

Columnists

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When making your coffee choice, just make sure that it's 'green'

The most important coffee choice we can make is to reduce the environmental impact of Seattle's favorite legal drug.

By Tom Watson

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Our modern society inundates us with choices, and coffee is no exception. At home, our coffee-brewing options include a trendy single-serving pod system, drip coffee maker, espresso machine, French press or even an old-school percolator. Away from home, the more than 1,600 coffee shops in the Seattle area offer an eye-opening selection of caffeinated concoctions.

All these alternatives may delight or confuse us, but the most important coffee choice we can make is to reduce the environmental impact of Seattle's favorite legal drug.

Q: Aren't the social impacts of coffee production on growers around the world at least as important as the environmental ramifications?

A: Definitely, and they go hand in hand. Two progressive social trends in coffee procurement, "fair trade" and "direct trade," often emphasize green practices such as reduced use of pesticides.

Fair trade involves certification and standards programs to support and protect farmer co-ops, while direct trade usually means coffee buyers deal directly with the farmers in faraway countries. Both movements aim to provide farmers a fair wage, primarily by reducing the role and profits of the middleman.

Q: How do I find fair-trade or direct-trade coffee?

A: In the Northwest, many coffee shops and retailers offer at least one type of fair-trade or direct-sourced coffee, both of which may cost more than other coffee. Look for the "Fair Trade Certified" logo or other information about the coffee's source on a label or website.

Q: What else should I consider when purchasing coffee?

A: Look for major environmental certifications for coffee such as Smithsonian Bird Friendly, Rainforest Alliance and USDA (U.S. Department of Agriculture-certified) Organic. Along with Fair Trade Certified, these programs require participants to meet detailed criteria.

Words such as "shade-grown" on labels may indicate the coffee grower used greener practices, but those terms mean more when they are backed up with a certification.

Q: Speaking of coffee shops, what about all the cups they use?

A: Americans go through billions of take-away coffee cups every year, and they especially pile up

in a coffee-crazed region such as ours. Since most area recycling programs now have end-markets for used paper cups, many local residents can now recycle paper coffee cups at home and at some coffee shops.

Although a few coffee shops have experimented with compostable coffee cups, most of those efforts have not panned out locally, and cups should not be placed in residential food-waste and yard-waste carts for composting.

The greenest option, of course, would be for coffee-shop customers to bring their own mugs or to use durable cups when staying in the shop. Until this month, Starbucks had this ambitious goal for reducing cup usage: "Serve 25 percent of beverages made in our stores in reusable cups by 2015." Apparently realizing how difficult that would be to achieve, Starbucks has revised that goal to, "Serve 5 percent of beverages made in our stores in personal tumblers by 2015." Starbucks and many other coffee shops already offer discounts when people bring in their own mugs, but only a tiny percentage of customers (1.9 percent at Starbucks) remember.

Q: What's the greenest way to make coffee at home?

A: No one method stands out, but you can take steps to reduce waste no matter how you make coffee. For example, always put your coffee grounds in with food scraps and yard waste for composting.

The new single-serving home coffee makers have gotten roasted by some environmentalists because of all the packaging waste from their coffee pods, which are typically made of multiple materials and are not recyclable. Green Mountain Coffee Roasters, the Vermont-based manufacturer of the top-selling Keurig single-serving coffee makers, is working to resolve this problem with its new models. On the plus side, single-serving coffee may result in less leftover brewed coffee.

Our coffee choices today may be robust, but our options for greening our coffee consumption are just as hot. With a little forethought, the two Northwest passions of coffee and sustainability can come together in that steaming mug in your hand.

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