

KELSEY
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AUTHOR OF
WHERE AM I WEARING?

WHERE AM I EATING?



PRODUCT OF
CHINA

PRODUCT OF
COLOMBIA

PRODUCT OF
COSTA RICA

PRODUCT OF
**IVORY
COAST**

PRODUCT OF
NICARAGUA



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WHERE AM I EATING?



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V V A L L A

Cover image: Brian MacDonald
www.WonderkindStudios.com

Cover design: Rule29 Creative www.Rule29.com

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Published by John Wiley & Sons, Inc., Hoboken, New Jersey.

Published simultaneously in Canada

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data:

Timmerman, Kelsey, 1979-

Where am I eating? an adventure through the global food economy / Kelsey Timmerman.

pages cm

Includes index.

ISBN 978-1-118-35115-4 (hardback); ISBN 978-1-118-63986-3 (ebk); ISBN 978-1-118-63982-5 (ebk); ISBN 978-1-118-63979-5 (ebk)

1.Food industry and trade--United States. 2.Food industry and trade--

International cooperation. 3.Globalization. I.Title.

HD9005.T56 2013

338.1'9--dc23

2012050969

To Harper and Griffin

Part I

Coffee: Product of Colombia

Chapter 1

The Starbucks Experience

On most mornings, I drink Starbucks Colombian roast. I grind the beans and brew them in the French press my wife Annie bought me for Christmas.

I'm easily distracted and dangerously curious. One minute I was working, sipping on a fresh cup of coffee, and the next I was trying to figure out where exactly in Colombia my coffee came from. I found my way over to the Starbucks website looking for answers. Here's how Starbucks markets its Colombian roast.

How far do we go for a better cup of Colombian coffee?

Six thousand feet—straight up. Sounds extreme, we know. But high atop the majestic Andes, in a rugged landscape of simmering volcanoes, is where the finest coffee beans in Colombia like to grow. And just as there are no shortcuts through the dirt paths that crisscross the sheer slopes, we take none when it comes to nurturing these treasured cherries to gourmet perfection.

This Colombian marvel erupts on the palate with a juicy feel and robust flavors, a testament to the hearty riches of volcanic soils. Its remarkable finish, dry with hints of walnut, lifts this superior coffee into a class of its own. One sip and you'll agree it's worth every step of the climb.

How could I not feel all worldly, hardy, and refined after drinking such a sophisticated cup of coffee provided to me by such a dedicated company?

Not only did I want to *drink* this coffee after reading that narrative, I wanted to *visit* this magnificent land of sheer slopes and treasured cherries myself. I wanted to meet the people who grow my coffee. So I called Starbucks' press contacts and customer service to see if they could point me in the right direction. I left multiple voice mails. I e-mailed them repeatedly. Finally a customer service agent e-mailed me a response:

Hello Kelsey,

Thank you for contacting Starbucks.

We appreciate your interest in Starbucks.

Unfortunately, the information you are requesting is proprietary information, which we are unable to divulge. We're unable [to] provide information about the company beyond what we make publicly available.

I apologize for any inconvenience this may cause.

Thanks again for writing us. If you ever have any questions or concerns in the future, please don't hesitate to get in touch.

Sincerely,

[A customer service agent who will remain unnamed.]

Proprietary information? Huh, that's funny. I thought farmers were *people*.

My Grandpa Timmerman farmed until he was 82. When he was a kid, my dad rose before the sun, milked cows, tended the gang of free-range turkeys, and then went off to school. Grandpa and Dad delivered, weaned, fed, and killed hogs, chickens, and cows. They grew corn and beans. They worked the land. Their lives revolved around food.

The author's grandfather, Lee Timmerman, on the farm.



Merely one generation later, there's me—a grown man who can't make Kraft Macaroni & Cheese. I can never get it straight; do you add the noodles before or after the water boils? And when does the packet of whatever that stuff pretending to be cheese come into play?

When I attempt to make mac and cheese, my three-year-old daughter, Harper, stares as I fumble at the stove, squinting at the tiny directions on the side of the box. I can almost read her mind: “We are totally screwed if something happens to Mom.”

Food is so inconvenient. You look in the fridge and in the pantry to see what you need, you go to the store, you put the food in the cart, you get the food out of the cart to be scanned, you put the food back in the cart, then it's in the trunk, out of the trunk, in the house, in the pantry or fridge, back out of the pantry or fridge, time to cook (or, in my case, microwave), eat, wash dishes, rinse, and repeat. The

eating part is okay, especially if someone else is doing the cooking, but other than that, what's fun about food?

If there were a pill to take instead of eating, I would wash it down with a chocolate milkshake.

Lately, however, I've become obsessed with food. Not so much with eating it, but with the labels that appear on it. I've always had a thing with labels, I guess. In 2007, I followed the labels of my favorite items of clothing to their country of origin and hung out with the workers who made them in Honduras, Bangladesh, Cambodia, and China. I wrote about the experience in my book, *Where Am I Wearing?* At about the same time that this book hit the shelves, the U.S. Department of Agriculture's Country of Origin Labeling (COOL) law came out.

From the USDA's COOL site:

*Country of Origin Labeling is a labeling law that requires food retailers to notify their customers with information regarding the source of certain foods.*¹

Suddenly, the apple juice that I gave my daughter wasn't just apple juice; it was *Product of China* apple juice as were the canned mushrooms I added to my frozen pizza (my idea of gourmet cooking). The bananas were Costa Rican. The blueberries were Chilean. Our freezer had fish from Vietnam and shrimp from Thailand. Our fridge was a United Nations of calories and becoming every bit as global as our wardrobes.

I wrongly assumed that this big ol' country of mine—thanks to the tropical waters of Florida and Hawaii, glaciers in Alaska, and everything else in the middle—allowed us citizens to feed ourselves. I supposed that salt-of-the-earth guys like my grandpa and my dad worked the land, and bawdy sailors like the ones on the Discovery Channel's *Deadliest Catch* trolled our coastal waters for seafood. I naively assumed apple juice was from Washington state,

and shrimp came from the shrimp boats that I saw in Key West, where I had worked as a dive instructor years before.

I was wrong.

The amount of food we import to the United States has doubled in the past 10 years.² Eighty-six percent of seafood,³ 50 percent of fresh fruit, and 20 percent of the vegetables we Americans eat come from another country.⁴ In total, we import 319 different types of fruit products from 121 different countries.⁵

Authors like Eric Schlosser (*Fast Food Nation*), Bill McKibben (*Deep Economy*), and Michael Pollan (*The Omnivore's Dilemma*) have educated us about how industrial our nationwide food chain has become. Thanks to their research, we know that the average food item travels 1,300 miles from the field to our plate. Works like these and films like *Food, Inc.*, *Supersize Me*, and *King Corn* have launched the grass-fed, local, and organic movements.

“While total U.S. food sales grew by less than 1 percent in 2010, the organic food industry grew by 7.7 percent,” bragged Christine Bushway, CEO and executive director of the Organic Trade Association, in an April 21, 2011, press release. “Consumers continue to vote with their dollars in favor of the organic choice. These results illustrate the positive contribution organic agriculture and trade make to our economy, and particularly to rural livelihoods.”⁶

But there's one trend growing faster than the organic food movement: the global food movement.

During the same period cited earlier, U.S. agriculture imports grew 8 percent to \$79 billion.⁷ Even organic agriculture isn't just about our economy as many may assume; 40 percent of growers and handlers that have earned the USDA certified organic standards are located outside of the United States.

The Omnivore's Dilemma author Michael Pollan traveled the country trying to answer one simple question: What should we have for dinner?

I'm traveling the world asking a different question: Where am I eating?

* * *

“Mas grande?” I ask.

“No.” The barista behind the counter shakes her head, which is topped with a maroon hat that matches her maroon apron. She is holding the biggest cup of coffee they serve at the Juan Valdez Café in Bogota, Colombia—a cup that looks like it would barely hold a double shot of espresso. It's not even close to the size of a short coffee at Starbucks, which only holds eight ounces. And who drinks only eight ounces of coffee these days?

The Juan Valdez Café, Bogota, Colombia.



It begins to sink in that the largest cup of coffee I could get here is smaller than the smallest cup at my local Starbucks in Muncie, Indiana. In order to meet my typical morning intake of coffee, I would have to order an entire tray.

What a cliché: An American wants a food item to be bigger. The barista tells me how much it costs, and I reach into my pocket. Maybe it's because I haven't had a gallon of my much-needed morning coffee yet, or maybe it's because this is my first day in Colombia and I haven't mastered the currency, but I just stare at the pesos in my hand like a child. Fortunately, the man behind me in line is kind enough to help me count out what I owe.

If you change maroon to green and the larges to smalls, this could almost be a Starbucks. Everything seems measured and considered and focus-grouped. People at Starbucks don't talk about design but about “environmental

psychology.” They don't talk about simply serving coffee to their customers but rather about shaping the “Starbucks experience.” The front counter isn't a counter; it's a “theater.” Juan Valdez cafés have taken note.⁸

The line of customers winds past puffy pastries and bags of beans. There are travel mugs and sweatshirts and hats available for purchase. It's as if you were visiting an amusement park and needed to memorialize the fun you had here by buying an overpriced T-shirt and becoming a walking billboard.

Etched, emblazoned, and stitched on every marble, plastic, cloth, and wood surface is a man and his donkey. Juan Valdez stands proudly alongside his mule, Conchita, before two rising peaks in the distance. This logo is one that's familiar to most people in the United States; in fact, a 2000 logo study determined that the Juan Valdez logo was recognized by 85 percent of Americans, making it more recognizable than Nike's swoosh at 84 percent.⁹ In 2003, Juan Valdez and Conchita appeared alongside Jim Carrey in the film *Bruce Almighty*. The Colombia Coffee Growers Federation—represented by the Juan Valdez logo—paid \$1.5 million for 23 seconds of fame on the silver screen.¹⁰ Carrey's character Bruce—who has taken over for God while he's away on vacation—decided to “manifest” his morning coffee. Suddenly Juan appeared at his window and filled Bruce's cup. “Ahh...now that's fresh mountain-grown coffee from the hills of Colombia,” Bruce sighed.

You probably don't recognize the author, but you probably *do* recognize Juan Valdez and his mule.



But without Starbucks' help—and without Bruce's deific ability to manifest coffee farmers with a single thought—how was I going to find the farmers who produced my Starbucks coffee? Colombia is nearly twice the size of Texas, and since a fair amount of the country sits above an altitude of 6,000 feet, it truly *can* be described as “atop the majestic Andes Mountains in a rugged landscape of simmering volcanoes.”

When I was in Costa Rica two months earlier working as a banana farmer (Part III), I met a student at EARTH University

who came from Colombia's Nariño district, a region famous for its coffee. After some searching, I found a Starbucks-produced report on its Coffee and Farmer Equity (C.A.F.E.) Practices program in Nariño. C.A.F.E. Practices is what Starbucks points to when customers ask why it doesn't buy more fair trade coffee. In 2010, 8 percent of Starbucks coffee was Fair Trade Certified.¹¹ A fair trade certification is granted by one of several third-party certifiers, such as Fair Trade USA, the Fairtrade Foundation, or Fair Trade International based on several principles: a set minimum price, a fair trade premium that goes directly back to the producers, supply chain transparency, and specific environmental and social standards. C.A.F.E. Practices is Starbucks' own set of environmental and social standards. The company launched its C.A.F.E. Practices program in 2003 and purchased 86 percent¹² of its coffee through certified farms in 2010.

About one cent of a fancy mocha at Starbucks makes its way back to the coffee farmers in Colombia. A *penny*. That's it. The creation of the Juan Valdez cafes is the Federation's attempt to cut out a few of the middlemen and get more money back to the growers. Colombian growers earn about four cents for each cup of Juan Valdez sold.¹³

The barista handed me my not-so-grande steaming cup of Juan Valdez. Hundreds of filtered photos of coffee growers and their farms decorate the wall behind the counter. They wear wide-brimmed hats and work on steep, emerald hillsides. Ninety-six percent of farmers own less than 13 acres.¹⁴

I take a seat in a wicker chair at a table beneath a heater and set my bag on the ground. Before I even take a sip, a vigilant coffee attendant—Starbucks doesn't have these—tells me to take my bag off the ground. Apparently this is counter to the image that they want to convey.

White sails stretching overhead across steel beams, like a café at a museum of modern art, aren't able to keep out the mist that has rolled over the mountains and drops down onto Bogota.

I stare deep into my coffee. Marketing copy, certifications, and images of farmers swirl through my head. But where does that marketing copy and the theater end and reality begin?

In a way, this adventure is a prequel to the journey I took while researching and writing *Where Am I Wearing?* Not a prequel in terms of my own life but in terms of the lives of the garment workers I met. The growing cities of Guangzhou (China), Dhaka (Bangladesh), Phnom Penh (Cambodia), and San Pedro Sula (Honduras) are swelling with new arrivals from the countryside. Forty million farmers a year move from the country to the city.¹⁵ Most of the garment workers I met had previously worked in the fields of their home villages or sent money home to their families who still worked in the fields.

Yesterday's farmers are today's factory workers. It's a shift that our own nation underwent, too, as evidenced by my own family history. When my grandpa was born during World War I, 30 percent of Americans were farmers. Today, less than 1 percent of U.S. citizens farm. And as our food economy goes global, we're even less in touch with our food.

The worst place I've ever been in my entire life is the Phnom Penh city dump in Cambodia. That place is hell on earth. All day long dump residents dive into piles of burning trash that produce clouds of toxic smoke, looking for something of value. They earn \$1 per day doing this, and most of them were farmers before. They heard about this opportunity to work at the dump. If the worst place I've ever been in my life—my hell on earth—was somebody else's

opportunity what, then, must life have been like on the farm?

There are 1 billion farmers on earth. Sixty percent of them live in poverty. More than two-thirds of the population is composed of rural farmers in Asia and Africa, but that is changing. It's estimated that by 2050, 70 percent of the world's population will live in the city.^{[16](#)}

Today, 1.5 billion people eat so much food that it causes them to have health problems. They are *ovemourished*. Yet, we have 1 billion people who are starving. They are malnourished.^{[17](#)} We are moving to a world with more people and fewer farmers.

I have a lot of questions.

Why, how, and by whom is dinner being outsourced? What does this mean for farmers in my hometown in Indiana—and farmers around the world?

Is the increasing global nature of our food economy part of the problem or the solution? Do we need *more* farmers or fewer?

How can we sustainably feed our growing population?

Less than 2.3 percent of imported food is inspected.^{[18](#)} What does this mean for our national food security?

And, how can we best impact the lives of the world's poorest producers?

Now a generation removed from my farming roots, I'm traveling back along the global food chain all the way to the people who catch, pick, grow, and harvest a few of the imported foods we eat to answer these questions.

Not only am I setting out to meet the workers who nurture, harvest, and hunt our food, I am working alongside them. I'm harvesting bananas in Costa Rica, lugging sacks of cocoa beans in the Ivory Coast, picking coffee beans in Colombia, and hauling trailers of tomatoes in Indiana. I'm exploring the global food economy through my own, out-of-

touch consumer eyes and from theirs as boots-on-the-ground producers.

Growing our food gives hope and opportunity—and the lack of both—to the world's poorest producers. The issues are complex, but so are the lives of the farmers, migrants, pickers, and divers. We eat food that maims, kills, and enslaves other human beings. This is an ethical dilemma. In the United States, 325,000 Americans are hospitalized each year because of something they ate—and 5,000 are killed.¹⁹ The globalization of our diets is an issue of global health and of national security.

There is simply no way around it. These men's, women's, and children's (yes, children) livelihoods and our lives are inextricably linked.

As Martin Luther King Jr. said, “before you finish eating breakfast in the morning, you've depended on more than half the world.”²⁰

Forty years later, his words were never truer.

* * *

Though most Americans have seen the Juan Valdez logo, many of them have never heard of the Federation. Its headquarters is housed in a 12-story brick building with heavily tinted windows and a metal detector a few steps inside the front door. I sat across a boardroom table from a marketing coordinator named Marcela. Behind me hung a poster of a smiling boy looking back over his shoulder as he wrote on a chalkboard. The poster read, “His mind is filled by Colombian Coffee,” in bold print and then in finer print:

Felipe depends on Colombian Coffee daily, but not because he drinks it. The more than 500,000 independent coffee growers of Colombia together

manage the National Coffee Fund, which has built over 6,000 schools.

Despite living in mountainous terrain, 360,000 children now manage to attend local primary schools. It takes an educated drinker to appreciate the Richest Coffee in the World® and an educated future grower to produce it.

Marcela told me the Federation is one of the largest rural nongovernmental organizations in the world, supported by a six-cent fee on all exported coffee. In turn, the Federation—run by elected regional and national leaders—supports farmers in several ways. It conducts research on how to combat a changing climate and an increasing number of pests and pestilence. Field technicians based in coffee communities educate local growers on best practices and sustainability. Through Juan Valdez—as well as other branding and marketing initiatives—the Federation works to make Colombian coffee worth a premium price above that of the “C” price (the base price used for coffee purchasing) set by the New York Board of Trade (where coffee futures are bought and sold). The Federation offers a “purchase guarantee,” which means it will buy any farmers' coffee at a published price at any given time.

I showed Marcela my coffee bag of destiny—an empty bag of Starbucks Colombian roast—and told her about my plans to visit the Nariño district.

“Most of the coffee in Nariño goes to Starbucks or Nespresso... Starbucks has the C.A.F.E. program. You'll see it in Nariño.”

* * *

This is paradise.

Juice drips from my elbows. My face is covered in fruity flesh. Acid and sugar burn my tongue and cheeks. Large black ants have gathered at my feet, waiting for a juicy squirt of guava or a discarded banana peel.

We came to look at Julio's field of coffee on the edge of El Tablón de Gómez in Nariño, but now we're just gorging ourselves on his fruit. The sticky feeding frenzy started innocently enough. Julio plucked a ripe coffee cherry—just like he has done for the past 70 years—from a coffee tree and held it out in his hand.

Julio (left) standing in front of some young coffee plants with Ladardo (right) and one of Ladardo's cousins (middle).



That's right—a coffee tree. I'm embarrassed to admit that until recently I had no idea these existed. Since coffee comes in beans, I just assumed that they grew on a low-lying plant like soy beans encased in bean pods. Instead, coffee grows in cherries on head-high trees that stand

together with droopy, waxy leaves, like dolled up parishioners bowing their heads.

The red cherries are tucked close to the branches and intermixed with various shades of yellow, green, and red. Not all of the cherries are ready to be picked at the same time. There are two harvest seasons here in the Nariño district. During each season, workers must visit each plant several times to get the cherries as they ripen.

I pluck the cherry from the worn valleys of Julio's hand. I bite into the thin layer of fruit that hints of sweetness, and I spit out the white bean—actually a seed—into my hand and stare at it.

This is what all the fuss is about. The pit of the fruit that originated in Ethiopia is the world's fourth most valuable agricultural commodity.^{[21](#)}

We eat bananas and guava. Julio hands me a tiny green fruit and I'm not sure how to eat it. Is it a bite and chew kind of thing, or a peel and bite? Fruit is mysterious like that. He instructs me to bite into it, and boy, is it sour—enough to make my face pucker and my eyes twitch.

Ladardo, the father of the student I met at EARTH University in Costa Rica, hands his cousin Alfredo a long pole. Alfredo then reaches high up into a tree of oranges and twists the pole. Three oranges the size of large grapefruit thud to the ground. I begin to peel them like I do for my daughter for breakfast.

“No,” Ladardo corrects me. And then he rips his orange in half and makes short work of it.

I try his technique and juice squirts me in the eye.

They are the best oranges I've ever eaten. I can't help but moan while I slurp and smack my lips on them. If you were standing behind a nearby bush out of sight but within earshot, you'd wonder what illicit act of passion was taking place.

Adjectives alone can't describe this shaded paradise in the mountains. The place is so damn beautiful all the descriptions I can think of are paired with four-letter adverbs. I try not to share this with others, though, and simply curse to myself while cramming my mouth full of fruit.

We leave the fields and return to Julio's home. Coffee beans that grind and pop as we step across them cover the concrete pad in front of Julio's long brick house. The concrete business in Nariño must be a good one, since it appears that the number of basketball courts far exceeds the local love for basketball. The concrete serves a single purpose: to dry coffee during the harvest. Courts and pads are lined with plastic and then covered with coffee. Workers spend the mornings picking the coffee, and the afternoons raking hills of coffee into a single layer of beans.

A man and his mule on a street lined with drying coffee.



Therese, Julio's wife, hands us each a plate of bread and a cup of panela juice made from dried sugar cane. This is our third breakfast, and we didn't pay for any of them. We ate at Ladardo's where I'm staying, and then as we walked through town, his cousin, a restaurant owner, insisted that we eat two empanadas apiece—on the house. Ladardo said that they were cousins, but he calls everyone his cousin. I'm not sure how anyone makes it in business here. Hospitality, friendship, and reciprocity seem to be the most used currency. By the end of the day visiting farms and restaurants, we'll have bellies full of two cups of coffee, two cups of panela, two empanadas, a bottle of soda, and a truck bed full of produce—everything from yucca to mangoes, bananas and sugarcane.

Therese's face is as worn as an old leather boot and her smile as warm as a sun-soaked beach. Her eyes are shaded

by a Spiderman bucket hat and her dress appears homemade. Her apron looks like a black belt in grandmaring.

“Do you ever have to go to the grocery?” I ask.

“Just for rice and sugar,” she responds.

Paradise.

“I bought this at my grocery in the United States,” I say, holding out my empty Starbucks bag. “Have you heard of Starbucks?”

Therese and Julio both shake their heads “no.”

I've been in town for two days, have asked this question countless times—and no one has heard of Starbucks. When I ask, I point to the Starbucks siren on the bag, then they usually take the bag, bury their nose inside it, inhale deeply, and then on the exhale ask me how much it cost.

“Ten dollars,” I tell them.

They do the conversion in their heads and then their eyes widen just enough that I can register the surprise on their faces, but not so much as to be impolite or to imply that I'm an idiot for paying such a price for a 12-ounce bag of beans. They get less than a dollar for selling that amount of beans.²²

Starbucks' Colombia Field Report Survey (September 2011) states that there were 22,000 farms in Nariño actively participating in the C.A.F.E. Practices program.²³ Yet I couldn't find a single one.

We shook Julio's hand and kissed Therese's cheeks before walking back to town. That's when I saw Starbucks' logo for the first time in El Tablón.

The faded siren was atop a white plaque hanging high on the side of a home. I hadn't been so excited to see Starbucks' logo since this past fall when my local shop reintroduced its pumpkin spice latte. “C.A.F.E. Practices” was written below the logo along with an identification number

and “Empresas de Nariño,” the name of the local export company with which Starbucks works.

I pose for a picture with my coffee bag of destiny and the sign. An old woman with butterfly earrings walks out and asks us what's going on, as one is apt to do when a stranger poses for a picture with your home.

The author's coffee bag of destiny next to a Starbucks sign on a home in El Tablón.



I show her my bag of coffee, point to the sign, and explain my mission.

“I have no idea what that sign is,” she says, beginning a rant about how no one helps her. “I've never heard of Starbucks.”

“Who put up the sign?” I ask.