies drinking tea made from tree bark, he decided to roast his own coffee. “All I knew was that if you heated it, it turned brown,” recalled Katzeff, who now runs Thanksgiving Coffee Company in Fort Bragg, California. “In Aspen, after I roasted my first batch of coffee for an hour, it just turned tan. It wouldn’t roast. I racked my brain to figure out why, and it was because I was up at eight thousand feet — there wasn’t enough oxygen! So I figured out a way to rig up a vacuum cleaner to provide extra air. Then, when the coffee started to snap, crackle, and pop, I thought the machine was broken and took the coffee out, but it was just a light roast.”

Perhaps the most strident recruit to the cause was George Howell, a Yale-educated art dealer who specialized in works by Mexico’s Hui-chol Indians. After sipping Peet’s every morning for six years in Berkeley, Howell moved his family to Boston in 1974 in hopes of finding more lucrative work. Instead, he became outraged at the vile Bostonian coffee. “The coffee was infernal,” he explained. “If you found any loose coffees at all, it was at old tea and spice shops in plastic bins — but they were really brown painted wooden pellets that they ground into sawdust. It was that bad.” Recognizing that improving the coffee was an “aesthetic necessity,” Howell opened the Coffee Connection in a tiny space he shared with an ice-cream vendor and a cheese shop in Harvard Square. He had just a few seats, and the ceiling overhead was a jumble of chicken wire and plywood, but for the first time customers could get fresh coffee, brewed to order in a plunger pot before their very eyes. Unlike Peet’s, the Coffee Connection was an immediate hit. “We didn’t know what to do with all of these people,” Howell told me. “We didn’t have enough coffee for everyone. We were potentially faced with bankruptcy due to overpopularity!”

But the first roaster to give coffee the kind of social cachet that would later propel Starbucks into the stratosphere was Southern California’s Coffee Bean and Tea Leaf, founded in 1963 in the Brentwood district of Los Angeles. Owner Herb Hyman hoped to make his business fly by drawing wealthy socialites from nearby Beverly Hills, but he did even better; he snared celebrities. If Peet’s was coffee’s cathedral, Coffee Bean and Tea Leaf was its Hollywood red carpet. Johnny Carson had his own blend there. The actor Jason Robards ordered fifty pounds at a time to take with him during Broadway runs, and the oceanographer Jacques Cousteau arranged to have coffee care packages from Hyman meet him at ports around the world. Half of Hollywood had Hyman’s home phone number in case of emergency coffee shortages. The *National Enquirer* even once offered Hyman \$5,000 to divulge what the stars drank — “But we had a big ‘fuck you’ for them,” Hyman told me.

“All of the celebrities came into our stores,” he said. “We never put pictures of them on the wall, never made a big deal out of it or took advantage of them. They just enjoyed coming in. They were marvelous people. I enjoyed all of them — well, maybe there were one or two I didn’t like. I don’t want to mention any names, but some stars weren’t as good about paying.” Among Hyman’s most scrupulous customers was Ronald Reagan, who occasionally dropped by with Nancy (a tea drinker when he was governor of California and always insisted on paying right away with a personal check). Lee Marvin — the square-jawed, gray-haired leading man who played the commander of the “Dirty Dozen” — was devoted enough to Hyman’s product that he often worked behind the counter just for fun.

The clique of coffee-mad Americans grew slowly at first, but a distant national catastrophe made it gain steam. In July 1975, Brazil endured a cold snap unlike anything seen in centuries — the so-called Black Frost, which killed over 1.5 billion coffee trees and destroyed more than half of that year’s anticipated harvest. Coffee prices immediately skyrocketed. But while this was a tragedy for Brazilian farmers, it was a boon to gourmet roasters; suddenly, their product wasn’t much more expensive than the canned stuff, enticing many dissatisfied coffee drinkers to give their beans a test brew. With even the most expensive coffees costing far less per cup than a can of soda, it was a luxury in which most could afford to indulge. “If you want a custom-made Bentley with leopard-skin seats, you’re not getting it,” Schoenholt explained. “If you want a custom-tailored shirt, it’s three hundred dollars. So what can you get? You can get a custom-roasted, custom-ground pound of coffee for four bucks.”

Bit by bit, the movement was taking shape. Stories began bouncing around about people making so much money selling bulk coffee that they had to stuff fistfuls of cash into their pockets because their till was already full. Anxious that the major brands would catch on and use their immense brand accounts to squash their fledgling businesses, the small roasters sought strength in numbers by founding the Specialty Coffee Association of America in 1982. (*Specialty* was the preferred term because the word *gourmet* had lost some of its prestige through misuse.) But even though members of the SCAA pooled their knowledge and financed campaigns to get Americans accustomed to better coffee, and even though the coffee giants were so busy scrapping among themselves that they ignored the SCAA entirely, none of these small roasters had the ability to vault gourmet coffee into the national consciousness. Out in the Pacific Northwest, however, a peculiar phenomenon had begun.

## ***A Star Is Born***

In the world of specialty coffee, every roaster acknowledges that he owes his livelihood to one ironclad law of human nature: once you get used to very good coffee, there’s no going back. Those who had been content with Folgers for years would suddenly retch at the mention of the canned stuff. Soon, these ordinary-seeming people — who were once responsible, well-adjusted adults — found themselves going to heroic lengths to secure top-notch beans, undeterred by petty inconveniences like, say, international border crossings or global trade restrictions.

So it was with Gordon Bowker. Once a month, Bowker would leave his home in Seattle and drive to the nearest place he could get decent coffee. This being 1970, that place was 140 miles north: a roaster called Murchie’s, in Vancouver, British Columbia. “I was a writer,” Bowker later told the *Seattle Times*, explaining his motive. “I had just gotten a job and I had a paycheck and I thought, no

that I have money, what do I want to buy? What I wanted was, I didn't want to drink any more coffee." As his friends learned there was a bean courier in their midst, Bowker began carting ever larger payloads of coffee back to Seattle, to the point where customs officials on the Canadian border had to give him a gentle lesson on the strict legal definition of smuggling. A brooding idea man who sometimes became so lost in thought that he'd stare right through acquaintances on the street, Bowker hit upon a solution to his coffee dilemma on one drive back and promptly shared it with his friends. They thought he was insane.

"I was driving in Gordon's car one day and I smelled a ton of coffee," recalled Terry Heckler, a designer who worked with Bowker. "I said, 'Jesus, Gordon, what's with all of this coffee?' He said he was just up in Vancouver for his monthly run and he was getting tired of this, so he was going to import coffee himself. I said, 'Are you kidding?' I thought it was a joke." Heckler paused. "I think that was the first time I really realized coffee came from beans."

Two of Bowker's friends thought his plan sounded like the perfect enterprise for them. Zev Siegl, the son of the Seattle Symphony's concertmaster, had trekked through Europe with Bowker a few years before and was now searching for any profession that didn't involve teaching history to teenagers. Jerry Baldwin, who knew Bowker from their college days at the University of San Francisco, was likewise trying to escape his cramped desk at Boeing. Baldwin and Siegl had come up with plenty of business ideas of their own — starting a classical radio station, shooting documentary films about indigenous peoples — but nothing seemed quite right until the day the three were relaxing on the lawn outside Siegl's house on Magnolia Bluff, and Bowker uncorked his idea to open a coffee shop. "I'm willing to concede that it was Gordon's idea," Baldwin said with a laugh. "Zev and I just wanted to find something to do."

The three, who fancied themselves quite the urbane young sophisticates, had a lot to learn about gourmet foodstuffs. "I remember Gordon and I having an argument once," Baldwin recalled. "We had this roommate who was convinced that canned vegetables were better than frozen vegetables. I mean, no one thought to mention fresh ones. It wasn't pretty back then."

Bowker and Baldwin soon dispatched Siegl to San Francisco to do reconnaissance on the coffee roasters they'd heard whispers about. In the Bay Area, Siegl scouted shops like Capricorn Coffee, and Freed, Teller, and Freed, but the one place that made his heart thump wildly in his chest was a little storefront in Berkeley: Peet's Coffee and Tea. After Siegl sped home with his findings, the trio agreed they had found their sage. Said Baldwin, "I thought Alfred Peet invented coffee." Despite Peet's severe demeanor, he was always eager to instruct genuinely curious souls in the right way — *his way* — of roasting and handling the bean. Once the Seattleites had genuflected properly, Peet agreed to help them in their quest by advising them and supplying them with coffee, on the condition that they each work at his Berkeley shop for a week to learn the basics — or at least how not to mangle his product. The three each invested \$1,350, they borrowed \$5,000 collectively from a bank, and the endeavor was on its way.

Of course, the bibliophiles still needed to settle the most important question of all: what would they name it? "Baldwin, Bowker, and Siegl" was an unappealing mouthful. All of them liked nautical imagery and the idea of high-seas adventure and importing from afar: "We wanted to have this sense of world trade, of things coming in from around the world," Baldwin told me. They considered and accepted, then vetoed "Cargo House" and "Customs House." Bowker was convinced that words beginning with *st* suggested confidence and power — think *strong, strapping, stellar, stupendous* — so they contemplated calling it "Steamer," which sounded perhaps a bit too much like a bath-house. Zev and Jerry had named their hypothetical film company "Pequod," after the ship in *Moby Dick*, but



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