RESEARCH ARTICLE

Coffee, Connoisseurship, and an Ethnomethodologically-Informed Sociology of Taste

John Manzo

Abstract Coffee is an important commodity and an important comestible, one that is momentous not only for nations' economies but also, at the micro-social level, as a resource for interpersonal sociability. Among a subculture of certain coffee connoisseurs, the coffee itself is a topic that is an organizing focus of, and for, that sociability. This paper is an empirical investigation of online narratives produced by hobbyist participants in what coffee aficionados refer to as the "third wave" coffee phenomenon and engages and challenges extant perspectives social aspects of "taste" by inspecting members' insights concerning their conceptions of taste and their participation in a subculture that comprises taste as an important, central defining aspect. The analytic point of view deployed in this paper is ethnomethodological, one that, instead of emphasizing a priori the social structural characteristics of these connoisseurs as do Bourdieu (In: Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgment of Taste, tr. Richard Nice, Routledge, New York 1984) and those who work in his tradition, emphasizes discovery of members' own displayed understandings of the topic at hand. As such, this paper is more than an investigation of the "coffee geek" subculture but is also an invitation to an ethnomethodologically-informed sociology of "taste."

Keywords Coffee · Connoisseurship · Taste · Ethnomethodology

Introduction

Coffee is an important commodity and an important comestible, one that is momentous not only for nations' economies (cf. Talbot 2004) but also, at the micro-social level, as a resource for interpersonal sociability. Coffee*houses* were the

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venues where what we might currently think of as traditional social life was invented in places like London and Vienna starting in the 17th century (Arjomand 2004; Cowan 2005; Haine 1996; Komecoglu 2005). Political discourse and public discussion of weighty matters were born there, and it could be argued that what we appreciate as public sociality, social interaction, discourse, and indeed sociology itself might not exist without coffee and its sites of consumption.

Coffee has thus played an important role for what we might consider to be modern sociability, and among a subculture of certain coffee connoisseurs, the coffee itself is a topic that is an organizing focus of, and for, that sociability. This paper is an investigation of hobbyist participants in what coffee aficionados refer to as the "third wave" coffee phenomenon and engages and challenges extant perspectives on social aspects of "taste" by inspecting members' insights concerning their conceptions of taste and their participation in a subculture that comprises taste as an important, central defining aspect. The perspectives challenged here are the views of Bourdieu and his followers that view taste in social structural terms; and as well, this paper stands as an addition to histories of coffee and coffeehouses that are much broader and that comprise analytic emphases that are different from those engaged here.

Ethnomethodology and the "Third Wave"

Persons who are not coffee aficionados (or, to borrow a term now current in the subculture, "coffee geeks") are probably unfamiliar with the term "third wave" and so it is important to first qualify the expression as a *members'* term and as such one that reflects this paper's emphasis in the autochthonous nature, and those members' understandings of this subculture. This qualification reflects one of the provisos of *ethnomethodology* (Garfinkel 1967; Heritage 1984), the substantive and theoretical area of sociology of which this project partakes. That proviso is to undertake observational study of social topics by inquiring first, foremost, and always about what participants are *doing*, what knowledge they are demonstrating, what and how they deploy language and related argot and, where available for inspection, paralinguistic tools to organize, define, and make sense of their social experiences, and in general what the social world is like and is managed by people who actually partake of it. This sociological perspective, which prioritizes members' experience, differs not only from most social-structurally focused emphases in sociology generally but also, as will be discussed below, from the social-structural focus in the sociology of connoisseurship, food, and "taste." For example, with regard to this paper's topic, some observers and analysts would and do find the term "third wave" coffee phenomenon to be imprecise and confusing, the point is that "third wave" is used and understood as an organizing concept for the connoisseur subculture that is under investigation in this project.

One way to grasp that members' understanding of "third wave" is to be contrast it with "first" and "second" waves. In a food review column of LA Weekly, journalist Jonathon Gold (2008) does this elegantly:

The first wave of American coffee culture was probably the nineteenth century surge that put Folgers on every table, and the second was the proliferation, starting in the 1960s at Peet's and moving smartly through the Starbucks grande decaf latte, of espresso drinks and regionally labeled coffee. We are now in the third wave of coffee connoisseurship, where beans are sourced from farms instead of countries, roasting is about bringing out rather than incinerating the unique characteristics of each bean, and the flavor is clean and hard and pure.

The new face of coffee is neither Juan Valdez nor a gum-snapping waitress named Madge, or even Starbucks' Howard Schultz, but a postmodern barista like [Eton] Tsuno, spiked hair and a gauzy shirt, stirring a siphon of Sumatran peaberry with the pouty insouciance of Jimmy Page executing a guitar solo, while awestruck customers study every flick of his long fingers.

This particular "history" of coffee might be revisionist, imprecise, North-America-focused, and generally unsatisfactory as a review of actual historical precedents to modern artisanal coffee roasters and coffeehouses, but as a way of understanding members' understandings of "third wave," it is important to recognize these categorizations. The "first wave," according to the coffee geeks' timeline, refers to how coffee was prepared and consumed in, say, the 1950s until, say, the early 1990s, when coffee was a "caffeine delivery system" prepared in percolators or massive urns in offices and banquet halls. The "second wave" refers to that period, starting in the early 1990s, when coffeehouse chains (Starbucks, Gloria Jean's, The Coffee Bean and Tea Leaf, Second Cup, etc.) were founded and became common features in urban storefronts and suburban malls. The "second wave" purveyors, this history claims, laid the groundwork for the "third wave," which comprises small-batch artisanal coffee roasters and independent or small-chain coffeehouses that are themselves part of a supply chain including a collection of field-to-cup actors starting with direct-trade growers with whom the coffee brokers, roasters, and café owners are understood to have relationships. Part of the "third wave" has also entailed the growth of networked communities of "home baristas" who partake of the increasing availability of artisanal roasters, green coffee resellers, equipment purveyors (often under the same roof as the cafes themselves), and of course like-minded connoisseurs who share their interests and provide support and assistance for them. It is these hobbyists whose views are inspected in this paper.

Again, this definition of the "third wave" is missing a great deal empirically, including the glaringly obvious fact that coffee (and coffeehouses) existed commercially and domestically for many centuries in many countries before the American 1950s, but the point here is to first understand the sense and reference of "third wave."

The Sociology of "Taste"

The primary substantive touchstone for this project has to do with what sociologists have researched and theorized regarding connoisseurship and taste, and an obvious

consideration is the work of Bourdieu, famously reported in *Distinction* (1984). Bourdieu's concern was broadly similar to Durkheim's in *Le Suicide* (among other works, but as an example of the unique utility of his approach and his program), and that was to demonstrate via the use of appropriate indicators that what appear to be matters of individual volition or otherwise individual behaviours (or individual *taste*) are in fact always filtered through and to subject to analysis as social-structural products. In Bourdieu's work, social structure explains cultural preferences among members of different classes; even a stated interest in classical music among a person of a lower class stratum will usually reveal a preference for something more accessible and low brow (what one of my undergraduate music professors called "classical muzak"); we can't escape "habitus" despite Bourdieu's seeming imputation of subjectivity. As a consequence, one's exposure to "arts" is conditioned by one's social class position (DiMaggio and Useem 1978; Levine 1988) and other social structural determinants, such as one's race (DiMaggio and Ostrower 1990).

Bourdieu's priorities with the impact of social structure on cultural experience also applies, he and his adherents would argue, to comestibles, one recent analysis of which (Baumann and Johnson 2009) considers the "foodie" culture with a focus on how "foodies" valorize certain working-class and "global South" cultural products while coming from class-based positions of material privilege. Even in cases in which, then, persons from higher socioeconomic classes eschew the "highbrow," as Peterson and Kern (1996) describe it, the understanding that one's social structural position is key to the analysis of taste and related cultural choices is typical of not only studies of taste but of the sociological worldview generally. Explanations and descriptions require deference to social structure and its impact on all human social behaviour.

The perspective suggested in this paper is, again, ethnomethodological; it is not opposed to Bourdieu's (or his heirs') investigations but reflects analytic priorities that are very different. What differs in an ethnomethodological treatment of matters like this project's is that it does not begin with presumptions concerning something that practicing sociologists call "class" or even "social structure" organized around any variable; neither does ethnomethodology deploy as a working concept and resource for explanation something called "habitus" as a means of describing or theorizing lived social interaction.

The imperative in doing ethnomethodology is always, first foremost and always, to begin by asking what actors in a site are *doing*: what they are saying, what they are writing, what behaviours are visible alone and in concert with other members, how these things are organized, and how these findings contribute to their understandings of what they are involved in. So when ethnomethodologists engage something like a coffee "subculture," their goal is to uncover the grounded organization of that phenomenon and to uncover the members' definitions, discourse, meanings, and so forth that make this "subculture" visible and understandable as such from their own perspectives as well as to the perceptions of outsiders. I will examine some discursive examples presently to flesh some of this out, but it bears mentioning now that this investigation will not entail the use of social class or social structural issues any more that does Bourdieu or any variable-analytic sociologist consider any of the topics that

have animated ethnomethodologists. Additionally, since the focus here has never been a topic for sociology, it bears first asking precisely the sort of questions that ethnomethodologists ask, first and before considering social structure or any other issues beyond the lived experiences of the persons under study.

Sociology and Coffee

A second touchstone for this project concerns prior sociological attention to coffee and spaces for its consumption. The traditional independently-owned urban café is that non-domestic, non-work-related, but still resolutely social "third place" (Oldenburg 1991, 2000) par excellence, and there is no dearth of research on coffeehouses. Among these are works addressing the history of the coffeehouse in Europe (Arjomand 2004; Cowan 2005; Haine 1996; Komecoglu 2005); all of which see the pre-20th century coffeehouse as an important location for the development of a form of public sociability and even, as mentioned above, "civil society" *tout court*. Studies focussing specifically on modern coffeehouses are rarer, but include Laurier et al.'s (2001) ethnography of a "neighbourhood café," and Milligan's (1998) analysis of the emotional attachment that employees at a university coffeehouse had to the coffeehouse's physical setting. Milligan (1998) is notable for being the only researcher among those uncovered for this literature review to consider the behaviours and viewpoints of coffeehouse employees and not customers or to treat "the coffeehouse" generically as "institution" and empirical focus.

However, even in the case of Milligan's study, coffee per se has always been epiphenomenal, and merely the comestible extant in the real focus of research, which has been public (customers') behaviour and sociability. What is thus missing among these investigations is attention to coffee connoissieurship. Cafés are indubitably important as customers' meeting and "hang-out" spaces, but aside from acknowledging a gross difference between "chain" and "independent" coffeehouses (cf. Lyons 2005), these are taken without reflection as un-studied contexts for describing and analysing customers' experiences or issues germane to the coffee industry.

The foci for this project are novel with respect to past sociological research on coffee. First, this project focuses on the experience of coffee consumption and the shared lifeworld of coffee hobbyists and the business owners who cater to them. Second, for this report, the cafes themselves are treated as neither topics nor resources for empirical analysis since the priority here is on the narratives of those coffee aficionados and their reflections on their acquisition of "taste" in coffee and their introductions to, and the social concomitants and consequences of, their participation in the third-wave coffee subculture.

Method and Data

In line with the ethnomethodological imperative to "consider, analyze and describe the methods used in the production and recognition" of what is "observably the case in some talk, activity of setting" (Francis and Hester 2004: 25–26), this project has entailed a number of sources of qualitative data and techniques for their collection

in order to subject those data to analysis in order to uncover, for this research, how connoisseurship and other constitutive phenomena relevant for the social world of the third-wave coffee phenomenon are socially and interactionally accomplished. These sources of data include interviews with personnel at "third wave" coffeehouses and the roasters that service them, observation and photographic record-keeping at those coffeehouses, and the discovery of narratives among internet-based discussion board contributors at several coffee-based websites in which conversations around the vagaries of the third wave abound. These websites include home-barista.net, coffeegeek.com, coffeed.com, and coffeenobs.com.au.

The sampling strategy here is a nonprobability approach akin to what Beighey and Unnithan (2006: 137) term "ideographic sampling" in which materials are selected because they are "representative or expressive of the topic under investigation." Narratives were gleaned by inductively inspecting discussion thread topics and examining entries that speak to the matter at hand. From among approximately 80 such narratives, common themes were uncovered along the lines of the conduct of an ethnographic content analysis for live interview data characterized by the "reflexive and highly interactive nature of the investigator, concepts, data collection and analysis" (Altheide 1987: 68).

Given this paper's focus on members' reflections on the nature and acquisition of "taste" in coffee, the narratives drawn from web-based discussion fora constitute the data for this report. These narratives, it must be noted, do not constitute all of the discussions in these fora; in point of fact, the vast majority of content there concerns technical discussion around coffee equipment (for example, espresso machines, parts for those machines, extraction techniques, and roasters) and information on coffee-related businesses (for example, travel suggestions for where to find third-wave cafes in various cities, reviews of cafes, information on openings and closings, and shipping assistance for artisanal roasters). Reflections on "taste" and the autobiographical narratives that constitute the data extracts for this paper are fairly rare, but are, obviously not unheard of. As the analysis below demonstrates, these narratives encompass themes relevant to a member-focused understanding of "taste" in this subculture and to a theoretical view of "taste" from an ethnomethodological perspective generally.

Permission to use these extracts was gained through an informed consent process in which participants were given the option of use of their actual or a pseudonymous screen name in the excerpts reproduced below; as such, some of the names preceding comments are "real" and some are pseudonyms but none are identified as such. As well, in compliance with the approved ethical guidelines for this study, all geographical identifiers are stripped or masked, and the names of businesses (aside from widespread coffee chains such as Peet's and Starbucks) have been deleted from all excerpts.

Findings

Much of the online discussion uncovered for this project is autobiographical and concerns members' acquisition of "coffeegeek" status. Among other issues, these

narratives speak to part of why it can be important and impactful to eschew, at least for a while, a variable-analytic emphasis and to allow members to speak (or write) in their own voices and to analyze their discourse in their own terms.

Four thematic findings follow. The first concerns the fact that, contrary to what a social-structural emphasis on taste might conceive of regarding the *bestowal* of "taste" on persons based on their ascribed social and cultural capital, the reflections of coffee aficionados suggest that taste is also an *acquired* phenomenon.

Taste is Acquired, Not Only Ascribed

A recurring theme in the online narratives concerned how coffee connoisseurship was never given to coffee geeks as an accident of birth. In fact, one persistent statement concerns how dreadful users' parents' tastes in coffee were, and how they sometimes, in a manner completely at odds with the notion of taste being an ascribed characteristic, manage to teach their parents about the vagaries of quality coffee.

> Malachi: My father has been visiting… He drinks a lot of coffee. He is a big fan of Peet's. Drinks autodrip Peet's coffee. Yumm… (said with deep irony). When he drinks espresso, he drinks a 16oz latte with sugar.
> They have been here for almost a week now.
> I don't have any 12oz latte cups (much less 16oz ones).
> In the beginning I was making him single shot 5.5oz "piccolo lattes"—sweetened. I got the usual, "wow! Did you do that on purpose?" when he saw the latte art.
> But each day I've offered him a taste of my drink. I started off drinking double cappuccinos, then macchiatos and now straight shots.
> I thought I was being quite clever.
> This morning he said to me, "okay, I give. Make me a cappuccino."
> And then, after finishing the drink, he said, "so what sort of espresso machine should I buy."
> I've set him on the road to ruin.

Malachi thus relates how he instructed his father about coffee. In the next excerpt, Mike McKoffee reflects on this first exposure not only to "quality" coffee, but to coffee per se, at age 30:

> Mike McKoffee: I didn't start drinking coffee until age 30 in 1984. Oh sure, tried what was supposedly coffee many many times over the years and it was always vile tasting in varying degrees. Summer of 1984 we were on vacation visiting a friend in San Francisco. We got there early evening and he asked if we'd like some coffee. I declined and D___ said yes. He walked over to his fridge and took a bag out of the freezer, measured out some whole beans into a grinder, sealed the bag and returned it to the freezer, waited a couple minutes and ground then started them brewing. I think it was drip. We chatted while the coffee brewed. Don't have a clue what varietal or if it was a blend or what roast, etc. All I know was I started smelling something I'd never smelled

anywhere at any time in the first 30 years of my life. It smelled wonderful! When the coffee finished brewing and he was pouring himself and D___ a cup he again politely asked if I'd like a cup. Based on what I had smelled brewing I of course said yes. Drank it black. Never tasted anything like it before in my life. It was GOOD. We visited long into the night with much of the talk around this stuff coffee. My palate was awakened to what coffee could and should be, my coffee education had begun.

When we got home from vacation bought a grinder & coffee pot and been chasing fresh roast whole beans ever since. Never bought pre-ground and or canned coffee in my life. We discussed that type of silly behavior that first night of my education!

So not drinking BAD coffee isn't a bad thing but a good thing! Not drinking good coffee, why that's just not possible.

Taste Requires Work

Like any hobby, participating in the "home barista" movement entails investments in money and time. Expenses for high-end equipment can be extravagant. My own home espresso set-up comprises two different machines, one fully manual and one semi-automatic, a semi-professional coffee grinder, and accouterments such as tampers and spare portafilters that represent a financial investment of more than $4,000. My experience is not only typical but also trivial relative to how much expense other "coffee geeks" have taken on in their endeavours. The point here is of course not only to evidence the fact that coffee is an investment for these research subjects, but also to buttress the central claim here around "taste" being not only "acquired" but also that it is acquired via social engagement with other persons who share in certain aspects of connoisseurship.

Calspro's following comments reflect the expense and effort entailed in laying claim to coffee geek status.

Calspro: Greetings baristi. (Or is it 'Baristas'?) I registered a couple of days ago after lurking for a few weeks. I told myself I would wait until I actually have a machine before registering, but my grinder arrived first and I decided that qualified me a a home barista. Here's my story: I am in my late 30s, married with two kids and live in _____. On the birth of my daughter (only 2-1/2 years ago), my wife and I became frequent visitors to Starbuck's [sic] drive-thru. My daughter often naps in the car, leaving the driver with time to kill before returning home, and we just fell into the habit of the Starbuck's [sic] drive through as a time killer and a reward for having to drive around to let my daughter sleep! Over this past Christmas holiday, I discovered super-automatic espresso machines and I talked my wife into buying me one on the grounds (pardon the pun) that in the long run we'd save money if we made our own espresso. We bought a Saeco machine that, from my perspective, made good espresso. I followed the directions and cleaned the machine meticulously, but in

week 4 the grinder clogged and I decided for an $800 machine that was unacceptable. So back it went (to Costco).

During those weeks, I began perusing this site and Coffeegeek. Though I immediately determined that you are all certifiably insane for devoting some much time and $$$ to espresso, I began to dream of pulling my own "perfect" shot, so the clogged grinder was fortuitous, I suppose. In addition to the education I have received reading this site and Coffeegeek, I have recently read David Schomer's "ESRESSO [sic] COFFEE: Professional Techniques."

I realize now that I don't believe I have ever tasted properly made espresso.

Calsrpo reports that he is relatively new to this discussion forum and it would appear that he is relatively new to the third-wave coffee world as well, but his financial investment in it (or what he dreams of as his financial investment) is already significant. What we don't see in Calspro's reflection is how much time, retrospectively or prospectively, his taste-related journey would entail. Stuggi discusses this temporal element in the next excerpt and suggests that taste can entail a lengthy process:

Stuggi: Here's how my "usage" progressed;
1. I had no money left, so I used the same preground Italian stuff and some Illy preground to get by until I could buy a grinder. This phase lasted for about 2 months.
2. I bought all the needed accessories, tamper (really hefty 51 mm hunk of stainless steel), grinder (i-Mini), 1 kg of burnt up "Vienna" roasted Monteriva beans, still have 900 g left of that), steaming pitcher, etc.
   This got me by for a while, probably around ½ year or something.
3. Slowly I started buying "fresher" beans, I found a guy that did espresso roasts every 3 weeks (not so good coffee, he used some Cuban beans and they tasted quite baked). I also used some other roasts, but nothing was very good.
4. Around 1 year after all this, I started to do my own home roasts. I roasted some Kenyan AA (that's what the bag said) in a pot on the stove (burnt), in the oven (good method, but I was too noob to get it right), and slowly find a Poppery and Sweet Marias. This was about the same time I started to get microfoam right on the La Pav and everything started to fall into place.
5. Now, a year after that, I'm finally starting to get drinkable espresso out of the La Pav, and I'm also starting to look at upgrades; a proper grinder (the i-Mini isn't that great after all) like an M7 (75 mm flat burr), a new machine (Elektra A3 probably), and some proper beans (my home roasts aren't as good as I've thought…) as I really can't get anything local, but luckily the UK and Square Mile Coffee isn't that far away.
   Well, that's about it, probably in two to five years I'll be on here telling everybody how wrong I was, and how it's impossible to make good espresso without 2 M7K's, a 3 group La Marzocco (probably the Strada or whatever they call their new pressure profiling machine) and a Probat in the kitchen, but until then I'll try to just improve my espresso bit by bit.

Partaking of the home barista subculture is thus dependent on work and some important investments of education, money, time, and social contacts on the part of

the participant. Whereas the persons who participate in these endeavours may share social structural locations, these narratives show that such social backgrounds cannot themselves account for one's coffee-related preferences and experiences.

Taste is Burdensome, and Members Report Its Negative Social Repercussions

> Dogshot: It's just coffee. So why do I spend so much time thinking about it?

One surprising and not infrequent theme in the narratives under study for this report concern how much of a reported *burden* the taste that coffee geeks acquire can be. Coffee is, of course, a social drink and so one's refusal to participate in mainstream coffee and its rituals has consequences for the coffee aficionado that extend well beyond coffee per se. Frege84 evidences the social costs of losing friends intimidated by his "obsession":

> Frege84: Okay, one of the worst things to come out of my coffee journey is that, while our friends are thrilled to come over to our house and get one of my, if I do say so myself, masterful cappuccinos, I am always getting these apologies about the coffee that they serve—as if they're too intimidated to have me over. It makes me sad. But even worse was the recent meetup (I belong to several meetups, not just coffee-related ones) that took me off their invites list because I suggested we pick a local third waver instead of Starbucks for our get-togethers. I can't believe this happened-the organizer is a micromanaging a-hole for sure, but this is just another way where my coffee obsession seems to be destroying part of my social life. If I say "let's get together over coffee" the person seems terrified that I'm going to judge them for ordering a caramel macchiato.

The notion that any obsession can have consequences for one's social life is unsurprising, but that a personal focus on coffee, a drink that is supposed to have enabled human sociability in ways that are world-historical, is an important discovery here.

HB reports an anecdote that evidences further the idea how socially excluding coffee "geekdom" can be, because it inevitable entails the aficionado's demanding inspection of the coffeehouses (among other businesses, of course) that are treated and organized as sites for social interaction non-problematically by "lay" coffee consumers. HB relates this story in a manner that is as much self-pitying as critical of "average" coffee purveyors, but one cannot help but to read this, as an outsider, as an example of a coffee geek being insufferable.

> HB: Why do I do this to myself? … I was out for ice cream with my youngest son as a reward for good behavior today. My wife suggested I take him to a new ice cream shop a few miles away "right next to a new cafe called _____." Lately I've been squirreled away at the office or home office and hadn't notice [sic] this new row of restaurants and shops; it sounded like a great idea.

> "So, who is your roaster?" I queried.

> "We're a chain and roast our own. It's microroasted to assure freshness. It's not burnt coffee like some other chains," she confided.

"Cool. So what kind of espresso machine is this? Is it an HX?" I posed as a trick question.

"What's that?" (red flag number 1)

"It means it's a heat exchanger. Do you flush before each extraction?" I offer helpfully. She nods and my hopes rise.

I figure it's now or never and order a double espresso. "Decaf?" she suggests (red flag number 2). "No thanks, straight up is fine," I reply, figuring there's a 80% chance it's going in the sink anyway, and may as well give her the best shot at a decent drink. "OK, if you're sure. Do you want a twelve ounce cup to leave room for sugar and milk?" (red flag number 3) "No thanks, do you have a demitasse?" I ask, worrying that my 80% chance of disappointment just spiked to 95%. "We've got a couple of these [shows straight sided demitasse], though nobody ever asks for them" (red flag number 4).

I had to excuse myself for a moment… By the time I returned, she already had locked and loaded, drawing the double into two small stainless steel pitchers instead of directly into the demitasse (red flag number 5). As we watch the blond, thin stream finish at 21 s (red flag number 6), she asks, "Are you in the coffee business?" I murmur something about a consumer website on coffee, nothing specific, as thoughts of how to politely pass on the espresso swirl in my mind. I think she may have heard me muttering about underextraction and incorrect temperatures because after she transfers the contents of the two pitchers into the demitasse, she comments that it looks better than the whitish color of most pours (red flag number 7). I recoil at the thought that this woeful sample represents a pleasant surprise for her, an extraction that on appearance alone would be rushed to the sink at my place.

Why why why… hope springs eternal, maybe it's not as bad as it looks. Indeed, it wasn't the absolutely worse espresso to pass by my lips, but it would share company with the major disappointments: Thin, slightly sour, hints of ash and wet cardboard… I placed two dollars under the saucer and left the drink on the counter next to the cash register, to all appearances untouched.

Finally, andy G. wryly explains that he cannot even lay claim to the imaginary solace running his own shop would provide him, because "a lot of people don't like" his taste in coffee.

andy G.: just this morning my wife and I were talking over our cappas:

wife: "You know, there just doesn't seem to be enough places where we can go and get a bad espresso."

me: "I've noticed that too. I actually saw a corner in town where there wasn't a Starbucks."

wife: "Maybe you should see if there's a shop there for lease and you could open a coffee shop."

me: "I don't know. I'm not very good at making bad espresso. And my drinks…
you can actually taste the coffee in it, and a lot of people don't like that.

andy G.'s complaint may sound arrogant and far-fetched but it is a common
grievance among posters at more industry-focused websites that they must manage
demands to "dumb down" their third-wave coffee program in order to appease
customers who are used to the offerings at chains such as Starbucks. The point here
is of course not however, the veracity of andy G.'s statement, but that in stating it he
makes evident a worldview that sees his taste in coffee as mostly unshareable and,
ironically, as antisocial. But taste is, in the end, social; it's simply shared in the case
of the coffee geek among a relatively small coterie of the like-minded.

Taste is Social, and the Connoisseur Subcultures Like the Coffeegeeks Provides Social Support for It

ScottyG514: We're one step away from train spotters!

Arguing that taste is "social" is of course old hat in sociology; as Bourdieu
demonstrated, "taste" is associated with and constitutive of forms of capital that are
gleaned via one's social status. But to correlate cultural choices (including culinary
ones) with the choicemakers' social standing is only one version, the predominant
social-structure-focused sociological version, but still, only one version of the social
concomitants and character of "taste." When I argue that the "taste" evinced by the
coffee geek is "social," I mean that it is shared, understood, delineated, defined, made
sense of, and generally appreciated as and oriented to as an aspect of the social groups
and networks that constitute the subculture itself. ScottyG514's humourous compar-
ison of the participants in his web forum to "train spotters," a group of hobbyists who
are symbolic of an arcane pastime, he is not only making light of his interests. He is
also referencing his group qua group and constructing his interests as shared ones. In
other words, he is making evident that "social" aspect of taste.

In the final data excerpt in this piece is an almost poignant entry by in which user
forumer Examerican references this "we" repeatedly and expresses perfectly the
notion that taste-related work is social in nature because the struggles and burdens
of taste are communal.

Examerican: We've all been there. We've all had to deal with the screwed-up
faces of our moms when we say "no thanks" to her percolator. We've all had
to give the speech to our disbelieving friends on how they've been duped by
Starbucks. The beauty of this site is that it's the one place where I don't have
to relive any of this and can feel comfortable in a group that gets me in all my
espresso-addled glory.

Discussion

We can glean several interpretations from these narratives, and I would draw
three conclusions from them concerning how one might approach a sociological
perspective on "taste" that is ethnomethodologically informed and member-focused.

First, these excerpts reference what are clearly acquired and not ascribed aspects of "taste." Becoming a participant in, and maintaining one's public status as a member of, the third-wave coffee phenomenon entails work for acquisition even if those members share social structural characteristics consistently. It might be obvious from these web forum excerpts, even when it is not stated as such, that every one of the authors is male. Most might be middle-class or better. But while these social aspects might be exactly the first questions asked about the "sample" convened for this study, the fact is that for the questions asked here concerning what the displayed coffeegeek culture looks like in the first place and what its members reflections on taste are, the social background of the speakers is immaterial. As well, if this investigation had started, as formal analytic sociology would when studying the social aspects of coffee consumption, with the question of the relationship between persons' social statuses and their coffee-related preferences, then we would likely end up very far from the third wave phenomenon. This is because of the relationship between the retail model of the Starbucks chain and the consequence that its customers tend to be wealthy (Bowman 2008). Starbucks and its ilk are, by third wave standards, appalling coffee purveyors for many reasons and yet are still status markers, even though their customers might lack taste, at least, taste in coffee. These nuances are simply unavailable to structural analysis and indeed a primary focus on socioeconomic class and coffee might lead us to Starbucks, which is precisely where we don't want to go.

Second, this analysis has evidenced themes around how taste can be seen as the outcome of a great deal of effort and how it can even be described as burdensome. A rarified taste in coffee separates the aficionado from other people who would be satisfied with non-artisanal coffee and in so doing makes problematic quotidian and very, very recurrent social experiences. "Taste" takes away what had been simple and acceptable pleasures. "Taste" makes a person look like an arrogant and pretentious boor in some respects. "Taste" in these terms, in important respects, is anti-social. Taste does not always reflect or promote class; rather, it sometimes drives the devotee away from other people. However, at the same time, this rendering of "taste" does confer membership in a subculture whose interest specifically and obsessively surrounds a comestible and the vagaries concerning it. So, while the narrators of these extracts consider taste to be burdensome, they also allow that their taste has introduced them to new social circles. Moreover, these social circles are paradoxically liberating and are sites where one's arcane taste is not burdensome at all. This is, of course, typical of anybody who joins any subculture (or for that matter of many people who join any social agglomeration, from political parties to clubs to cults), but it is important to note that "taste" is, or can be, a basis for this sort of separation from one's other social moorings, including one's social class-based expectations of consumption, whether it is the middle- and upper-class love of Starbucks or the working-class devotion to Tim Hortons or Dunkin' Donuts and to take on a quite separate preference. This is not about social class but about *taste*.

Finally, one can glean from these excerpts some of the linguistic and cognitive aspects that undergird the third-wave coffee phenomenon and that help constitute the "coffee geek" or "home barista" subculture as they do any subculture. The web

narratives uncovered for this paper and reproduced here contain almost stultifying amounts of jargon. To translate all of these is beyond the scope of this paper, but to point out that this argot presents a set of shared vocabularies and reflects an expectation of shared "meanings" among its participants is part of what is key in ascertaining what this particular group, assembled under the guise of coffee specialists and conversing virtually on the vagaries of coffee, has as part of its ethno-methodologies. What we observe here is akin to any social efforts at sense-making and practical social organization; what we see here is the sort of topic, one deploying modern communication technologies but still undertaking the "how" of social organization that has always animated practitioners of ethnomethodology. Thus, one way to think about this analysis is as a suggestion for how we might go about making ethnomethodology relevant in the 21st century.

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