

Riding The Wave-s

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“And that, I think, was the handle — that sense of inevitable victory over the forces of Old and Evil. Not in any mean or military sense; we didn’t need that. Our energy would simply prevail. There was no point in fighting — on our side or theirs. We had all the momentum; we were riding the crest of a high and beautiful wave....” **Hunter S Thompson, *Fear & Loathing***

From hippies to hipsters

Conceived in 1971, Thompson was tapping into an American society at a time of cultural upheaval, which saw younger generations rebel against the consumerism of the parent generation. Fast-forward to the present, although decidedly less dramatic, the gist of Thompson’s infamous “wave speech” could help illustrate the development of the specialty coffee movement. Blogs and online forums are abuzz with an ongoing debate on the current **'Third Wave'** of coffee, which has been brewing for the past decade and now is sweeping across the world with force. At its best, it is described as a craft coffee experience like no other – we are talking responsibly sourced single-origin beans, latte art and a sensory sensation tailored-to-cup, and served up by a beansmith. At its worst, it has been described as a self-congratulatory marketing hype, coffee elitism and barista self-indulgence, which sniffs at the inferiority of the average coffee consumer. Why, the hotly debated topic has even given cause for its own [meme series!](#) Popularly depicted as someone covered in body art with a penchant for facial hair, the barista is ultimately the gatekeeper standing between you and your cup of joe. However, with whispers of a Fourth Wave rippling on the horizon, this might all be changing.

"... the gatekeeper standing between you and your cup of joe."



A barista making latte art

Three Waves

American Trish Rothgeb, who is heading up *Wrecking Ball Coffee Roasters* together with specialty coffee royalty and master brewer Nick Cho, was the first to coin the 'Third Wave' of coffee in 2002. She put coffee culture into the framework of three consecutive waves: *"First Wave, Second Wave, Third Wave: this is how I think of contemporary coffee. There seem to be three movements influencing what [has been] termed Specialty Coffee. Each approach has its own set of priorities and philosophies; each has contributed to the consumer's experience—and our livelihoods. Occasionally, the waves overlap; and one inevitably spills over to influence the next."* The three waves mainly describe the development and consumption of coffee in **America, the UK, and Australasia** although similar movements have been recurring in Scandinavia. They are commonly broken down into: **First Wave** The first wave roughly began in the early 1900s and refers to the mass-marketing of coffee as a major commodity, for the very first time. The advent of cheap, **freeze-dried** robusta coffee swamped the market and made its way onto every kitchen table. Consumption peaked in North America during the post World War II era, and **Folgers** and **"gourmet coffee"** became household concepts.



Instant coffee made its way onto most kitchen tables

Second wave The globalisation of coffee chains (**Starbucks** being the most famous) propelled the second wave, which shifted focus onto arabica coffee. It started in the 60s with Peets and spurred a new artisanal interest in, and the enjoyment of, the hot beverage. A string of Italian style espresso-based beverages (latte, cappuccino etc) were ushered in worldwide, and an interest in 'specialty coffees' from various origins was taking shape. 90s sitcoms centred round coffee shop helped bringing the new coffee culture into people's living rooms. **'Fair Trade'** and **'venti'** were instilled into the public consciousness, whilst syrup and cream smothered pick-me-ups pulled from semi-automatic machines modified the taste of coffee. The resulting large-scale homogeneity for profit is what, according to Rothgeb, paved way for the 'Third Wave'.

Venti vs. large

Third Wave Arriving at the Third Wave, coffee today is increasingly – and rightfully – talked about and appreciated in a similar artisanal context as fine wine, chocolate or cheese, in line with increased consumer awareness, ethical consumerism and a desire to know more about the origins of the goods we buy and consume. After all, coffee does have over 800 aroma compounds, making it even more complex than wine. With a shift away from the standardised espresso roasts, which are characteristically darker, more bitter and leave a lingering aftertaste, the combination of the highest-quality beans, lighter roasts and skilled barista craftsmanship can unlock the complex palette of bean flavours distinct of each origin. **'Seed-to-cup'** and **Direct Trade** relationships with coffee farmers are key, as are tracing the origins of the beans, the planting, harvesting and processing, and more importantly – putting emphasis on the social and environmental conditions in coffee-producing countries. *"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."* **Pulitzer Prize-winning food critic Jonathan Gold of the LA Weekly, 2008.**

Third Wave coffee shops are mushrooming like wildfire, and you may be able to differentiate them from regular coffee shops based on a couple of key characteristics. This includes latte art and, with a romanticised revival of old pour-over brewing methods (such as the 1940s slick Chemex design, cold-brew coffee, or the siphon which looks like it comes straight out of a chemistry lesson), a notion of taking things 'back to basics'. The barista's role has shot to prominence as the mode selector – he will be able to tell you – among other things – about the origin of the beans (country, latitude it was grown on, season and the producer), as well as roast. Coffee preparing has turned into performance art, where the barista will perform in the barista theater or „brew bar“, preparing your coffee in front of your eyes, in extracting the very best natural bean flavours. Or, as Nick Cho summarised it “... *letting the coffee speak for itself*”. Additionally, it should be noted – as pointed out by Danielle Sacks of *Fast Company* – that, “...*baristas die a little on the inside every time someone orders a decaf-soy-vanilla-latte.*”



Double shot, anyone?

“... baristas die a little on the inside every time someone orders a decaf-soy-vanilla-latte.”

When coffee goes bad

In a similar vein to Thompon's hippies, the Third Wave advocates of today are rebelling against the preceding Second Wave generation of mass-produced, standardised taste. Yet, natural cultural differences have arisen between the traditional dark and caramelised roasts vs the American fruity and lighter roasted coffees. Or as summarised by coffee columnist Meister for *Seriouseats.com* in 2013: “*To Italians, the brash, big fruity espressos making their way across counters in American third-wave coffee shops are undrinkable disasters; to baristas from New York to San Francisco, the long, roasty, and deeply bittersweet coffee that epitomizes the Roman- and Neapolitan-style shot is nothing more than an archaic cultural touchstone and caffeine-delivery system.*” In fact, the surf has been anything but smooth, as the self-professed 'third-wavers' have met some resistance in the upper echelons of coffee circles, and there is a clear distinction between those pro-Third Wave, and those who disregard the concept of three waves altogether as marketing tools: “*The facts are that great espresso has existed long before naked portafilters, single-origin bean roasts, and other gimmickry that some might associate with the Third Wave... The whole Third Wave concept has since been bandied about in the specialty coffee industry as a sort of pompus and self-congratulatory marketing hype about their products and services — a self-appointed seal of approval.*” As coffee and its loudest advocates were picked up by the mainstream, a certain blog controversy between a famous Third Wave profile and a complaining customer in 2008 resulted in a media storm, catapulting specialty coffee into the limelight, and compounding the image of the condescending 'hipster barista' culture. The furore? The customer had been refused a triple espresso served over ice by a barista in a Third Wave coffee

shop, as it would violate the integrity of the espresso. The frictions in coffee circuits were a fact.



Storm in a coffee cup

On the other hand, the roasters and baristas of the Third Wave – some of the most renown ones including **Stumptown**, **Intelligentsia**, **Counter Culture** and **Blue Bottle** – might retort that the big Second Wave companies are hijacking their language. *“Mass-market coffee, the Starbucks and Nespressos of the world, have already co-opted much of the language these small roasters are experimenting with, and with their much larger megaphones, they’re the ones exposing and getting the consumer comfortable with quality classifications,”* as noted by **Adam Teeter in Vinepair** in August this year. Intelligentsia’s Stephen Morrissey hits the nail on the head, or the crema on the espresso, in the problem facing the coffee industry by saying that, “The need to distinguish great coffee from not so great coffee is getting more and more relevant by the minute.”

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This begs the question, where will coffee go next?

Ripples on the horizon

Enter: yourself, the ethically-minded coffee lovers, enthusiasts and the at-home hobby baristas. Whether in the shape of a wave or not, there is arguably a need to describe the increase of coffee drinking consumers who not only want to know more about their coffee, if the beans are responsibly sourced, how it is harvested and prepared, and if the premiums they pay actually end up in the pockets of the farmers, but also learn about the craft of roasting, grinding and brewing on their own.



A ripe coffee cherry picked during harvest in Nicaragua

Let's take it one step further – obtaining the best qualities associated with the Third Wave, such as the highest-quality single-origin beans and Direct Trade – and really disrupt the world of coffee. Let's break down all barriers between the coffee farmer and the consumer shifting – for a second – focus away from large-name roasters, and coffee shop baristas for that matter. Let's empower farmers by turning them into faces, putting them in charge of their own value chains and making them brands in themselves. Let's build transparent and healthy relationships between producing and consuming countries in an emerging consumer-driven coffee landscape, where coffee producers set their own prices for the first time. Explore a world full of flavours, learn about the time and work going into your morning cup and experience the novelty of roasting in your own kitchen. The tides are undoubtedly changing. Or, in the words of Thompson: *“So now, less than five years later, you can go up on a steep hill in Las Vegas and look West, and with the right kind of eyes you can almost see the high-water mark—that place where the wave finally broke and rolled back.”* Surf's up! [accordion title="Read more" close="1"]<http://www.slowtravelberlin.com/third-wave-coffee-a-history/> <http://drinks.seriousseats.com/2014/02/what-is-third-wave-new-nano-roaster-trend-multiroaster-coffee-shops-coffee-news.html>

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