

Opinions

COFFEE

A responsible caffeine nation

Coffee aids students' habitual insomnia during finals week, but how do we ensure the coffee we drink is ecologically friendly?

By this time in the semester, students are doing all they can to keep their fingers typing that wretched essay on John Donne, crunching numbers, combining chemicals or presenting power points for the business world. Few are ahead and more are behind after a semester-long bout of procrastination. Nearly all are drinking coffee.

Long days at tables in cafés lend themselves to evenings with softer light and the scattered glow of laptops. Many presume the brown, caffeinated liquid they drink contains one purpose — as long as a jolt of caffeine accompanies the coffee shop's playlist of the day, the origin of the beans seem irrelevant.

But author Mark Pendergrast and writer and film director Irene Angelico would argue otherwise. According to Pendergrast's book, *Uncommon Grounds: The History of Coffee and How It Transformed Our World*, coffee provides a livelihood for more than 21 million individuals around the globe. After oil and its steadily increasing prices, coffee remains the world's second-most traded legal commodity, and caffeine, the most widely taken psychoactive drug. But only in the last few decades have people begun to care from where their coffee comes and about the social struggles that inevitably coincide with growing coffee cherries. With an ambition to educate and incite activism, Angelico began the process of "Black Coffee" in 2002, and her resulting documentary was released in Canada in 2007. It will be shown at the Oak St. Cinema on Saturday, May 3, in conjunction with the Min-



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neapolis-St. Paul International Film Festival.

When we spoke this week, she said, "I started to realize the importance of the social story of coffee and started to become aware of its incredibly rich history. I love a topic where you can use it as a lens to look at issues of social justice. This kind of lens provides a different angle for a new perspective." Indeed, a new perspective is needed when those who grow coffee survive on an average of \$3 a day and rarely even drink the coffee they produce.

Coffee cherries are most often picked and processed by hand. From my own witness of the harvest season in Guatemala, the diligence and stamina of coffee-growing families is remarkable. Small women in native dress can be seen with children swaddled to their front and a sack of coffee — seemingly equivalent to the size of their bodies — on their backs. The annual school break parallels the harvest so children are able to pick coffee alongside their parents.

Pendergrast agreed. "It's transformative when

you spend even a day on a coffee farm. It really gets you to understand the care and labor that goes into buying your cup of coffee. You have a direct connection with it, which you don't otherwise have. You understand that it is a product. It grows on a tree. It is a berry. More people need to have that experience outside the coffee industry."

It is this kind of ecotourism for which Pendergrast is an advocate. His new project, *Harvest for Humanity*, proposes sister relationships between coffee roasters and individual farms. The idea is for the roasters to sponsor coffee tours for their customers and to literally bring them to the origin of the coffee they drink. In turn, the roaster can build a business correspondence with an individual farmer, and associate that particular farm with his product.

But for those not able to see the places in which coffee grows, "Black Coffee" is certainly a beginning. It encourages the viewer to ask about his or her coffee, especially when such an industry is driven by sales.

According to Angelico, where farmers are suffering the most is where the big companies, like Folgers, Maxwell House and Nestlé, are making record profits. "So the message of the film is about finding the win, win, win situation," Angelico said. The smaller companies like Starbucks and Minnesota's Caribou Coffee and Peace Coffee are making more positive strides toward sustainable practices. It is also in this Specialty Coffee industry that consumers find the best coffee to drink. "It's hard to get consumers to buy coffee out of the goodness of their hearts, as good as their hearts may be. Consumers are looking for a quality cup of coffee, but it is also necessary to find a coffee that is good for the farmer and good for the environment. To me, when all three are present, you have the perfect cup."

So we like to drink coffee. It aids students' habitual insomnia during finals week, and has been around for centuries. However, before we gallivant around the globe in search of our own perfect cup, how do we ensure the coffee we drink during finals week and thereafter is both ecologically and economically friendly?

Angelico believes this is where our responsibility as a consumer is involved, and it begins with a simple question. "Ask the company where they're getting their coffee from," she said. "Their bottom line is to make money, and if the consumer is concerned and demanding changes, then it does have an impact." This kind of activism is simple, and can make a big difference. Though we may not have the opportunity to know the farmer, there is little reason to remain ignorant about the origin of our coffee. Mark Pendergrast spoke of certified coffee that guarantees positive reinforcement for the financial survival of coffee farmers. "Fair Trade Coffee, Rainforest Alliance, and Organic are a few," he said. "These coffees are grown on farms that must be certified by organizations like TransFair USA in order to label their product in such a manner." Though they are a small fraction of the coffee market; they create large opportunities for their producers.

But a few certifications do not rectify the struggle that continues for farms. We should continue to educate ourselves, and "Black Coffee" is one way to begin. After the showing on Saturday at 8:00, a panel, including both Angelico, Pendergrast and TransFair USA CEO and President Paul Rice, will discuss the film and speak with the audience. After all, we're all pining for the ingredients of a perfect cup.

Kelsey Kudak welcomes comments at kkudak@mndaily.com.