

Spent coffee grounds as a bridge to the past

As kids we want to be firefighters, veterinaries and astronauts when we grow up. I'd bet a few of us called archeologist as well. Hollywood is partly to blame, through pop culture tropes like the ass-kicking Dr. Indiana Jones. Still, at the heart of it lies a fascination with the past that is genuine and something that we can all tap into. Lost civilisations... with nothing remaining of them but pottery shards and the buried outlines of a few buildings. It elicits everything from curiosity and awe to humility and angst from me. But I'm no archeologist. It's rarely that my untrained mind goes rambling that far back in our human story, to imagine, for example, two Romans walking down a road of yore, complaining about taxes, or Sumerians gossiping over pots of cloudy Ur beer.

In school we're taught something about history. Dates and treaties mostly, and wars and the strategic marriages of anaemic-looking young royals, the fates of Imperial Houses yoked to one another. It's not that this stuff is unimportant, but I suspect not the best material to engage young minds, to feed their natural curiosity about the past with. I'm neither a historian nor a pedagogue, but why couldn't we instead start with something small and concrete (fire crackers, comics, monasteries, airplanes—we could even ask the children) and assist them in exploring the history of that thing? I'm sure such explorations would quickly lead to whatever our elaborators of curricula deem worthy of History with a capital H.

The most ready road to the past, for most of us, is through ourselves. We remember earlier versions of ourselves and what the world was like back then. Our memories are notoriously unreliable, of course, but we can't let that get in the way of our reminiscences. Ideally we have a shoebox of trinkets to guide us, odds and ends absolutely loaded with sentimental value. Digging through, handling these precious items helps us reconnect with a past that time has otherwise removed all traces of.

I've so far stated a number of things that I am not. It's time now to stake a claim, something affirmative. I am a coffee drinker. Let's just say that I bring a lot of mindfulness to it. But it wasn't always so. Back in the day, don't ask me how old I was, I started out on instant. With lots of sugar and milk. I may cringe about it today, but I loved those sickly sweet cups of reconstituted Joe. They were an important part of my teenage world. Whatever I was doing, immersing myself

in music, a film or a book, or just staring out of a window and dreaming about girls, none of whom I had any luck with, everything seemed more enjoyable (or tolerable) with a steaming mug of coffee beside me. Although I drank it every day, I never gave the coffee itself much thought, never dreamed of improving the quality of my cup.

A few years later I was served a fantastically good espresso and down a rabbit hole of specialty coffee I went. The undreamt-of flavours, the loving rituals of preparation, learning about the history and culture of coffee and cafés, connecting with people over coffee... I was very excited by all of it.

I even started collecting coffee! And I don't mean getting beans from as many origins as I can, although that is how it started and what lay the groundwork for it. One afternoon as I was cleaning my Bialetti, instead of tipping the spent grounds into the garbage can I spread them out to dry on a newspaper. I wanted to keep on savouring the aromas of those amazing coffees.

I'm a lavish sniffer of coffee. For every cup I make I smell the beans before grinding and the powder before and after tamping. I sip and scent my way to the bottom of the cup, to the last cool sip. So far so normal, right? You do this too, don't you? The only bit I've added is after the drink has been drunk, when I break open and spread the puck, paying my last respects to these mortal remains as they cool and slowly dry.

Long story short: I decided to keep the stuff, even after they had dried out completely. I also failed to throw away the grounds of every coffee I've made since. The grounds are keepsakes of my armchair travels around the world via one tasty cup of single origin after another. This is simply one more way in which I enjoy coffee, and it's mutually reinforcing with the other ones I mentioned previously.

Although I keep records of how much and where from, the collection is not organised according to origin, varietal or processing method. One and all they go into a large barrel, chronologically, as I drink them. The daily ritual reminds me of sand running into the bottom of an hourglass and for me it has become a way of marking time. I started doing this twenty years ago and am now on my third barrel. The layers in them represent nearly half my life. The oldest deposits are from a very different time, when I was still a student or a young worker, just chuffed to be earning a salary.

Seven years and one barrel later I met my future wife and at some point up that second barrel the first of our two daughters was born. With a bit of luck, I'll get to fill another few barrels before my time is up, and see our daughters grow into healthy and happy adults.

Eventually I also started collecting other peoples' spent grounds. I was living in the Austrian capital at the time, which has a rich and diverse café scene. Vienna has everything to offer from coffee houses that look like opera houses to grimy dives whose walls are lined with one-armed bandits. For a surprisingly long time I pointedly ignored all of it, because, I told myself, I was brewing better stuff at home (this was in the days before specialty or third wave landed). But I got it eventually. The spark that lit my fascination was imagining the thousands of anonymous lives on this end of the coffee value chain. I wondered who these café customers were and what they had going on in their lives. (For my home grounds it was learning about what happens on a coffee farm to produce such an outstanding product in the first place).

In terms of acting as a mental bridge to the past, Viennese grounds is where it gets more interesting. They invite us to imagine a larger timescape. By default it's still a rather murky one, because too little time has passed since the bulk of it was collected between 2009 and 2011. To explain that we have to go a bit further back.

Viennese cafés enjoy an illustrious past, most famously the *fin de siècle* period, when famous writers, painters and architects practically lived in their favourite coffee houses, hashing out the Vienna Secession (an art movement). Entire novels were conceived, gestated and midwifed in Viennese coffee houses. (None of them are likely to be known to an anglophone audience, I'm afraid. The likeliest candidate, in a round-about way, might be a 1926 novella by Arthur Schnitzler called *Traumnovelle*, which was adapted into the 1999 film *Eyes Wide Shut* by Stanley Kubrick.) But it wasn't all about arts. Far from it. Everything under the sun was discussed in these coffee houses. In 1913 Hitler, Stalin, Tito and Trotsky lived in Vienna within a few kilometers of each other and each frequented his own favourite café.

What I want to get at is this: I first came to appreciate the temporal dimension of what I'm collecting by imagining that I had some spent grounds from 100 years ago, collected from Viennese cafés during that heyday. I visualised myself really holding a little heap of it in my hands. What would I make of them? They would've fascinated me to no end.

I would marvel at the survival of such an unlikely and fragile artefact, something that under normal circumstances is broken down in a matter of days. How strange that this stuff would've survived when all of the people who drank this coffee are now dead. Probably many of the jobs that they used to do no longer exist either. Such grounds would be intensely personal and everyday, yet perfectly anonymous and mute as the grave.

My mind would be resonating with thoughts like: somebody drank the coffee extracted from this stuff before Hitler's rise to power and before the Nazi regime industrially murdered six million Jews. Before the US instantaneously evaporated tens of thousands of civilians by dropping atomic bombs on the Japanese cities of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. Before a group of men flew to the moon and drove around up there in an electric vehicle. I'd remind myself that this must've been part of the last few tons of coffee that made it into Central Europe, before collapsing supply chains and war-time rationing made scarcity abundant.

It's safe to say that less history will be concentrated in our present day Vienna than was the case a century ago. And I for one am glad. That much history is never a good thing, I can't help feeling. But the times they keep on changing. We tend to think that everything leads up to the present moment, that every bygone era and struggle was a prelude to the main attraction, our generation. If I did have spent coffee grounds collected 100 years ago from Café Griensteidl, Café Herrenhof and all the rest of them, they wouldn't help me understand the unfathomable atrocities that were soon to follow. But they would help me feel a direct connection to the past that no number of blunderbusses or historical documents could match. And they'd remind me that we're all just passing through, my loved ones and I, our generation, the technology, our jobs, our politics, this moment.

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