Indulgence

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The scene is a chic coffee café in urban Seattle. The barista flicks his towel over a spotless wooden counter.

"What would you like?" he asks the woman standing before him. She is wearing a short black leather jacket and jeans.

"A tall mocha, please."

"Will that be with whole, two percent, or skim?"

"Hmmm, you'd better make that skim." The woman glances at her female companion, whose hair is cut in a perfect pageboy. "That won't make it taste too much like water, will it?" Her com-

panion smiles and nods an acknowledgment of her friend's self-control. "I really like skim better than two percent anyway. It tastes better."

"Would you like whipped cream on that?" the barista asks.

"Oh." The woman looks into her billfold as if to find an answer lurking there. "Well, that would taste really good, wouldn't it?"

The barista smiles.

"Sure," the woman says. "I deserve it." She looks at the barista and then looks away. He spritzes on the whipped cream. The woman turns to her friend and says, "We deserve these sinful indulgences, don't we?"

Her friend gives a quick tight smile. "Yes, of course." She turns to the barista. "I'll have a double Americano." She pauses. "And I'll take that last cinnamon roll too. But put the butter on the side, would you?"

I have seen variations of this scene enacted time after time in coffee cafés, where I often sit with my laptop, ostensibly working. I am always intrigued by the obvious contradiction that gets played out again and again in these cafés: the apparent mixture of indulgence and restraint in this particular type of consumption. Most customers order a skimmed-milk drink—and add whipped cream. Or they order a low-fat pastry—with butter or frosting on the side. I do it myself: if I allow myself my favorite apricot and walnut scone, I take 2 percent milk in my coffee. If I skip the scone, I get half-and-half (lots of it, actually).

Why bother with the pretense? I asked myself one day as I sipped my creamy coffee and watched five other people make the same kinds complicated decisions I had just made. Do we think that the skim milk somehow cancels out the whipped cream?

These observations, and occasional conversations with Eric,

one of my favorite baristas, eventually got me curious about the way Americans consume fat in public places. I live in Seattle, and I know that we Seattleites like to imagine ourselves as outdoorsy and healthy. Hiking and skiing and kayaking play a central role in how we identify ourselves as Northwesterners. We spend time, and a lot of money, on the gear-clad appearance of good health. But if we really cared about good health, it seems to me that everyone would skip the mocha or cream and just drink plain black coffee. Or, better yet, green tea. But that was not what I saw happening. Instead, what I saw happening in coffee cafés is that people order fat-free milk and fatty cream in the very same drink. Why?

In asking this question, I immediately encountered all sorts of surprising tensions between indulgence, morality, pleasure, and restraint. This struggle to find balance between all these things is not a purely American dilemma, to be sure. But there does exist a particularly American way of negotiating the line between indulgence and restraint. How and why those negotiations look like they do began to intrigue me.

The Rise of the Coffee Café

According to the Specialty Coffee Association of America, Americans drink more than three million cups of coffee daily. Sixty-six percent of these are drunk away from home. Seattle boasts over 650 coffee cafés, including 318 of that "fast-food" dynamo of coffee cafés, Starbucks. An estimated two hundred thousand espresso shots are served here daily.[1]

Espresso consumption is considered so vital to Seattle public life and its economy that a recent initiative proposed to the

City of Seattle to place a ten-cent "luxury" tax on espresso drinks caused an uproar. This tax was going to subsidize programs for early-childhood learning, and it only targeted drinks made with espresso, such as lattes and mochas. Good old American filtered drip coffee was exempt. But even though the tax was earmarked for an undeniably admirable cause, the Seattle City Council was so distressed by this assault on Seattle's hallmark drink that it delayed the vote on the initiative eight months. Two hundred protesters of the initiative staged a Seattle version of the 1773 Boston Tea Party, and coffee café owners threw burlap bags, designed to resemble coffee sacks, into the waters of a local urban lake, in a sure move to attract attention from coffee-drinking dog walkers and joggers.

In the end, Seattle voters roundly defeated the initiative. The result of the vote was reported in a local newspaper under the banner headline of LATTE TAX CREAMED.[2]

What is it about a product like coffee that makes it so sacrosanct?

Perhaps it has something to do with the fact that coffee has increasingly become something that Americans consume in public, in particular kinds of places. Those places, coffee cafés, are designed to be special kinds of public places. The decor, the ambience, the special language known only to the cognoscenti—"A venti decaf hazelnut latte, 2 percent"—all of this is supposed to make you feel sophisticated, worldly, in touch with the urbane. Coffee cafés are geared toward a yuppie crowd, with some residual influence from older "bohemian" coffeehouses that have existed since the 1960s.

The rise of these new coffee cafés, and of "gourmet" specialty coffee more generally, is the result of marketing genius. In the

early 1960s the corporate giants General Foods, Nestlé, and Procter & Gamble dominated the coffee market. Only four roasters controlled 75 percent of the trade. Coffee mostly came instant or from cans. Throughout the 1960s, coffee-drinking among people under fifty began to decline. Anthropologist William Roseberry writes that the coffee marketers of the time were concerned that this decline was attributed to the fact that younger people associated coffee with an elderly lifestyle they wanted to reject. By the 1980s the situation looked dire for coffee marketers, who saw their market aging and dying off.[3]

Sharp-minded entrepreneurs in the late 1980s and early 1990s began gearing specific coffee products to the emerging young professional market. These new entrepreneurs began promoting coffees with a marketing campaigns that were affiliated with social justice groups such as Equal Exchange ("a Fair Trade company distributing Organic and Fair Trade products in the independent natural food sector") and Coffee Kids ("an international nonprofit organization established to improve the quality of life for children and families who live in coffee-growing communities around the world"). The ties to social causes did not, however, prevent the new coffee companies from making significant profits: the markup from the wholesale green beans to the coffee café retail price was between 400 and 600 percent. Coffee was also marketed as if it came from exotic locales. The clever and purposely misleading use of the word *style* also came into play during this time; so instead of Kenyan or Brazilian coffee, what we got was "Kenyan style," made of beans that were grown nowhere near Africa, let alone Kenya.

Along with new coffee "styles" came "flavored" coffee—that is, coffee infused with natural or artificial flavorings that make

the beverage taste as un-coffeelike as possible. This had the advantage of appealing to younger consumers who might otherwise have selected a soft drink. The invention of flavored coffees extended the market to reach even those people who do not particularly like coffee but who want a jolt or who want to be part of the current scene.[4]

Throughout the 1990s, specialty coffee cafés, from Starbucks to small privately owned enterprises, multiplied in every middle-class and commercial neighborhood in the U.S. More recently, coffee cafés have even begun to pop up in the more economically challenged neighborhoods, such as the predominately African American neighborhood where I live. The opening of the first Starbucks in this area caused dispute because most locals knew that the space, a prime location, had been in negotiation for some two years by a popular local restaurant specializing in catfish. City and local authorities, however, inclined toward the Starbucks, presumably because they thought it would bring in outside business and cast a more middle-class glow over the area.

And if that indeed was their intention, they were right. The Starbucks that opened has been careful to make itself a "cool," jazzy, and middle-class place with an African American "style." It has become one of the few places in the neighborhood where whites and blacks appear to feel comfortable to sit together in the same place, socializing if they wish and, for the price of a fairly expensive cup of coffee, looking like yuppies regardless of the actual state of their personal finances.

Throughout America, in any city, we can all see the success of the modern coffee café. But what about our choices once we get there? What about our mochas, Frappuccinos, and lattes? Why, exactly, are we so drawn to these places, and what they offer?

Fat and Fat Lite

Few things in society are as imbued with as much meaning as are sex and eating. Coffee cafés do their best to subtly link the two. A photo ad in one Seattle coffee café I frequent shows a young, well-built man in his tight T-shirt, licking frothy curls from the top of his latte. Other ads show creamy froth in richly textured detail that give it a sensually inviting look. Feminist writer Rosalind Coward has called ads like this "food pornography." She argues that they appeal to our secret desire for the forbidden.[5]

Starbucks, according to some health watchdogs, are food pornographers in more ways than one. Two new products, the Strawberries & Crème Frappuccino Blended Crème and the Double Chocolate Chip Frappuccino Blended Crème recently earned the "Food Porn of the Month Award" from the Center for the Science in the Public Interest's (CPSI) Nutrition Action Healthletter.[6] Past winners of the award include the Coconut Crème Frappuccino and the Vanilla Crème Frappuccino.[7] This award is not for the best hard-core food ad but for food products the CPSI considers to be impressively unhealthy. A 20-ounce venti of either of these products has over 600 calories and while the Strawberries & Crème has 7 grams of fat, the Double Chocolate Chip Frappuccino contains 16 grams of fat.[8,9] (Venti means "really big" for those not fluent in American coffee café Italian). Neither drink actually contains coffee; the Nutrition Action Healthletter calls them "fattuccinos"—more like milk shakes than coffee.[10]

Starbucks did not become the commercial giant it is by accident. As one slim man I interviewed said, "I figure I'm not drinking cream for my health. It's for comfort." Even more revealingly,

a young woman told me, "The fat doesn't really count if it's a drink."

Starbucks and other coffee café drink designers understand a fundamental principle: Americans love fat. They love the way it tastes and looks. In fact, the American diet derives 60 percent of its calories from two nutrients: sugar and fat. The average American eats 135 pounds of fat per year. This translates to *one ton* every fifteen years.[11]

There is a lot of talk these days about how the American love of fat is new. But if tradition and history mean anything, it isn't, really. Americans have always had a "fat tooth." The food historian Richard Hooker writes that in the 1700s, butter and oils flavored the dishes of all classes in colonial America. Melted butter, served in a cup or boat, was routinely served with both meats and vegetables. Hooker cites the journal of an early traveler to America who concluded that the only American sauce, even for roast beef, was melted butter. Americans' "turnips and potatoes swim in hog's lard, butter or fat." Pork fat routinely flavored baked beans, chowder, porridge, vegetables, and even puddings and pies. On the frontier, bear's oil and venison grease served the same purpose. Because of this obsession with the taste of fat, some Europeans reportedly called the Americans "Buttermouths."[12]

Despite this history, and despite our current reality of impressive fat consumption, Americans of today are obsessed with appearing as though we are avoiding fat. It is intriguing to note that the kind of fat Americans are eating is changing. The Institute of Shortening and Edible Oils divides fats into two major categories: "visible" and "invisible" fats. What the institute calls invisible fats are those contained in milk or meats. Visible or

"added" fats are fats we add to other foods: products like salad dressings, spreads and processed foods. In the period from 1970 to 1997, the consumption of invisible fat decreased but the eating of visible fat climbed—yet the eating of visible fat seemed clandestine.[13] When I discovered this statistic, I reflected back on the people in the coffee cafés, dripping skim milk (invisible fat) into their drink and then spraying on the whipped cream (visible fat), taking the fat out of the milk and then adding it back (and then some) to improve the taste.

Americans' preoccupation with slimness while we are, at the same time, growing ever fatter presents an intriguing anomaly. "Lite" and diet foods remain overwhelming popular despite the introduction of diets that actually encourage fat consumption, such as the Atkins diet. Total fat intake had a short-lived decline in 1994 with the introduction in supermarkets of mandatory nutrition labeling. Food companies also introduced over five thousand lower fat versions of food between 1995 and 1997.[14] According to the American Obesity Association, consumers now spend about $30 billion per year on weight-loss-related products. Yet, overall total food consumption has dramatically increased over the last thirty years. For women, half of whom are supposedly on a diet at any one given time, the increase is three times as much as for men, with women's food intake increasing 22 percent to men's 7 percent increase. More revealing, in relation to us café coffee consumers, is the fact that the decline in total fat intake after the introduction of low-fat foods was so short-lived, in part because people decided they did not like the taste of the low-fat or no-fat products. So they either returned to the full-fat version or else they added fat to their supposedly low-fat item to improve the taste. Although the total consumption of

milk went down between 1970 and 2000, the consumption of both skim milk and half and half went up, skim by 150 percent and half-and-half by 47 percent.[15]

As anthropologist Sidney Mintz has observed, the consumption of fat and the consumption of low-fat anything are increasing simultaneously. In other words, what is happening is that Americans are eating more fats and sugar, yet at the same time they are buying other, low-fat foods to make them feel less guilty. And they are eating *those* too.[16]

Immoral Fat

Think of the triple-scoop ice-cream cone, the pie à la mode, the bonbon. Foods like these don't represent sustenance; they represent indulgence, a gift. They conjure up images of rapture, bliss. Our lattes and mochas are anything but sustenance; we want them because they make us feel happy. We also know they are not very good for us. Our small indiscretions are all the more exciting because they represent a kind of danger, harbingers of our potential falls from grace and self-control. Each of us thinks we are making our own individual choices here, and of course we are. But we are also responding to moral messages that have been honed over several generations.

The connections between denial and indulgence in America find an early example during Prohibition. The closure of saloons during Prohibition led to the booming popularity of the ice-cream parlor. From today's perspective, what could be more innocent and wholesome than ice cream? At the time, though, the idea of men and women sitting together, chatting and laughing as they spooned luscious, fat-filled ice cream into their mouths

was too much for many of the keepers of the public morality. Ice-cream parlors became perceived as immoral places that led young girls astray, enticing them down a path that inexorably led to ill repute and prostitution. This connection between ice-cream parlors and wickedness was so explicit by the late nineteenth century that some areas banned the sale of ice-cream sodas on Sundays.[17] What the temperance people sensed was that the soda shops provided a publicly sanctioned space for overt indulgence between men and women.

The tensions between indulgence and decorum were also evident in the way candy was marketed at around the same time. From the 1890s, ads depicted women in bare-shoulder blouses smiling provocatively over their shoulders and touching a small piece of candy to their seductively parted lips. However, the ads combined these lusty pictorial images with slogans that stressed the innocence of the indulgence. Various candy companies made "Purity" their motto. Whitman's Candies ads touted heavenly images of angels seated in a box of chocolates that appeared suspended in midair. The message was clear: in eating candy, the modern woman might indulge in sensuous pleasures but could also be pure at the very same time.[18]

Food and Guilt

Perhaps part of the appeal of coffee cafés is that, like the messages conveyed by the early candy ads, they promote a feeling of innocent indulgence. The fat being consumed is, after all "only a drink." And, like the ice-cream parlors of a hundred years ago, coffee cafés provide a space where this kind of pure indulgence can occur in a relaxed, clean-cut, mixed-sex environment.

Both the men and the women I was seeing in Seattle coffee cafés nearly all indulged in cream. One barista told me that customers regularly ordered a low-fat or skimmed milk drink and then added cream later from the cream thermos that most coffee cafés keep for customers' use next to the sugar and napkins. He said that customers often hid their cups behind the condiment table as they poured away. I didn't believe him, so he made me sit nearby until, about a quarter of an hour later, a plump man in shorts came and did just that. The barista laughed and thumbed his nose at me.

Customers who spoke with me were quite aware of why they came to the coffee café, and they were explicit about their desire to indulge. In fact, that was the exact word many of them used. "Coffee cafés are about indulging yourself," customers told me as they picked up the cream thermos. Jenny, a barista in an area of Seattle known as the University District, told me that student customers often spoke of their visits to the coffee café as being a "daily indulgence" that they carefully regulated. It appeared that they thought of "indulgence" as something "bad" that could be permitted in small doses, thereby limiting its effects and simultaneously allowing them to think of other spaces and other activities as "'good," through which they could recover so they could be "bad" again.

In another coffee café, I saw the barista, Kelly, serve five people in a row, who ordered skimmed milk drinks and then asked for whipped cream. I asked Kelly about this and she offered her theory, based on two years experience at the coffee bar: "They get uncomfortable. They wanted something rich, but they hold back in the drink. Then they're not satisfied with the drink, so they have to put the fat on top to richen it up, wanting and not wanting it. They're embarrassed."

Kelly's colleague Mike agreed with her. "We sell two percent the most, and a lot of nonfat," he told me. "But then people add fat. I think it's psychological. We are rewarded for eating healthy, but coffee isn't really healthy anything, so this is sort of middle-of-the-road. In coffee they can indulge, they can commit a little sin, do a little naughty thing, a bit of a taboo thing."

I was getting a bit perplexed with all this contradiction, so I began asking customers directly if they felt guilty when they drank cream. With only a few exceptions, almost everyone initially responded, often with some defiance, that no, they did not. Then, almost immediately, these same people would justify their lack of guilt or reverse their first statement.

"No, I don't feel guilt," a man in running clothes said. Then he paused. "If I weren't as active as I am, I guess I'd feel more. And I don't come in here so much, and I don't drink cream at home. I only allow myself to do this sometimes."

Another man, heavyset, in his forties, and wearing a suit, gave another perspective. "No," he said when I asked him if he felt guilty ordering his low-fat caramel mocha. "Smoking, yes. Fat is much less evil. We are designed to have fat. It's a marketing thing convincing us not to want fat, to fit into clothes that are too small for you."

I asked the same question to a woman in a fake fur jacket sitting in the chair beside me, waiting for her drink. "No, definitely not." Then when her frothy drink arrived, she turned to me again. "Well, sometimes," she added. "I think about my weight more than my husband. I guess I associate *eating* cream with weight gain." She then left in a hurry.

The finely tuned guilt, repression, and desire that emerged when I talked to customers seemed to contribute to the conflicted statements I encountered in these Seattle coffee cafés.

Forty of the fifty customers I directly observed took some sort of cream with their beverages. Five of the other ten drank what they all described to me as "creamy soy milk." The numbers were consistent for men and women, crossing all age groups. The numbers of men and women who used cream and whipped cream were about equal. Baristas told me that, if anything, men appeared more embarrassed in the eating of cream than were the women.

"I used to think there was a difference between what men and women drank," one barista told me. But, he said, these earlier observations were influenced by the fact that a few years earlier many more male than female customers had frequented the café. That had changed and now the numbers seemed to him to be about equal. And, he said, "I think men are just as self-conscious about eating cream and fat—maybe more."

Most customers, both men and women, were very clear that they did not permit the indulgence of the coffee café in other spaces of their lives, and certainly not at home. Being in the coffee café gave them a public space where indulgence was sanctioned and where they could escape from the control they tried to maintain in the rest of their lives. One seventeen-year-old woman said, "This is my real indulgence for the day. If not cream, then whipped cream. This is the only place I can drink real cream—just pour it on. For me, morning food is sweet and about fat. In the coffee shop I use butter for breakfast and eat pastries." Another man said that at home he eats only olive oil "and fats like that." At the coffee café, however, he always had cream. A man sitting nearby told me, "I look at the back of packages and if it has too much fat, I don't buy it. But here, I go on binges. Because I deserve it."

Deserve it? I asked myself. Why? Clearly, it seemed, because he needed a reward for his self-denial. And if no one else was going to reward him, then he would do it himself.

So, after all this, is the question of why we pour our conflicting attitudes of indulgence and restraint into the same cup of coffee answered? As I ponder the question now, sitting as I am at my favorite coffee café, all I can do is smile. I broke my ankle recently, so I hobbled here rather than coming my usual way, which is flushed from a brisk bike ride.

"Scone?" My barista friend Eric asked me when I had reached the counter.

"No, no," I replied, slightly scandalized. "I can't have a scone when I'm not getting exercise from riding my bike. No. No more scones until the ankle's healed."

Eric handed me my coffee and passed me the 2-percent from farther down the counter. I looked at him. He looked at me. A pause. Then I hobbled to the end of the counter and poured myself some half-and-half.