

HIGH-END COFFEE AND SMALLHOLDING GROWERS IN GUATEMALA

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Abstract: Coffee production in Guatemala has undergone a dramatic transformation over the last twenty years. Changing tastes among northern consumers have driven new demand for high-quality Strictly Hard Bean coffees that are grown above 4,500 feet. As a result, many of the large, lower-altitude plantations long synonymous with coffee in Guatemala have abandoned production, moving into rubber, African palm, and other crops. At least 50,000 mostly smallholding farmers in the highlands have begun growing coffee to fill this market niche. Building on a capabilities approach to development, this article examines how smallholding Guatemalan producers' desires for a better future orient their engagement with this new market. Most of these small producers live in very modest circumstances with limited resources and opportunities. Yet, as they describe it, coffee represents an opportunity in a context of few opportunities, an imperfect means to a marginally better life.

Over the past twenty years, and in the aftermath of price collapses in 1993 and again in 2001, the coffee trade in Guatemala and elsewhere in Latin America has been dramatically transformed (Murray, Reynolds, and Taylor 2006; Bacon, Méndez, and Gliessman 2008). Throughout the twentieth century, coffee production in Guatemala was a highly concentrated industry composed of a small number of very large producers. These *cafetaleros* operated privately owned plantations (*fincas*) and depended on temporary migrant labor to deliver their high-volume, low-cost commodity product. The large producers traded with equally large and concentrated exporters and roasters who then completed the global value chain; this was the coffee that found its way into cups around the world as Folgers, Maxwell House, and hundreds of other brands. In the largely Maya highland communities where labor was recruited, working on coffee *fincas* was, and is, seen as employment of last resort because of the low wages and harsh conditions.

Today, we find a large number of former coffee laborers and subsistence farmers supporting their families by growing and selling their own coffee. Guatemala's varied landscape provides for a wide range of microclimatic variation and altitudes that produce distinct coffees. The rapidly proliferating number of small

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producers—at least 50,000 new growers over the last twenty years, doubling the number of producers in Guatemala—has significantly altered the face of Guatemalan coffee.¹ In the Western Highlands, the majority of these new producers are indigenous. They cultivate increasingly differentiated varieties of high-quality coffee on their own small parcels of land using family labor and hiring day workers; most of them process and sell their coffee through a cooperative. Their production is sometimes sold as domain-specific varieties directly to small- and medium-sized roasters around the world rather than disappearing into vast, undifferentiated lots of commodity.

The emergence of this class of new producers was unintended but far from accidental. Critical factors that contributed to new coffee producers' entry and growth include the macrodynamics of the global coffee market, the policies and actions of the traditional Guatemalan coffee elite, the interventions of nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) and international agencies, and advances in communication and transportation technologies. It was the collapse in the price of the commodity-grade washed Arabica grown on the lower-altitude fincas that created the necessity for former coffee workers to find a new source of income (Eakin, Tucker, and Castellanos 2006; Ponte 2002). The shift in First World taste and style (Tucker 2010; Weissman 2008) induced the Guatemalan coffee industry to look to move its production up into the higher altitudes where the high-quality Strictly Hard Bean coffee would grow. The history of land ownership in Guatemala (Martínez Peláez 2009; Figueroa Ibarra 1980) had pushed the poor, indigenous population high up on the slopes of the country's vertiginous landscape, just where that high-quality coffee could be grown. But it was the farmers' choices, framed by their specific desires and preferences, that determined how this coffee would be planted, cultivated, harvested, processed, and marketed, and what it means for them as they pursue their visions of a better life.

Our research is based on interviews with a sample of eighty-two new small-scale producers drawn from the recognized coffee-growing regions of Guatemala, which we have divided into the Western Highlands and the Central/Eastern Highlands. The interviewees were selected from panels of smallholders (farming less than five hectares of coffee) and new entrants (first producing coffee for export in the last fifteen years); 66 percent were indigenous. We collected data on cultivation practices, market relationships, participation in cooperatives, financing, and labor practices. In-depth interviews elicited growers' personal histories and the role and meaning of coffee in their lives, families, and communities. These data are supplemented by interviews conducted with past and present leaders and field technicians from Anacafé, the Guatemalan national coffee producers' association.

Guatemala ranks as a lower-middle-income country in terms of gross national product per capita, but this masks high levels of inequality and extreme poverty (Fischer 2001). Wealth and income inequality in Guatemala map closely onto not

1. This is an estimate based on coffee export registries kept by Anacafé, the Guatemalan national coffee producers association.

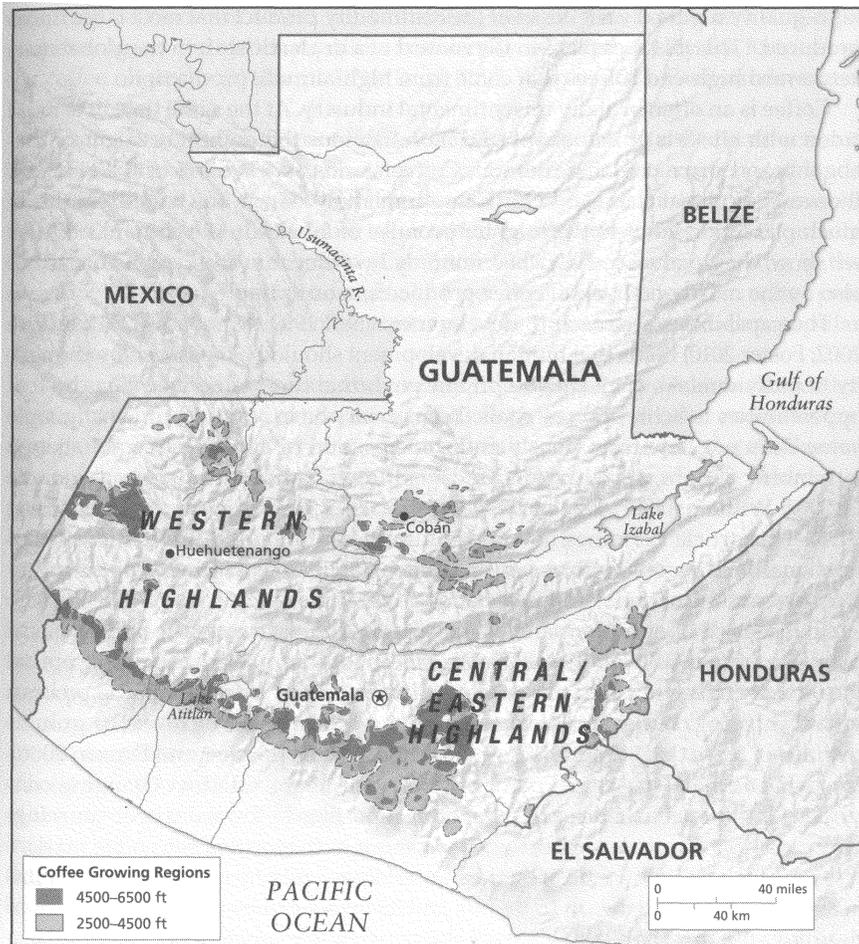


Figure 1 The coffee-growing regions of Guatemala.

only class but also ethnic divisions. About half of the population is ethnically Maya, and by virtually any measure the rural Maya suffer disproportionately from poverty and lack of access to land, education, and health care.

Here we attempt to flesh out what dramatic changes in the global coffee market have meant to smallholding Guatemalan producers and how producers' desires for a better future orient their engagement with this new market. We look at how small producers became involved in coffee production and at the role of coffee in their lives and livelihoods. We also explore why Anacafé, whose interests have historically been aligned with the landed coffee elite, came to promote

high-quality regional varieties over the commodity product that most large fincas produced.² This all takes place in the context of a dramatic shift in the global market toward high-end coffees that come from high-altitude production.

Coffee is an often brutally unsentimental industry. At the same time, it is more laden with all sorts of valuations and moralizations than wheat or sugar or mahogany, and more personal than oil. Coffee stands as a symbol of the best and the worst of global trade and North-South relations—from the harsh realities of much plantation labor to the brighter promise of fair trade (Reichman 2008). As we show, these values are ascribed not only by affluent northern consumers but also by the mostly poor, rural coffee producers in our sample.

The capabilities approach to development (Sen 1999; Nussbaum 2011; Alkire 2002; Foster 2010) holds that human development should be measured by the ability of individuals to envision and pursue goals that they value, as well as by real opportunities to achieve those goals. Yet as critics have pointed out, what people value does not flow from purely endogenous sources: their desires are shaped by power relations, social norms, and institutional structures (see for example Li 2007; Williams 1987; Jaggar 2006; Escobar 1994; Conroy, Murray, and Rosset 1996). This article examines how the culturally and morally inflected desires of new smallholding coffee producers in Guatemala operate within the opportunity structures of the national and international coffee market.

To discuss the aspirations and agency of new coffee farmers, we build on a capabilities framework and introduce the concept of desire. Desires are conceptual ideals that engage material and social realities and are redefined in the process, broadly holding on to original aims and scope while responding to on-the-ground realities in ways that substantively change those goals (Fischer and Benson 2006). In our Guatemalan case, a number of external factors (including changing consumer tastes, established market relations, and trends toward direct sourcing) have created a particular opportunity structure in the form of the coffee market. Here we look at how the desires of smallholding coffee farmers engage this imperfect structure (filled with trade-offs and its own set of incentives) in pursuit of the better life that they envision from their current circumstances.

COFFEE, LABOR, AND GUATEMALAN POLITICAL ECONOMY

The history of Guatemala is deeply intertwined with coffee. There and elsewhere in Latin America coffee has historically been associated with the worst forms of colonial exploitation and marked by the dramatic boom and bust cycles of primary commodities (see Roseberry, Gudmundson, and Kutschbach 1995). Coffee was first introduced to Guatemala in the mid-1800s, just when the indigo and cochineal booms were ending as synthetic dyes were developed in Europe. In 1860, coffee represented 1 percent of Guatemalan exports; this rose to 44 per-

2. Our use of *commodity* here follows the distinction that Kopytoff (1986, 83) makes between commoditization and “singularization,” the latter being the differentiation of homogenous commodities into unique objects. Singularization sets apart items such as high-end coffee from undifferentiated bulk commodity forms.

cent in 1870 (Woodward 1990, 50). Coffee has been the most important single export ever since, and national politics historically followed closely the fortunes of the coffee oligarchy (Williams 1994; Paige 1997; Wagner 2003; Gudmundson and Lindo-Fuentes 1995).

Dictator Justo Rufino Barrios (1873–1885) made promoting coffee production a backbone of his economically liberal reforms in the 1870s. He expropriated lands from the church and confiscated communally held Maya lands, and then sold these on favorable terms to those who would become the coffee barons, mostly German and English immigrants (Cambranes 1985). The Germans living in the area around Cobán especially came to be associated with Guatemalan coffee production, and Germans and coffee continue to be linked in Guatemalan popular discourse (Wagner 1991).

Throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, the Guatemalan coffee oligarchy controlled production more tightly than its peers in other countries (except perhaps in Chiapas in Mexico, and El Salvador) and exerted its influence effectively over the affairs of state (Paige 1997). This classic, tightly held, large plantation system was closely associated with exploitative legal, political, and social structures (see Williams 1994; Rice 1999).

Coffee production in Guatemala rose hand in hand with forced labor policies directed at Indian communities. Coffee requires massive seasonal labor inputs at harvest, and labor was scarce in Guatemala in the areas around the large plantations. In response, the state began the *mandamiento* in the 1870s that required rural peasants to work a certain number of days per year (if they were not fully employed) on projects mandated by the government. Directed largely at indigent campesinos, *mandamiento* labor was used for public works, but it was also official policy to assign workers to coffee plantations to support this crucial sector of the export economy. Formally, the *mandamiento* system lasted until the 1920s; informally, similar forms of debt servitude and coercive labor practices continued (McCreery 1994). Even today, workers are recruited from distant communities, often induced with loans and alcohol.

Until 1900, Guatemala exported most of its coffee to Germany. Even in those early years, the German market had exceptionally high standards for coffee quality and the appearance of beans. As a result the German coffees had to be wet processed (McCreery 1994), establishing a legacy of producing quality washed beans. The Guatemalan standard of shade-grown, wet-processed arabicas requires more labor and more water than dry methods (Pendergrast 2010) but produces a markedly superior quality. After 1900, the US market grew in importance, quickly becoming the primary destination for Guatemalan coffee (Paige 1997).

Coffee remains one of Guatemala's most important exports, and up to 30 percent of the rural workforce is involved in coffee production, processing, and trade (Lyon 2011). Yet, coffee production in Guatemala has changed dramatically over the last twenty years. The large plantations traditionally associated with coffee production produced, for the most part, Prime and Extra Prime coffees.³ Despite

3. Categories such as Prime, Extra Prime, and Strictly Hard Bean are used in the Guatemalan trade, although terms vary internationally. Strictly Hard Bean, for example, is also known as Strictly

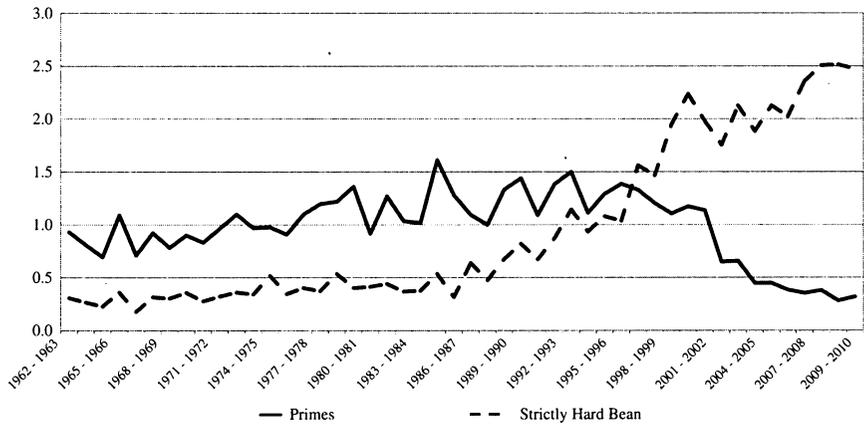


Figure 2 Volume of Guatemala coffee exports by grade. (Note the dramatic rise of Strictly Hard Bean and the equally dramatic decline of Prime and Extra Prime.) Based on data from Anacafé.

the names, these relatively low-altitude varieties (grown at 2,500–3,500 feet above sea level), are at the low end of the coffee value chain. As Roseberry (1996) pointed out, US tastes in coffee have shifted away from the commodity and to the singularized high end, what is called in the trade “specialty coffee.” This coffee is grown at higher altitudes, the best above 4,500 feet.

The resulting shift in Guatemalan coffee production has been dramatic. Overall export volumes have dropped significantly since 2001. At the same time, the highest-quality washed arabica exports have grown steeply and now make up the overwhelming majority of exports (see figure 2). Thus, while overall exports are lower, high-value exports make up a much larger percentage; as a result total export earnings for coffee have increased steadily since the 2001 crash (see figure 3).⁴

COFFEE

Two main species of coffee are cultivated today, arabica (*Coffea arabica*) and robusta (*Coffea canephora*). As the name implies, robusta is a heartier plant and produces larger quantities at lower, more temperate altitudes. Its flavor, however, is considered inferior, more bitter and acidic and with a higher caffeine content. With some major exceptions, arabica is grown in Central and South America and East Africa, and robusta is grown in West Africa and Southeast Asia (Vietnam is the world’s largest producer, followed by Brazil) (Wild 2004).

High Grown (SHG), and Extra Prime is referred to on the New York market as Medium to Good Bean (NY-MTGB).

4. For comparison, see Sick (1999) and Smith (2009) on the different reactions to market shifts in Costa Rica and Panama.

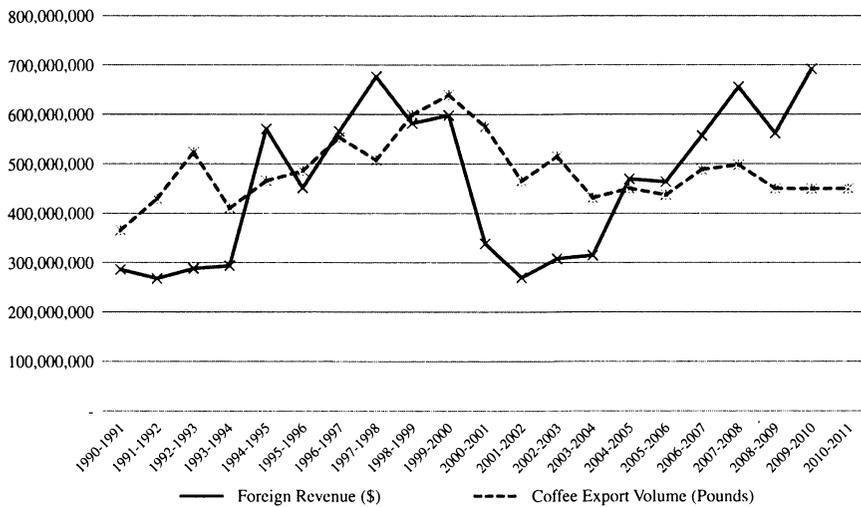


Figure 3 Foreign revenue and volume of coffee exports from Guatemala. Based on data from Anacafé.

Arabicas are marked by a much wider range of flavors, or “cup profile,” as it is called in the industry. Grown at higher altitudes and usually under shade, the climatic and growing conditions produce a deeper, more concentrated flavor, with notes ranging from dark berries and chocolate to citrus (to employ the vocabulary developed around wine that is used to describe high-end coffee). Arabicas are further graded based on the altitude of production; higher-altitude coffees have more concentrated flavor and are considered of higher quality (Weissman 2008). In the Guatemalan trade, Prime and Extra Prime refers to coffee grown at 2,500–3,500 feet above sea level; Hard Bean and Semi-Hard Bean at 3,500–4,500 feet; and the top-quality Strictly Hard Bean (SHB) at 4,500 to circa 6,500 feet.⁵ Gourmet and specialty coffees are almost uniformly SHB arabica, and now even most major mass-market brands (such as Folgers and Maxwell House) are arabica, including SHB. Robusta is mostly used as filler in cheaper blends and in instant coffees (Luttinger and Dicum 2006).

The global metric for coffee prices is the New York coffee C futures contract price. Long traded on the New York Commodity Exchange (now ICE Futures), the C price, as it is known, is for quality washed arabicas. The contracts are for container loads of exchange-grade green beans from nineteen countries of origin

5. In Guatemala, exporters often speak of SHB coffees as being synonymous with what is called in the international trade “specialty coffee.” While it is true that virtually all Guatemalan SHB winds up in specialty coffee and that the overwhelming majority of specialty coffee sold in the world is SHB, the two are not definitionally synonymous; there are high-end specialty coffees that are not SHB, and a large percentage of the world’s production of SHB goes into mass-market coffee brands.

for delivery to one of eight licensed warehouses in the United States and Europe (New York, New Orleans, Houston, Bremen, Hamburg, Antwerp, Miami, and Barcelona) (Luttinger and Dicum 2006).

Each producer country or region receives a premium or discount from C rate depending on quality; Colombian coffee regularly gets a 10–14 point premium. Guatemala is the sixth largest (as of 2010) producer of coffee in the world, even given its small size, and Guatemalan washed arabicas receive a consistent premium over the C price, although not as great as the Colombian premium. The final price paid to farmers in Guatemala can reach 20 percent of the C price or more in the case of fair trade and specialty coffees (Martinez-Torres 2006). In general, about 12 percent of the supermarket price and about 3 percent of the brewed cup price goes to growers.

THE COFFEE MARKET IN THE UNITED STATES

Coffee is one of the world's most traded commodities. It is produced by twenty million farmers and workers, mostly in developing countries, and it is consumed by a majority of Americans, Europeans, and Japanese. Over 60 percent of the US population drinks coffee on a given day (Luttinger and Dicum 2006).

Coffee consumption in the United States increased steadily from the late nineteenth century until the mid-1950s (although World War II shortages led many to turn to inferior substitutes). Starting in 1950, per capita coffee consumption in the United States began to decline (just as soft drink consumption took off), a trend that slowly continued for the next four decades. By 1993, declines in consumption in the United States had leveled off.

Starting in the 1950s, the blends of national brands started including more low-cost robusta, and instant coffees (that used more robusta) increased in popularity (Pendergrast 2010; Wild 2004). As the mass market moved toward lower prices and lower quality, a countermovement for high-quality "specialty" coffees began on the West Coast and in New York (Tucker 2010). This started in the late 1960s with the brands Peet's and Zabar's followed in the early 1970s by Starbucks. The specialty trend grew slowly through the 1970s, picking up steam in the 1980s and 1990s with smaller coffee shops opening around the country.

By the early 1990s there were two main coffee-buying sectors. Rice (2003) terms the first industrial coffees, the large-scale roasters dominated by a few international firms. Kraft (which owns Maxwell House and Jacobs, among other brands), Procter and Gamble (led by their Folgers brand, now owned by the J. M. Smucker Company), Sara Lee, Nestlé, and Tchibo (from Germany) accounted for about half of all coffee purchases. Second is the much more diffuse specialty market, made up of thousands of small and medium-sized roasters and retailers who were sourcing more and more from small-scale producers (see Rice 1999). Specialty coffees distinguish themselves from the homogeneity of industrial commodity coffee, selling "quality in the cup" as well as a connection to specific regions and growers. As Roseberry (1996) notes, this involves a marketing sleight of hand, presenting a hypercommodified "beverage of postmodernism" as something sin-

gular and unique, with the imagined linkage to places and producers creating a sense of intimacy and connection.

Specialty coffee has been the growth segment in terms of both volume and profits over the last twenty years (Weissman 2008). The specialty segment prefers the higher-priced washed arabica varieties of coffee, and most specialty coffee comes from the SHB classification, which has a richer, deeper taste profile than the Prime and Extra Prime classifications. The higher altitudes required by SHB coffee in Guatemala are also the poorest areas of the country and have served as the primary sending communities for seasonal finca labor.

DEALING WITH BOOMS AND BUSTS, QUOTAS AND QUALITY: ANACAFÉ

World coffee prices have always been volatile, responding to droughts and frosts as well as fluctuating consumer demand. This fluctuation creates a great deal of vulnerability for commodity-producing countries in terms of foreign revenue, and favors large individual producers who can weather the drops.

This vulnerability led coffee-producing countries to come together through the International Coffee Organization and ratify the 1962 International Coffee Agreement (ICA) that helped stabilize prices for struggling producer countries. (The United States supported the move in hopes that it would provide some immunity to the appeal of communism.) The ICA established a quota system by country to limit supply. Remarkably, the agreement brought together fifty producing countries (representing 99 percent of production) and twenty-five consuming countries (90 percent of market). The quota system was in force until 1989 (see Ponte 2002).

Despite signing on to the ICA, the leadership of Anacafé had a long history of ambivalence and even resistance to the quota system. In the late 1980s, the board was composed mostly of lifelong coffee growers and associated with the interests of the country's landed elite. While they had long benefited from relative price stability in the bulk commodity market, they were never fully comfortable with the global producers' cartel, believing it to discount Guatemalan quality. In interviews, former leaders also expressed a pronounced commitment to an Austrian-school-inspired approach to free-market economics, opposed in principle to any market regulations. Past presidents of Anacafé spoke proudly of the Guatemalan position as a lone voice, in international meetings, for a free-market approach. Board members also felt compelled at times to support market-stabilizing interventions, such as the issue of a government-backed coffee bond following the collapse of the ICA in 1989. In the 1990s, however, the Anacafé board unified around the free-market position, becoming a vocal opponent of quota systems (along with the United States) in the International Coffee Organization.

In 1993, prices dropped to their lowest point in almost twenty years, and the leadership of Anacafé had to confront the possibility that this time the drop was not just the latest fluctuation in prices but a step on a structural decline. Coffee consumption in the United States, the most important market, had steadily decreased since the early 1950s, even if specialty coffee sales offered a glimmer

of hope in the dismal market. At the prices offered in the early 1990s (as low as \$0.50 per pound) it was simply uneconomical to grow coffee; even the large growers could not survive unless prices were supported or subsidized (see Eakin, Tucker, and Castellanos 2006; Murray, Reynolds, and Taylor 2006).

In a move that the past presidents of Anacafé virtually all retell as a story of following the irresistible power of market forces, the board decided in 1995 to pursue a strategy of expanding into the growing specialty coffee segment. They did this through technical assistance that promoted high-end SHB coffees and a marketing strategy that delimited eight regional denominations of origin within Guatemala, each with its own cup profile. (For example, Highland Huehue coffee is marked by “intense acidity with a full body and pleasant wine notes,” grown above 5,000 feet in limestone soils with about 1,300 mm of annual rainfall and a temperature range of 68–75 degrees Fahrenheit.) It was not only the coffee that was different, though. Unlike the cafetalero’s large fincas that produced high-yield Prime and Extra Prime coffees, the growers who grew the SHB specialty coffee were mostly small-scale Maya and Ladino farmers in the highlands.

It seems odd that Anacafé supported a shift in emphasis apparently counter to the material interests of the larger growers, who held considerable sway in the association. It may be that the large producers came to see that the prime-grade coffee they grew was not going to produce the returns it once did. Since this was the only kind of coffee they could grow on their current land, they diversified to other crops and land uses. In hindsight it looks like a smart move to shift into rubber and cattle, but at the time the decision was full of risk and uncertainty. We could easily imagine the coffee oligarchy clamping down during the market shift, brutally protecting their declining market shares (cf. Berry 2001). Short of this, they could also have ignored the small producers and focused Anacafé’s technical and market support resources on the remaining prime coffee production. Instead, they turned the machinery of Anacafé to support the growing volume and profitability of the specialty coffee market.

Past and present leaders of Anacafé explain their decision not as an attempt to aid small farmers but as an effort to follow where the market leads: “We just follow the market” was a phrase we heard again and again. More than just a business tactic, this deeply held *laissez-faire* position is at once antistatist (and anti-regulation) and pro-free trade. (“We should be able to sell to anyone we want,” as one large grower explained.) Truth be told, they were not just following the market: their marketing, branding, and system of provenance fueled as well as followed northern market trends toward SHB coffees.

By 2000, Kraft, Nestlé, Sara Lee, and Procter and Gamble controlled about 60 percent of the world market and 73 percent of the US market (Martinez-Torres 2006; Renard 1999), but the growing specialty coffee segment made up about 10 percent of world coffee exports and approximately 15 percent of US import volume. Significantly, Guatemalan SHB coffees did not follow the C contract price roller coaster. SHB prices continued to grow even when C contract prices were down.

The international price collapse of 1999–2003 was brought about by increas-

ing Vietnamese and Brazilian production of lower-altitude coffees and declining demand for those coffees (see Bacon, Méndez, and Gliessman 2008). Coffee prices dropped to historic lows of less than \$0.50 per pound, less than the cost of production. In 2001, total Guatemalan coffee exports fell to \$320 million from \$600 million in 2000.

Coffee is labor intensive, and global markets are always searching for cheaper labor. This is what led to the breathtaking rise of the Vietnamese coffee industry. Guatemala's labor cost for middle-range and low-end commodity coffee suddenly became more expensive relative to the new markets. The family-run smallholding producers are willing to self-exploit, relying on unpaid family labor to compete and hopefully get ahead, a pattern not uncommon among the Latin American peasantry (see Edelman 1999; Kearney 1996; Netting 1993).

As a result of these price drops, many of the country's large coffee growers left the market, moving into rubber, macadamia, palm oil, and sugar cane production, some even selling off their lands. Many of the younger generation of elite coffee-producing families have gone into finance or real estate or other nonfarm pursuits.⁶ At the same time, more and more smallholding producers in Guatemala (those with less than 5 hectares under production) began growing SHB coffees for the growing specialty market; by 2000, they represented 30 percent of total coffee production, up from 16 percent in 1979 (Lyon 2011). Today, it is estimated that more than 50 percent of Guatemalan coffee production comes from smallholding producers.

SMALL PRODUCERS AND HIGH-ALTITUDE COFFEES

In 2011, we conducted eighty-two in-depth interviews with new entrant smallholding producers from the coffee-growing regions of Guatemala.⁷ Our sample was drawn from an extensive database of producers maintained by Anacafé, the national coffee producers association, which includes all registered coffee growers producing for export (see tables 1 and 2).⁸

We limited the sample to producers who, according to Anacafé records, had begun coffee cultivation for export within the past fifteen years. (We should note the focus on exports here; most of those in our sample had grown coffee on their own land for personal consumption and some local sales for more than fifteen years. In addition, many in the sample had long family histories of work in coffee on the large fincas.) We then selected those farmers whose land qualified as smallholdings. How smallholder was defined varied by the coffee-growing re-

6. This emerged from our interviews with former Anacafé leaders.

7. Tatiana Paz, Luis Velásquez, Carlos Pérez-Brito, Ixchel Espantay, Pakal B'alam, and Felipe Girón helped develop the survey questions; Paz and Velásquez finalized survey design and a training module; and Paz, Velásquez, Espantay, B'alam, and Girón administered the surveys in the field with the assistance of Ana Liggia Samayo, Ixkik Zapil, María Fernanda Villagrán, Elizabeth Pellecer, and Tere Aguilar.

8. Because of the nature of the database used, virtually all producers we interviewed had had previous contact with Anacafé, many having attended technical assistance workshops.

Table 1 *Description of survey respondents*

Descriptive statistics	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. deviation
Age	82	18	73	45.73	13.01
Years cultivating coffee*	71	1	63	21.18	13.49
Yield (<i>quintales</i> per <i>cuerda</i>)	79	0.10	18.00	2.22	2.87
Years of school	82	0.00	18.00	5.45	4.41

*Years of cultivating coffee for household consumption and sale on local markets; all in the sample began producing for export in the last 15 years.

Table 2 *Social categories and coffee production*

	Frequency	Percent
Gender		
Female	6	7.3
Male	76	92.7
Total	82	100.0
Literate		
Yes	77	93.9
No	5	6.1
Total	82	100.0
Ethnicity		
Indígena	54	65.9
Ladino	22	26.8
Mestizo	5	6.1
Other	1	1.2
Total	82	100.0
Other sources of cash income in addition to coffee		
Yes	41	50.0
No	41	50.0
Total	82	100.0
Received economic aid to support coffee production		
Yes	66	80.5
No	16	19.
Total	82	100.0
Use of communal lands for coffee production		
Yes	3	3.7
No	79	96.3
Total	82	100.0

gion. We oversampled in the Western Highlands, which was the primary focus of our study.⁹ In these regions, smallholdings were considered by Anacafé to be fewer than 2.2 hectares (50 *cuerdas*).¹⁰ In the Central/Eastern Highlands average

9. For our purposes, the Western Highlands include the departments of Huehuetenango, Alta Verapaz, El Quiché, Quetzaltenango, Sololá, and Suchitepéquez; the Central/Eastern Highlands include Sacatepéquez, Guatemala, Santa Rosa, Jalapa, Chiquimula, and Zacapa.

10. The most commonly used unit of land measurement in rural Guatemala is the *cuerda*, or about 0.05 hectares, although the exact size varies from region to region.

Table 3 *Quantity of land dedicated to coffee cultivation (in cuerdas)*

Region	Mean	N	Std. deviation
Western Highlands	23.76	49	24.02
Central/Eastern Highlands	46.47	29	31.10
Total	32.20	78	28.87

Table 4 *Self-descriptions of small coffee producers*

As a coffee producer, how do you describe yourself?	Frequency	Percent
<i>Cafetalero / Caficultor</i>	20	24.4
<i>Agricultor</i>	42	51.2
<i>Finquero</i>	1	1.2
<i>Empresario</i>	5	6.1
<i>Otro</i>	5	6.1
No response	9	11.0
Total	82	100.0

holdings were significantly larger. Overall, 52 percent of our sample cultivated 1 hectare or less (20 cuerdas), and 20 percent cultivated more than 2.2 hectares (table 3).

A majority of our sample self-identified as indigenous (66 percent; see table 4). In Huehuetenango, Quetzaltenango, Sololá, and other areas with indigenous majorities, over 75 percent identified as indigenous, with most speaking a Mayan language as their native tongue. Significantly, smallholder coffee production is a family enterprise, with spouses and children providing important labor inputs. In family production, men tend to make most of the decisions, although there are a growing number of women taking on primary responsibility for coffee production. A surprising 94 percent of our sample was literate, well above the national average of 71 percent. They averaged 5.4 years of education, again higher than one would expect given general demographics (the national average is 4.9 years, and this is significantly lower in rural areas).

Interviews were conducted by five teams of two interviewers each; interviewers were all either native Spanish or Mayan language speakers. After securing the consent of interviewee and assuring confidentiality, the interviewers stressed depth over breadth. Interviews often lasted two or three hours or more and were conducted either at farmers' homes or in their fields. Along with basic demographic information, surveys collected data on new entrants' cultivation, labor, and coffee marketing practices. The depth of the interviews focused on exploring individuals' stories of how they began cultivating coffee and on the experienced and anticipated impact of coffee production on their lives and aspirations.

THE PRODUCTION OF COFFEE FOR EXPORT AND DESIRES FOR A BETTER LIFE

In a fundamental challenge to classical economic views of development, Sen (1985, 1999, 2002) holds that material conditions are simply a means toward an

end in development, that the true goal should be the freedom of people to live lives that they themselves desire (see also Nussbaum 2011; Alkire 2002). We use the concept of desires to recognize that values, preferences, and utilities are socially constructed. Desires are culturally informed, embedded in moral systems, and shaped by what matters most to people (Fischer and Benson 2006; Kleinman 2006). Desires are also inherently aspirational (see Appadurai 2004). The shape they take may be more conservative or more dynamic, but desires are by nature forward looking, aimed at filling out the future and making the world new and different (and presumably better).

Our approach builds on recent work by scholars who document the ways in which small farmers are concerned with improving their lives, exploring new options, and seeking more secure livelihoods for themselves and their children (Sick 2008; Jaffee 2007; Lyon 2011; Martinez-Torres 2006; Tucker 2008). This work points to the importance of aspirations beyond immediate survival, not only the ways small producers pursue income maximization but also their efforts to realize a life that they desire: that is, how they configure their economic activity in relation to their values, cultural traditions, social obligations, and imagined futures. Understanding such desires only in terms of utility maximization fails to reveal the complex cultural trajectories that make some choices preferred over others.

FINDINGS

Changes in the global market opened new opportunities for small producers but did not unilaterally dictate farmers' choices. Farmers' own meaningful desires (in the context of cultural norms and social obligations) oriented their engagement with new markets.

Critical choices we observe include farmers' efforts at maintaining continuity with subsistence (*milpa*) agriculture; localizing labor and harvest in communities; and navigating growth, financing, cooperative membership, marketing, and cultivation options to meet not just risk preferences but to dynamically preserve and change opportunities for a self-conceived better life. Thus, new producers acquire new land at a regular, but patient, pace; plan ahead for how to respond to inevitable price fluctuation; celebrate harvests with their neighbors; reconsider what cooperatives can and should be; and open new relationships with the international market.

Among the traditional large coffee producers interviewed, we observe the frequent use of the term *cafetalero* for self-description to signify the primacy of coffee to their identity. A surprising majority of the new producers in our sample do not self-identify as *cafetaleros*. While just over 24 percent do adopt the *cafetalero* moniker, 51 percent call themselves *agricultor*. This reflects a different and more instrumental and utilitarian role of coffee as one among several sources of income for most families. Half of the families surveyed had other income-generating activities (ranging from weaving and occasional day labor to running a small store or tending another's fields).

This reframing of who grows coffee also represents a significant shift in ethnic relations and perceived opportunity structures. We found in our interviews that

coffee exporting was once thought to be the exclusive domain of the elites but is now seen as a viable market for small producers. Historically, smallholding coffee growers (especially in the area around Antigua and Lake Atitlán) have comprised a minor contribution to total coffee production (see Williams 1994). One twenty-one-year-old Q'eqchi' man (who had completed the eighth grade) told us, "I learned about growing coffee from my father. As kids we used to play 'planting coffee.' I have been growing on my own for a few years now. Before, there wasn't an opportunity for us indigenous people to plant our own coffee; it was just for the Germans." Several others likewise commented that they had taken up coffee production after "the Germans" (a term often used for the coffee oligarchy that was established in the nineteenth century, many with German roots) had given up production.

All of the producers in our sample had begun exporting coffee in the last fifteen years. However, many of the new producers we interviewed entered the export coffee market gradually, and it was often hard for them to put an exact date on when they began coffee production. In the early days, cooperatives working with fair trade and other certification regimes were able to pay significant premiums, stimulating new production and buffering global market slumps.¹¹ Government projects and international aid (especially through USAID) have also played an important role in getting new producers into the market; 81 percent of our sample had received some sort of financial assistance for coffee production (see table 2).

Due to steadily rising demand for high-quality washed arabica SHB coffees, since 2001 prices have gone up substantially season after season. More recently, market prices for quality SHB have exceeded fair trade premiums, leading some growers to try to break their cooperative contracts and sell to intermediaries paying more.

Significantly, virtually all of our sampled respondents produce at least part of their maize and beans subsistence needs. As Netting (1993), Altieri and Nicholls (2008), and Kearney (1996) point out, productive diversification to avoid risk and uncertainty is characteristic of peasant economic strategies and is closely linked to the value placed on material security in our sample. One farmer notes that "with one *quintal* [hundredweight] of coffee I can buy five quintales of maize," although keeping some milpa crops also recognizes that this equation can quickly turn upside down if coffee prices fall and maize prices continue upward.

For most small producers the articulation of cash crops and subsistence crops is a way of balancing desires for security with dreams of getting ahead. Manuel, a fifty-five-year-old Mam Maya man from Huehuetenango, explained: "I used to

11. Guatemala was an early player in the fair trade coffee movement, having worked with Dutch group S.O.S. Wereldhandel in the early 1970s. Fair trade provided a significant stimulus for smallholder cooperatives to enter the coffee market and turned out to be an important capacity builder for the explosion in SHB coffees. Still, it was not until the late 1990s that the fair trade market began to provide significant volume (US consumption increased from about 2 million pounds per year to almost 45 million between 1999 and 2005). In 2000–2001, when prices dropped to historic lows, fair trade premiums and a Starbucks program that paid almost double market prices help sustain many farmers.

There is an often-noted fundamental paradox of fair trade: efforts to reform markets toward social justice ends work through and depend on those same markets; see Jaffee 2007; Sick 2008; Murray, Raynolds, and Taylor 2006 for a more detailed discussion of these issues.

just grow milpa, and work on the fincas, but then I saw people here start making money from their own coffee, and I decided to take it up too. I still plant maize and beans for the family, but the coffee gives us more income to cover the expenses that maize production cannot cover." We heard variations on this story over and over again. Sergio, a fifty-one-year-old K'iche' man, commented: "My parents just grew milpa, nobody grew coffee, it wasn't our custom. We grew milpa and went to work on the coffee and cotton plantations for money. But now we can make money from coffee—I even used it to send my son to work in the United States."

Those who worked on coffee fincas learned there the basic process of planting and caring for coffee. Often they kept a few coffee trees for decoration and some domestic consumption, but these were not seen as commercially promising. Especially in Huehuetenango, but also in other parts of the Western Highlands, a significant number had family members who had worked in the United States and sent home remittances. As demand began to rise in the 1990s for the high-elevation SHB coffees, they expanded their plots to devote more to coffee.

Carlos, a fifty-four-year-old farmer from Huehuetenango, explained:

At first we worked on the coffee farms, first with my father then on my own. We were poor, we didn't have anywhere else to work, anywhere to live, we did not have our own land to farm. Over time, we saved up some money from working on the fincas, and we were able to buy some land that we now grow coffee on. Around this time I had a patron who loaned me some money to buy half a cuerda of land. Now I have six cuerdas and a house. It is hard work, but I have been able to do it.

Starting very small, with just a few coffee plants, and expanding gradually is a risk-averse and non-capital intensive strategy (although risks rise dramatically after a certain tipping point, when farmers have resources locked into the crop for several years). As they expand, most farmers employ family labor, usually conceived of as free labor in the mental accounting of costs. If they expand, they may hire temporary workers for harvest. In our sample, small producers who hire workers would employ from two to ten people, all of whom they hire locally.

María, a thirty-two-year-old woman who works with her husband on their six acres of coffee, observes, "Coffee is different from the other crops we plant around here. It is a form of self-employment that provides some income for people, sometimes enough to invest. When growers are very poor, they don't contract others for the harvest, the family just does it all. And this income stays in the community. Maize isn't very profitable, but coffee income lets us buy maize, or even maintain our milpa."

There is, of course, a significant capital investment in coffee: it normally takes three to four years for trees to start producing, and then they maintain maximum production for up to fifteen years. Most new small producers hedged their bets by expanding production very gradually in step with increasing market demand. Once a sizable plot has been established, risk rises as the producer is more or less locked into coffee for the medium term. With the market expanding, this has not been a problem, but in a period of contraction, small producers will be particularly vulnerable.

Most farmers say they are committed to coffee for the long term, even as they acknowledge prices are likely to fall at some point. They vividly recall the drop of 2000–2001, when prices reached historic lows on the world market, below even basic production costs. It was then that many medium and large producers left the market. Still, the small producers who have diversified income sources claim that they can hold out during a price drop because coffee production has the benefit of being able to adapt to variable inputs over several years. If prices are low, coffee can be left more or less unattended for a year or two without much harm done. Then, when prices rise, it can be cleaned up and harvested.

The type of connection farmers have to markets is crucial in their relative success (cf. Ensminger 1996). Small producers sell either to a cooperative (if they belong) that has its own *beneficio* (wet-mill processing plant), directly to a private *beneficio* (if they have access to a truck for hauling), or to an intermediary. Selling directly to a cooperative or *beneficio* is preferable. Some intermediaries are viewed positively, providing advice and loans; others are seen as predatory “coyotes,” loaning money against harvest at extortionist rates and paying below market prices.

Producers see being part of a cooperative or an association as a clear advantage; 74.4 percent of our sample belonged to an association, and most that did not said that they would like to. The cooperatives provide better terms for loans, a guaranteed buyer for production, and provide more efficient transfer of technical and market information. Some producers complain that their cooperative operates too much like a private *beneficio*, and of specific leadership and participation issues, but in general cooperatives are seen as a huge advantage (see also Sick 1999; DeHart 2010).

Farmers normally get their price information from buyers (the cooperative, the *beneficio*, or the intermediary), which puts them at a disadvantage. Most also sell coffee in cherry form (the whole, ripe, picked fruit), which, to ensure quality, should start processing within twenty-four hours or so. A few farmers are able to process to parchment stage (*pergamino*), which pays better and allows them to hold onto the product if they do not like a price offered.

Debt is a pressing issue for small producers. All respondents in our sample have taken out loans, and most do so almost annually. The majority of loans come from banks (especially Banrural, whose state-sponsored mission is to provide services to farmers) and cooperative associations. These loans pay for fertilizer and other inputs as well as help tide families over until the harvest. But they are also viewed as a burden and a hindrance to getting ahead. These small farmers are all working constantly to pay off their debts.

Coffee is seen not as a way to get rich but as a significant source of income that can keep a family out of absolute poverty. For most small-scale growers, coffee income is not sufficient to sustain their families, but it is an important source of additional income, one strategy among several in the household economy.

Miguel, a forty-one-year-old Ladino farmer from Huehuetenango, observed: “We have to put food on the table, but we would also like other things, for our children to go to school, and for this it [coffee] isn’t sufficient. So we feel constrained, and we are in a bad place if somebody in the family gets sick.” Signifi-

cantly, our respondents generally defined poverty as not having land and having to work on fincas.

They view seasonal plantation labor as a form of dependency, fraught with the hardships of being separated from their families, which they want to avoid if at all possible. They prefer to hold wealth in land, and they see coffee production as a way of expanding land holdings (or enabling first-time buying). They want to get ahead, to achieve something more (*algo más*) in their lives, to see their children flourish. They are realistic in their expectations of coffee, but value even its limited possibilities.

CONCLUSIONS

Coffee is intimately linked to the desires of the smallholding farmers we interviewed. At one level, this is an end in itself: to expand and increase coffee production. More importantly, these farmers see coffee as a means to other ends, a way to achieve a better life as they themselves conceive it. Coffee production provides a path for upward mobility for small producers, but those best able to take advantage of the new opportunities are not the poorest of the poor. Those with a higher level of education, with some existing land holdings, and with other sources of income are best positioned to reap the benefits of coffee production.

The small producers in our sample talk about coffee in a language congruent with the capabilities approach to development (see Alkire 2002; Alkire and Foster 2009). They value the income-generating potential of coffee, but this is a means to larger ends, such as educating their children, buying more land, or finding a degree of financial security. Coffee is an imperfect vehicle for economic development, but it allows producers to retain control over their means of production and to have a degree of control over their destiny that they value. Indeed, it is not perceived as a lack of ability or agency that holds them back but lack of opportunity. Said one young farmer, "If we had the opportunity we could be more successful. But we don't have the opportunity."

Sarah Lyon (2011, 6), in her study of new smallholding coffee producers in the Guatemalan town of San Juan La Laguna, reports that locals refer to the new coffee production as "'the bomb' that exploded in the community, bringing income that enabled families to end their seasonal migration to lowland plantations, build cement-block houses, and educate their children." While Lyon points out the power inequities and flaws in fair trade practices and the complexities and contradictions of cooperative organization, she also finds that coffee is valued by most growers as an important tool to help them realize the futures they envision. Martinez-Torres (2006) has similarly shown how, in certain circumstances, small farmers can effectively mobilize social and cultural capital to competitive advantage in the specialty (here, organic) coffee market.

Reichman (2008, 3) reports that "Honduran farmers do not see the coffee trade as fundamentally unjust or exploitative." Likewise, the small producers we interviewed regard the coffee market as neither good nor bad but as a tool, a technology, a means to achieve other ends, a vehicle for their desires. This is not to say that the coffee trade is free or just; as Reichman (2011), Lyon (2011), and Jaffee

(2007) point out, there are structural inequities and inconsistencies in even the fair trade segment that disadvantage small producers.

Importantly, desires are constrained by what is seen as possible, achievable, and conceivable. Goldín (2009) shows how diverse strategies pursued by rural Guatemalan households dialectically define economic ideologies and the realm of what is possible and desirable. In our sample, coffee producers construct their aspirations in the difficult circumstances in which they find themselves. In this context of limited opportunities, most farmers see coffee as a beneficial (even potentially lucrative) addition to household economic strategies.

A confluence of factors led to the emergence of new coffee markets in Guatemala over the last twenty years. The shift in the international trade toward high-quality, regionally differentiated specialty coffees created a new demand for coffees grown at higher altitudes than most of the traditional Guatemalan fincas. The Guatemalan national coffee association began promoting regional designations of origin based on the ecological, agricultural, and botanical factors that contribute to "the cup." Most of the growth in production of these quality SHB coffees has been from smallholding producers in the highlands. This illustrates the complex and sometimes unexpected ways that globalization touches down in particular places and times.

In our sample, coffee production is seen as a positive addition to the limited range of available income-generating activities. Coffee is not viewed as a panacea but as a useful resource and a means to other ends. As one middle-aged producer commented, "Growing coffee hasn't allowed me to have all in my life that I wanted, but it moves me in that direction, and that is something." The expanding high-end SHB coffee market has created a new opportunity for such smallholding Maya and Ladino farmers in the highlands to exercise their agency in pursuit of a self-conceived better life. Significantly, coffee is seen here not as the end but as a means to other ends.

The rise of small producers is also viewed as a positive alternative to plantation labor. Day laborers can work locally and not have to go to the fincas or migrate. Workers report that conditions are generally better than on plantations. Most small producers pay a day rate, not a per-quintal rate, which is seen as more fair. Workers report more casual and convivial work conditions. One man explained, "Before, when we worked on the finca, families got separated, but now we have the chance to be more together and more independent. You can see the benefits of this change, even those who don't have land, everybody now has better work conditions." Thus, small production is seen by most as a way of liberating them from seasonal migratory labor on fincas. For producers, it is also seen as a way of investing in the future, through education or land and productive resources.

Focusing on farmers' desires allows us to account for the capabilities to aspire, plan, and decide within the confines of possibilities that are presented by market structures, social norms, and material realities. Certain tasks are seasonal, as determined by the crop. There is a four-to-five-year lag between planting and first harvest, determined by plant biology. Price and quality are market determined. Yet how to engage the risks, who gets the debt, who does the work, how they are compensated, and what community or meaning is created are driven by desire.

Growing coffee is back-breaking work, and these farmers mostly live in very modest circumstances with limited resources and opportunities. They are acutely aware of the perils of dependency on fickle global markets. While coffee prices have shot steadily up over the last decade, this follows a historic low in 2001. Yet, as they describe it, coffee represents an opportunity in a context of few opportunities, an imperfect but valued means to realizing their desires for a better life; it is tied up with hopes, dreams, and desires that go beyond mere income.

These producers view the coffee market as a mechanism, a tool, a technology, and a way of mobilizing available resources toward desired ends. These ends do not generally extend to the sorts of major structural changes needed for Guatemala's long-term and sustainable human development. Rather, the coffee market is a means to achieve *algo más* (something more, something better) given the context of limited opportunity and material resources. The desires that farmers in our sample expressed reflect the same sorts of aspirations documented by Lyon (2011) among coffee producers in San Juan La Laguna and by Fischer and Benson (2006) among Maya farmers growing broccoli and other export vegetables around Tecpán: to educate their children, to invest in land or a vehicle, to expand their house. These desires inform and motivate the ways new producers engage the coffee market toward their own ends—an instrumental moralization of the market at once similar to and distant from the values ascribed by northern consumers to their fair trade gourmet coffee.

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