

Cardinal Compositions

University of Louisville

Blissful Mornings: Introducing the Beauty of Coffee ([Podcast Essay](#))

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For the Classroom

1. Doty's essay shows how small things we sometimes take for granted are more complex than we might realize. Think of a part of your daily routine that you often don't pay attention to, like brushing your teeth or walking your dog. What complexity or nuance is present in these activities? What details of this activity might have been ignored before? How might you describe this activity with descriptive detail?
2. Doty's essay is presented as a podcast. How does this genre affect your experience with the essay? What affordances does this format grant to an author? How might you incorporate audio elements into your own composition?

Transcript of “Blissful Mornings: Introducing the Beauty of Coffee” ([Podcast Essay](#))

Will Doty

It’s a blissful morning. It’s quiet, serene. Beams of sunlight drip through your kitchen window, and as you trace them back to their source, you can see the sun warmly glowing behind the horizon.

It’s a long day ahead of you, but right now it still feels far away. That crisp, cool air has got the hairs on your neck stiffened up, and in the middle of the chilly day, you’ve got a warm mug in the snug grasp of your hands. As you lift it close to your lips, the vapors drift upwards and you catch a whiff of that cozy scent. One sip, and everything feels just a tiny bit more golden.

Coffee has that power to transform your day, to turn a groggy, sour Monday morning into a beautiful moment in time. And your average American is acutely aware of this, so much so that they can’t help but get hooked on the beverage. Ninety percent of Americans consume some form of caffeine¹ daily, and seventy-five percent of that caffeine is consumed in the form of coffee.² But I’ve got to wonder, how many of those Americans just use coffee as a means to cope with the dreary life of a laborer, without recognizing the beauty it contains?

I admit it, getting into the realm of “coffee connoisseurship” can feel a bit like stepping into a stuffy room full of condescending elitists, all ready to flaunt their superior palates and scoff at your limited coffee knowledge. And honestly, there *is* a lot of that energy there³. It’s not something I stand by. I’d encourage you to look past some of that toxicity, and instead embrace what’s wonderful about the drink itself.

There’s been a lot of hype around the coffee industry, especially in the past decade or so. As an outsider, it can feel kind of difficult to get behind it. You overhear that tatted barista⁴ with a man-bun talk about the “blueberry notes in the Ethiopian,” and you try it, thinking, “What? I do *not* taste blueberry in this.” I felt that way too at first, but I still remember the exact moment I understood what that meant.

In high school, I worked several jobs as a barista for about two years. While I was on the clock in the second month of my first job, my manager called me over to dial in the espresso, a process which involves adjusting specific parameters within the espresso machine to achieve the best possible taste. We tasted it together, and he said he was “getting a hint of stone fruit, maybe plum.” He told me he didn’t expect me to get that, but his words began to melt away once I realized I could taste it. *I could taste plum*. In the middle of this heavy swirl of dark flavors that I’d always been familiar with in coffee, there was a completely new flavor, dead in the center of my taste buds.

It was almost a philosophical revelation to me. I know it sounds silly, but it was a real slap to the face to realize that all these years, I hadn’t fully explored what it meant to *really taste* something. I had never taken a single minute just to stop and *think* about the senses of taste and smell when it came to food and drink, and coffee was the first step into that world. It was like a new universe slowly unraveled before me. It was the recognition that the array of

¹ <https://www.kuakini.org/wps/portal/public/Health-Wellness/Health-Info-Tips/Miscellaneous/Caffeine--America-s-Most-Popular-Drug>

² <https://disturbmenot.co/coffee-statistics/>

³ <https://www.baristaexchange.com/forum/topics/coffee-snob-or-elitist-ahole>

⁴ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=exH-Jmdav6g>

possibilities within human experience was *far* vaster than I had ever realized, the recognition that if I've never even explored the depths of taste and smell, then life must be much more complex than I thought.

Next time you've got any sort of snack or beverage in your hands, whether it's a glass of fine wine or [laughably] a bag of Doritos, I want you to just stop and literally think about what you're tasting, and try to pick it all apart. Do you taste the cilantro in your taco, or the cinnamon in your chai tea latte? Where on your tongue do you taste it? The edges? The middle? The back? You can take this in more abstract directions too. Try and associate a color with what you're tasting, or maybe a memory. Once you apply these ideas to tasting several different black *coffees*, you'll find that there's incredible nuance in what you're experiencing.

You might be surprised to find that, in terms of aroma and flavor, coffee is one of the most complex beverages out there, carrying numerous possible flavor profiles, depending on its preparation. There are 800 different possible flavor and aroma compounds in coffee, whereas wine carries about 250 possible compounds.⁵ Within that little mug in your hands is a small *universe* of new experiences. But I have to ask, how many people actually make the decision to venture into that universe?

If you're listening to this right now, I'm going to make the assumption that you haven't. And there is absolutely no shame in that! It's not like our high school teachers were ever telling us to "take the day slower with each sip of coffee." I really believe it ultimately says more about our societal culture than about any individual's decisions. As Americans, we have somewhat of an obsession with *efficiency*, and maybe that's why we love coffee so much. We want to consume whatever will wake us up the fastest, so we can get right out of bed and right to work. But is that really the best approach to living life? Sacrificing everything for efficiency?

I'm not going to act like I can answer that question, and I'm not going to tell you how to live your life. Feel free to talk to your pastor, or study Buddhism, or dive into other ancient philosophies, or do whatever you feel led to do to figure all that out. But I will argue that in America, and even on a global scale, there really is an underlying motor that draws us to serve efficiency. It's in our schools, it's in the food industry, it's in our social lives, and yes, it's absolutely in the coffee industry. And it has real consequences.

[Audio Clip of Ferris Bueller "Life moves pretty fast..."]

It doesn't take a genius to see what companies out there play into this "quantity over quality" mentality. Take a look at a photograph of "Anywhere, America," and you'll have a pretty comprehensive list of those companies. You might see a McDonald's, an Exxon Mobile, a Hampton Inn, and, there it is, a Starbucks. The efficiency monster of the coffee world.

Now, don't get me wrong, Starbucks has done a *lot* of great things for the coffee industry. I'm not going to downplay any of that. They, and a number of other companies, essentially created the coffee culture in America as we know it today.⁶ They reshaped the world and played a huge hand in globalizing the coffee bean, but unfortunately so much of what they've done is antithetical to Third Wave--well, before we go there, let me explain something.

The history of the coffee industry is typically understood in three waves. The first wave is, well, a little vague, but it essentially refers to the first instance of coffee entering the market,

⁵<https://perfectdailygrind.com/2016/05/coffee-science-what-affects-the-flavour-of-coffee/#:~:text=Coffee%3A%20More%20Complex%20Than%20Wine&text=In%20comparison%2C%20the%20Maillard%20reaction,s,amazing%20richness%20and%20elegant%20complexity.>

⁶ <https://www.drivencoffee.com/blog/coffee-waves-explained/>

the era as it was being bought and sold for the first time. The second wave refers to the rise of the cafe and its specific culture. It was a period of time throughout the 19th and 20th centuries when there was a desire to create an experience surrounding coffee. Starbucks falls into this category. It's what we all know as the pleasant atmosphere where we can finish our homework, write comedy sketches, or whatever you like to do with your life. It's the coffee shop.

What distinguishes it from the third wave, which I'll get to in a second, is the fact that while there is a great desire to bring light to coffee, it does so in a rather indirect way. The focus is primarily on the *experience*, and not the actual coffee itself. That's why Starbucks, and so many other of these second wave coffee shops, have their drinks loaded with sugar and syrups. And so, the coffee itself is poorly prepared, but saved by the glittery, sweet added flavorings.

That's what the third wave is attempting to undo.⁷ It was cultivated from a small group of people in the 1980s that shared a passion for the gorgeous possibilities of the coffee bean. While the first and second waves held a focus on darker roasts, the third wave explored lighter roasts and the effects of different brewing methods. And as we've seen in the past forty years, the complexity of coffee is unimaginable.⁸

And beyond just appreciating the taste of coffee, the third wave strives to appreciate the work behind it. The coffee shops, the baristas, the roasters, and the farmers are all brought to light. There is a special intention to create better circumstances for all of them, but especially for the farmers. There had been a time during the second wave when farmers were receiving less than a dollar per pound of coffee sold at the highest, but now it has climbed up to six dollars per pound.⁹ Additionally, on just about any bag of coffee you buy from a third wave coffee shop, you can find tons of information on the origins of the beans, including the region and country they came from, and maybe even a little bio about the farmers who cultivated it.

Unfortunately, Starbucks is largely working against this. Yes, they do have a third wave division, but once you step inside any of their shops and see their menus dominated with words like caramel and vanilla, it becomes pretty clear that their goals serve efficiency and profit. And this is what third wave shops have to compete with. A Starbucks on every corner of every road, making the fruitiest, most sugary frappuccinos possible, and swaths of customers shelling coins on 'em without a thought.

Chances are, despite all the focus on well-grown and well-roasted coffee, you'll almost never find a third wave coffee shop that doesn't sell coffee drinks with some sort of flavoring. It's just that that's what the average customer has come to expect from a coffee shop, and you just can't thrive as a business without it.

And there's no shame if you've been that customer. But now you've got a little bit of education on the coffee world. I'm not gonna tell you to completely cut sugary drinks out from your life. But I *am* urging you, reconsider how you consume coffee. *Think* about what you're tasting. Do some research on places to purchase coffee, because I promise there are some *great* companies roasting *great* coffees and properly crediting the origins of their beans. Support those guys, and support your local coffee shops, as they might be struggling. Dive deep into the culture, because there could be a whole universe you're missing out on. A new lens through which you can look at life. Right there, in that warm mug in your hands. And suddenly, you'll see: it's a blissful morning.

⁷ *God in a Cup*, Michaëlle Weissman

⁸ <https://www.drivencoffee.com/blog/coffee-waves-explained/>

⁹ [https://www.javapresse.com/blogs/buying-coffee/how-much-pay-for-coffee-beans#:~:text=Green%20Coffee%20Cost%20%2D%20%24%20%24%20%2D%20%2D6.00%20Per%20Pound&text=\(2019%20Update%3A%20the%20current%20%22,per%20pound%20of%20unroasted%20coffee.](https://www.javapresse.com/blogs/buying-coffee/how-much-pay-for-coffee-beans#:~:text=Green%20Coffee%20Cost%20%2D%20%24%20%24%20%2D%20%2D6.00%20Per%20Pound&text=(2019%20Update%3A%20the%20current%20%22,per%20pound%20of%20unroasted%20coffee.)

SOUNDS/SONGS USED:

Lena's Song by the Marshmallows

Fly Me To The Moon by Bart Howard, arranged and performed by Kent Nishimura -

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ws6dFb69t7U>

Clip from *Ferris Bueller's Day Off*: "Life moves pretty fast..."

All The Things You Are by Jerome Kern, arranged and performed by Joe Pass, from the album *Virtuoso*

All The Things You Are by Jerome Kern, arranged and performed by Will Doty

Don't Know Why by Norah Jones, arranged and performed by Kazuki Isogai -

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qz8DyT61hP4>