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Introduction

TO PREPARE MATE, take the cured gourd or the cattle horn *guampa* or whatever else you wish to use as a cup and fill it two-thirds with dried yerba leaves. Cover the opening tightly with your hand, turn the receptacle upside down, and shake it gently to break up any clumps in the powder and to make sure that the leaves and small twigs are evenly distributed. Then take the long drinking straw *bombilla* and jam its filtered end all the way to the bottom of the yerba, keeping it closer to one side of the cup. This will give you a lot of surface area on the loose-leaf mate over which to pour the water. If you're drinking mate that is hot, pour heated but not boiling water onto the yerba in the gourd, filling it up so that the liquid lifts the leaves ever so gently and air bubbles start to form on the surface. If you're using a cow horn to drink ice-cold *tereré*, the water you'll use is chilled and may already be infused with fresh *yuyos*, herbs for traditional remedies.

Wait a few seconds until the loose-leaf yerba has absorbed the water and then pour a bit more water into the cup. Sip the *bombilla* to drain the infused water from the gourd or the *guampa* until you can hear that you are sucking air. That sound is where the word “tereré” comes from—an onomatopoeic rendition in Guaraní for the sounds of sucking up the drink in a *bombilla*. It's customary for the *cebador*, the person preparing mate for a group, to take the first sip to remove the initial bitterness from the drink before pouring water into the cup again and passing it to someone

else. Everyone in a round of mate or tereré takes a turn fully emptying the cup with the same bombilla, passing it back to the cebador, who refills it and gives it to the next person.

Yerba mate is the world's third-most popular naturally caffeinated drink, behind tea and coffee. It inspired the world's first written tango lyrics. It was an economic engine for early Jesuit and German nationalist utopias, albeit separated by centuries. The secret of its cultivation was found, hopelessly lost, and then rediscovered. Jealousy over its wealth lay at the heart of one of modern history's most devastating wars and fueled great Catholic conspiracies. On its more global circuit, mate is currently starring in puppet shows put on by Syrian dissidents. And the Argentine national team proudly hoisted their mates for all to see en route to their 2022 FIFA World Cup victory.

Made from the dried leaves and tender shoots of *Ilex paraguayensis*, mate comes from an evergreen holly tree that grows in the subtropical Atlantic Forest in the heart of South America. In Argentina, southern Brazil, Paraguay, and Uruguay, mate is the stimulating brew of choice, giving its drinkers the jolt of liquid effervescence others might get from Colombian coffee or English breakfast tea. Consumed from precolonial times in South America by Indigenous communities, under Spanish colonial rule mate expanded far beyond its natural growing range to become the leading beverage, after wine and water, in the Viceroyalty of Peru as it was wildly popular in Argentina, Bolivia, Chile, Ecuador, Paraguay, Peru, and Uruguay.¹ Today, mate culture has traveled far enough to make its mark in the Levant—bombilla included—as Lebanon and Syria have become the world's leading importers of mate outside South America. And the drink has been given new life in the North Atlantic world as a blended energy drink and prepackaged in single-serving tea bags. No bombilla required.

But if mate is so delightful, as its popularity attests, why don't North Americans generally drink the world's major stimulant beverage commodity that comes from the Americas? For that matter, why do we drink coffee in North America, especially since the

United States has a famous tea moment in its national founding? The answer isn't who got there first. All three exotic beverages came into European orbit at about the same time and it took centuries for North Atlantic caffeine preferences to solidify. The Spanish were introduced to mate and chocolate in the 1500s, a hundred years before coffee or tea became known in western Europe. So, technically, mate got there first. Coffee moved westward from the Ottoman Empire in the 1600s via the institution of the coffeehouse, then (as now) a space for public sociality, debating new ideas, and even transacting business.² Fittingly, England's first coffeehouse was opened in Oxford in the early 1650s, setting a precedent for university town cafés the world over. Black tea arrived shortly thereafter as a novelty item in a London coffeehouse; it made such an impression on English writer Samuel Pepys that he recorded the first time he drank it in his diary on September 25, 1660.³

Consumables like yerba mate are popular subjects of books because of what they teach us about ourselves and the world we live in. Over the last few years salt, cod, sugar, and the hamburger have all received celebrity treatment.⁴ Red wine, coffee, tea, and (especially) chocolate are perennial favorites. It's high time for yerba mate to take center stage. What can we learn from a biography of the South American stimulant? The first thing to know is that mate has multiple personas: commodity, recipe, drink, highly stylized ritual, and plant. These different facets help us learn about the economics of drugs (legal and otherwise), the botany of psychoactive subjects, the symbolic meanings of consumption, the political histories of South America, and more.

Mate draws people together across time and space, from the chilly mornings on the Argentine countryside and the torrid afternoons in the Paraguayan Chaco to the souk of Damascus, the nightclubs of Berlin, the cafés of Kraków, and the rugged Pacific Northwest coastline. Cuisine is fun to talk about because it opens up to us both the symbolic and the material dimensions of human life; the food (and drink) we consume has an inordinate ability to

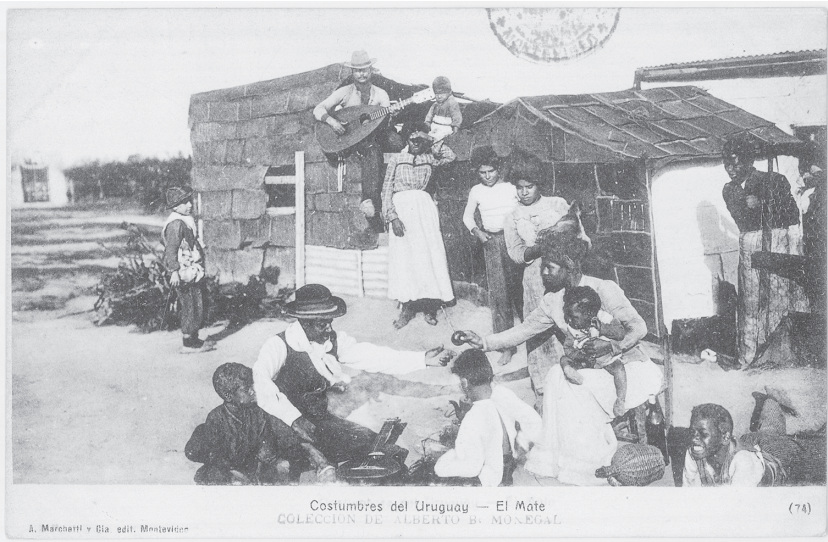


FIGURE 1.2. Customs of Uruguay: mate. A. Marchetti, 1900. Image credit: Biblioteca Nacional, Uruguay.

embody paradox. At one moment food is mundane, the daily bread we eat to live; at the next, it is extraordinary, a religiously inflected feast or a great wedding banquet. A single meal can juxtapose the large, impersonal economic forces that produce and move what ends up on our dinner plates and the intimate personal experience of taste and the evocative memory of grandma's cooking.⁵ At the very same moment, the act of eating and drinking unites people and distinguishes them as separate from others. Food is simultaneously, indivisibly, both symbolic and pragmatically material.⁶

This book follows the cultures of yerba mate, from its Indigenous and colonial beginnings to its current incarnation as a global caffeinated commodity, tracing the varied political-economic structures that brought the drink to market as well as mate's changing symbolic significance—its meanings. Social meanings, rather than just some unmoored rational calculus, shape consumer

choices within markets. But consumables also show us how larger structures (corporations, colonialism, and capitalism, to name a few) affect the conduct of our daily lives. This is one of the main tenets of economic anthropology and why ethnographic methodologies of observing how people do their daily shopping or click through websites have so much to teach us. One of the lessons from coffee, tea, and mate is that the uptake of stimulating beverages has to do with both market structures and social meanings.

To uncover who drinks mate and why, it's helpful to think in terms of "commodity chains," the differing dynamics of production and consumption, and the commerce that links the two.⁷ When we attend to the production side of the commodity chain, we ask questions about laborers and labor processes, materials, and the environment, as well as the costs of production. Consumption invites us to think about who uses the product and to what end, the rituals and moral economy built around the experience. To wit, the political-economic history of coffee and tea in the West features (1) exotic ceremony (orientalized tea) or convivial sociality (coffeehouses): consumption; (2) the creation of imperial or private transnational corporations for trade: commerce; and (3) the structuring of landscapes for extractive monocrops (coffee enclaves and tea plantations) that move from periphery to core: production. Scholars like to study the commodity chains of major consumables because they reveal the emergence of nothing less than global capitalism.

But mate is not just any product. It has powerful psychoactive properties that affect the mind and the body. Not only does it possess the alkaloid caffeine, it also contains significant amounts of theophylline (found in tea) and theobromine (found in chocolate). The interplay between these compounds gives mate a kick distinct from that of coffee or tea, each of which possesses a tad more caffeine per average cup, earning mate a reputation as a less jittery stimulant. But, of course, the potency of these drinks is affected by how you prepare them. Dried tea has more caffeine per gram than ground coffee, which is why we use more coffee to make

a single cup. Not to be outshone because of mate's lower caffeine content, mate drinkers in South America will fill a gourd with a good half cup of dried yerba leaves multiple times a day. The similarity of effects between plant products hailing from different corners of the globe long puzzled observers; it was through the study of psychoactive plants that disciplines like biomedicine, botany, and lab chemistry got their start.⁸

Mate was commodified as it was drawn into European-administered circuits of trade, a process that changed both how it was produced and how its users consumed it. The historical transformations by which goods become exchanged commodities uproot objects from their embedded meanings. A tomato becomes something that we get through money that we acquired by selling our labor, instead of something we struggled to grow and which we triumphantly now pick after waiting for months as the seedling bursts through soil we tended, weeded, and watered. Ready-made mac and cheese is mass produced and frozen, rather than laboriously cooked from a family recipe handed down over generations. Economic philosophers have noted that an economy based on monetary exchange hides the social relations underlying commodities because we can't see the labor and conditions of production that went into the product or service we're purchasing.⁹ This gives us the illusion that what we do when we buy things is exchange money for a commodity when what we're doing is interchanging the labor that we exerted to earn the money for the labor that went into producing the good.

Marx called this phenomenon the "commodity fetish" because the inert commodity takes on almost agentive power, as if it could move on its own, when the real creative force behind it is human ingenuity. To teach college students about the commodity fetish, a well-respected colleague used to ask his (simultaneously horrified and enthralled) students what, if anything, they knew about the toilet paper they used, where or how it was made. Because the production and consumption of commodities are separated, it's practically impossible to know what's involved in how goods are



FIGURE 1.3. Embossed cattle horn *guampas* for cold *tereré*. With permission from Centro Cultural Citibank/Museo del Barro, Asunción, Paraguay. Image credit: author.

made unless we actually go to the site of production. And that's why this book attempts to get beyond the commodity fetish by telling stories of mate production *and* of mate consumption.

At the same time, plants have power over people. In his classic work of Cuban anthropology, *Cuban Counterpoint: Tobacco and Sugar*, Fernando Ortiz explored the relationship between the two dominant plants of the largest island in the Antilles: one native to the New World, the other brought from the Old; one artisanally crafted, the other mass produced. The counterpoint treats sugar and tobacco as historical actors, as agents in their own right with the power to shape human society. This “counterfetishism” reveals the interwoven nature of commodities as their material qualities are inextricably linked to economic structures and symbolic interpretations.¹⁰ New scholarship on plants, from biology to philosophy, also challenges common understandings of plants as inert backdrops to animalistic action. Darwin noted that the radicle (the root tip) of plants acts like a “primitive” animal brain, touching, sensing, and making decisions about where to turn.¹¹

We know now that plants communicate with each other by smell.¹² They release chemicals when injured or eaten so that other plants nearby learn that one of their species is in distress. In short, plants solve problems. The strategies they use to do so—to reproduce, to avoid predators, to find water—may be thought of as “vegetal” or “plant-thinking.”¹³ Similarly, people look to plants to solve ostensibly human problems. While lab chemistry may tell us why coffee makes us alert or cannabis relaxes, the desirability of those chemical reactions resides in a wider milieu, which is why some are deemed morally licit and why that licitness changes over time.

Speaking of chemical reactions, the popularity of certain drugs over others comes from not only the sensations they cause but also the social contexts around those effects. It's no coincidence that drugs accompanied European colonial expansion or that Ad-derall makes the rounds on college campuses for off-script use during final exams. In fact, there's a direct connection between

what drugs do and the kind of economy in which they circulate.¹⁴ And, to be clear, legal substances like caffeine still count as drugs.¹⁵ In the early stages of European colonialism, the chemical and biological properties of psychoactive plants made them instrumental in trade and in securing labor.

Drugs were used to force people into relations of dependency with European trading partners. Pem Davidson Buck's historical work on race, class, and power in Kentucky shows that Native Americans who refused to sell land to British settlers in North America in the seventeenth century were gifted alcohol to induce addiction.¹⁶ But when they attempted to acquire more liquor to quench their thirst, they were met with a new demand. British traders would only accept money for payment rather than bartered goods and the only way to get that money was to sell something that the merchants would buy: in the case of Kentucky, deerskins or land. A hundred years later, the British East India Company ran a similar scheme. They smuggled opium into China in the eighteenth century knowing that it would create addiction. Once that goal was achieved, they demanded that China open their desirable market to British goods in exchange for the drug. The two Opium Wars (1839–42, 1856–60) fought between China and European powers resulted from various Chinese attempts to suppress the opium trade. Both times, Western military forces triumphed and the trade continued.

Stimulants took center stage when colonial priorities changed under a new phase of imperialism and drugs focused on intensifying the amount of labor extracted from workers. As the kind of labor changed from agriculture and mining to industry, there was a move from numbing drugs (alcohol, marijuana, opium) used to deaden the boredom and physical discomfort associated with hard labor to stimulants like coffee and tea, which had the opposite effect of heightening alertness and sobriety.¹⁷ The coffee pot became ubiquitous in offices and factories as companies realized providing it for free boosted worker productivity. Yerba mate, the “green gold” (*oro verde*) of South America, both follows and complicates

this schematization because then as now it was primarily consumed where it was produced. The psychoactive substance's importance changed in its native environs over the course of Iberian imperialism and into the early years of the newly independent nations as the dominant economic logic was shifting from mercantile to free-market capitalism. And now that mate use has finally transcended a South American circuit as a drink associated with the Levant in the Middle East and as a youthful energy drink in the North Atlantic, mate trains our eye to see new connections between markets and the meanings of psychoactive experiences.

But if psychoactive plants like mate were able to mobilize empires, it's because they were able to capture the imaginations and aspirations of millions. The symbolically laden consumption rituals, the intricate accoutrements to serve the drinks, and even the specific recipes for how to prepare them the "right" way show that caffeinated beverages have strong cultural resonances. George Orwell himself penned a widely circulated essay titled "A Nice Cup of Tea" (1946) that still inspires debate today. More recently, Bosnian women migrants living in Chicago in the aftermath of the Balkan conflict follow precise steps to roast, grind, and then brew coffee to create "multisensory encounters" that nostalgically link them to their old, lost homes as they establish new homes half a world away.¹⁸ Mate, too, is a multisensory encounter. From the predawn hours on the streets of Asunción, the sound of herbs being pounded in a wooden mortar can be heard as *yuyeros* (traditional herbalists) meticulously prepare roots, leaves, and stems to be mixed with ice-cold water and yerba mate to make the refreshing *tereré* Paraguayans prefer.

And, surely some of my mate-drinking readers have taken issue with the instructions at the opening of this book, while others agree that it is indeed the right way to *cebar* mate. But the reality for mate, as with all caffeinated beverages, is that the experience of consuming it is highly diverse. Yerba mate is as much a recipe as it is a plant and there are slight, but important, differences in how the leaves are prepared for consumers in the four chief South

American markets for the drink. Mate for the Spanish-speaking markets of Argentina, Paraguay, and Uruguay is usually slowly dried via roasting, a process that imparts a smoky flavor to the drinks. Skilled mate processors will carefully choose specific local woods whose essence complements mate to make the firepit. Brazilian-style mate consumed in Rio Grande do Sul has the bright bold flavor of fresh *I. paraguariensis*, but yerba for River Plate palates is aged (*estacionado*) and mellowed in storehouses: two years for *tereré* in Paraguay; three years for a more tempered flavor (*suave*) for mate in Argentina.

The flavor we think is right, it turns out, is not simply due to personal preference. Pierre Bourdieu's study of French citizens' taste (in food, music, literature, and visual art) demonstrated that something that seems so personal—individual taste—correlates tightly with socioeconomic class status as denoted by the father's occupation and with personal educational attainment.¹⁹ Bourdieu also found that part of the performance of elite identity was to look down on the consumption practices of those from less privileged backgrounds. Elites marked a distinction by preferring abstract art, daring literature, and pure music rather than the "simple" or "obvious" cultural production preferred by the French working classes.

We don't just consume what we like. We learn to like what we consume. This is especially true of bitter drinks like coffee, tea, mate, beer, and wine, which are often described as "acquired" tastes. And so, it's not just the conspicuous consumption of status symbols (a sports car, an immaculate green lawn, a large diamond ring) that has a public dimension. All consumption has social implications and therefore all consumption is semiotic—it communicates meaning through objects, words, and images. We demonstrate belonging and identity through what we wear, what music we listen to, and what food we eat; consequently, fashion, musical styles, and cuisine can be "read" to learn about the raced/gendered/classed communities that use them. If so, negative (or positive) conversations about a certain kind of music or a particular way to



FIGURE I.4. Organic yerba mate, ready to be harvested. Itapúa, Paraguay, 2019. Image credit: author.

wear an article of clothing map onto social hierarchies. Common sayings like “look the part” and “dress for the job you want” indicate that consumption itself may even be aspirational, a way to perform a desired identity. Recipes similarly communicate important social values by making claims about what is authentic and who has authority—think of how sommeliers and gourmands determine what kind of wine or dish is “good.” Through a specifically Uruguayan way of preparing mate, Uruguayans emphasize that they are distinct from Argentines. By drinking mate that has been processed locally, gaúchos from the southern Brazilian state of Rio Grande do Sul show that they are a community different from the rest of coffee-drinking Brazil.

Yet, the social resonance of cultural goods like cuisine and musical compositions can change over time. Like the exotic spices that once traveled on the Silk Road, coffee, tea, and sugar entered Europe first as rarities from the Orient. Although they are common today, these substances imported from afar were luxury items, indexing elite status because of their expense. In *Sweetness and Power*, Sidney Mintz tracks how cane sugar became the world’s top agricultural commodity, a position it comfortably held for centuries. To produce sugar for North Atlantic consumption, European empires seized land and labor in the tropics, unleashing demographic and political dilemmas that reverberate into the present. As mass production drove down the cost and sugar became accessible to the growing industrial working classes, the sweetener no longer signaled a high social rank. Coffee and tea have similar histories where European and North American powers sought control of colonies with the right climate to produce “drug foods” (Mintz’s term) at industrial scales and thus what was once exceptional became ubiquitous in North Atlantic cupboards.

Yerba mate and its cultural meanings migrate alongside people as they, too, move. In mate’s journeys with and between communities, it has animated multiple processes of cultural transition and transformation from the colonial expansion of Spain in the New

World to the plant's globalization as an iconic Levantine beverage in the Middle East and as a healthy lifestyle product in the North Atlantic. Even if the ingredients are basically identical, mate isn't the same thing if it's an energy drink gulped on a quick break while scaling the sheer side of a cliff versus a gourd passed around a circle in the early morning hours before work. The chapters here catalogue those disadjustments and readjustments, the losses and acquisitions, the new cultural creations that have something of the past lives of mate but are nevertheless different. Cuban anthropologist Ortiz prefers to use his term "transculturation" rather than "acculturation" to describe these experiences of cultural change because communities do not merely enter or adopt an already existing, complete culture. Rather, something new is forged in the simultaneous loss and gain.²⁰ New mate cultures have new recipes and rituals or new meanings for old recipes and rituals.

As we follow the stimulant drink from South America on its odysseys around the globe, we encounter worlds built by mate. The drama unfolds in three acts. Part 1 explores the deep origins of yerba mate and its burst onto the Spanish colonial stage by beginning with mate's caffeinated *Ilex* kin in the Americas. In part 2, yerba mate, already entrenched in South American markets for centuries, plays a key role in the political, economic, cultural, and scientific development of newly independent nations as they struggle to find their footing. Finally, part 3 traces yerba mate's recent journeys to the Middle East and to the North Atlantic, experiences that shed light on mate culture transformations in the past and illuminate the globalized present.

Because production and consumption change over time and place, we can use yerba mate to explore the processes of commodification and their countervailing forces to see how accidents of botany intersect with political economic systems and personal taste. The economic imperial logics of the Spanish Empire under mercantile capitalism and the material difficulty in transplanting *I. paraguariensis* have as much to do with the geographical limits of yerba mate as do the strategic marketing plans of coffee and tea

merchants who saw in mate a troubling rival. So, too, did the consumption rituals affect how exotic tropical products got adopted—tea got a boost from orientalist admiration of the ceremony and delicate porcelain accoutrements. There’s even a whole field of study about the “Art of Tea” to describe the aesthetic pleasure of these rituals. But because yerba mate is often taken using the shared bombilla drinking pipe and a rustic communal vessel, a cured gourd or cow horn or even a carved hoof, it violated European notions of hygiene and respectability. Yet there’s a comparable “Art of Mate” of structured ritual with highly intricate designs for the bombilla and exquisite precious-metal plating of mate gourds or tereré horns that incorporate the mining riches of the New World.

Just as some of the best mate grows *bajo sombra* (in the shade of other trees), other psychoactive plants near and far help tell the story of South America’s supreme stimulating infusion, which means we’ll also learn more about the histories of coca, khat, yaupon, coffee, kola nut, black tea, caapi, and more. The wide range of data used here—colonial archival documents, ethnographic observation of organic yerba mate harvesting, nineteenth-century scientific reports, twenty-first-century Arabic social media, interviews with mate producers and consumers in South America, North America, the Middle East, and more—attests to how a simple beverage unlocks the complicated interplay between economic forces and the tastes and choices of individuals. But each chapter has repeated themes: commodification and resistance, mate and migrations, consumption rituals, and the tension between pharmacological effects and social priorities. One common thread binds all the stories in this book: the way mate has served, throughout its history, as a force that brings people together.

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