






Illustrations by
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The Roast of George Howell

If you like coffee, chances are, this man has something to do with it

“  he way a shaman comes to light is that, as a child, he’s given fairy tales that are only that: fairy tales.

And the shaman has to then penetrate the veil, to understand that there’s really something else beyond. So they present him with veil after veil after veil, and they have to penetrate through these stories to this final point. So there are all these levels of popular understanding until you get to the tip of the pyramid. And there, it’s completely different.”

George Howell is telling me this as we sit at a tile-topped café table stuck in a corner of his office/warehouse/roastery in the Boston exurbs, his legs crossed and lanky frame leaning back against a straight-backed wicker chair. With a checked button-down tucked into his khakis and a drawling mid-Atlantic accent, he appears like a former ambassador holding court at the country club or an archaeologist planning his next dig.

Behind him, two employees are trying to manhandle a brand-new three-group Marzocco onto a cart that’s slightly too small, another is cleaning up the cupping table from this morning’s round of new Guatemalans, the roasters are churning farther back, the industrial freezer used to store vacuum-packed green beans is humming away, and in the

front office, logistics are in the works for the new downtown Boston café set to open in the fall. Howell sits relaxed in the middle, giving me all the time in the world. At seventy-one, he is an *éminence grise*. The primer on the shamanic practices of the Huichol people of Sierra Madre Occidental in Mexico was part of his explanation for how he came to open his first coffee shop in Harvard Square, in 1975.

Because: after Howell dropped out of Yale in 1967 (“the whole world was exploding at that point”) and met his future wife, Laurie, and moved to Berkeley and visited the first Peet’s Coffee, changing his conception of coffee shops forever; and after he then tasted a cup of lighter-roasted coffee made by the Bay Area Capricorn Coffees, which changed his conception of coffee further still;

but *before* he moved to Boston and started his café company, the Coffee Connection, where he invented the Frappuccino and pushed light roasts and sourced single-origin beans when the whole world was drinking anonymous dark-roasted muck; and before he sold the whole kit and caboodle to Starbucks for \$23 million in SBUX stock in ’94; and before he worked as a consultant to the UN and devised the hugely influential Cup of Excellence program, which finds and rewards the best small coffee growers in the world; and before he got back into the roasting and retail game in the early 2000s, as the third wave of coffee culture started to pick up and run with the values and aesthetics that he had been promoting for twenty years—at that wobbly point, there were still many veils between Howell and a life dedicated to coffee. He was, at the time, mostly preoccupied with the beauty and power of the psychedelic yarn paintings that the Huichol made as a part of their shamanic religious practices in those remote Mexican mountains.

The paintings aren’t quite paintings, he explains, but rather squares or rectangles of plywood covered in beeswax into which the artist presses lengths of fluorescently bright yarn with a thumbnail, creating scenes that depict the great stories and motifs of their religion, like the hunting of the blue deer, which is also represented by and contained within the peyote cactus, and the endless, circular motion of energy surrounding the tree of life. The best ones, which I later see hanging in his otherwise tastefully neutral living



room in the tastefully neutral Boston suburb of Belmont, make your eyeballs vibrate like they just licked a battery.

Howell didn't move back to New England from Berkeley to start a coffee shop—he and a pregnant Laurie and their then-two kids drove east, George freakishly grinding his own beans and brewing them in a French press during meals at HoJos along the way, so that he could get this indigenous religious yarn art shown at MoMA and the Yale and Harvard art museums, plus actually graduate from college.

None of this came to pass. A series of art scholars and museum subdirectors “blew their *minds* on the art,” he says, before their uptight bosses or powerful connections rebuffed the idea of a major exhibition at every turn. It was during this period of rejection and transience that the Howells came up with the idea of opening a café, not only as a remedy to the horrible state of local coffee, but also as—eureka!—a gallery for Huichol art.

Soon, though, even if the yarn art was up on the walls from day one, the

coffee took over, and Howell began his own ascent up the veiled pyramid, piercing through to what's beyond the cup, the brew, the roast, the bean. (He never did go on the sacred peyote journey of the Huichol, though, which involves a two hundred to three hundred mile walk east from the mountains to the desert and embedding with the community.) Over his forty-year career, he has become a shaman of coffee. He's known among third-wave coffee producers as a prophet of the *terroir*-focused, light-roast way of life, a man who gives three-hour PowerPoint presentations detailing every facet of the production process, and the rare boomer in a scene made up mostly of people who were either in grade school or not even born when George opened his first shop. People who have worked with him, or seen him speak, or run into him in Ethiopia or Guatemala (“at origin,” in coffee-world lingo), talk about his enthusiasm, his taste, his curiosity, his strong opinions on coffee processing. But mostly they talk

about his pragmatically mystical conviction that a higher truth of coffee exists, and that we can figure out how to get to it.

“I think he has this idea that the purest thing happens in that one second before the coffee gets picked,” says Peter Giuliano, former director of coffee at Counter Culture and now director of the Specialty Coffee Association of America (SCAA) Symposium. “There's some special spark of life, and everything is about getting back to that thing. And everything else is second to that.”

Colby Barr, the cofounder of the Santa Cruz-based roaster-retailer Verve Coffee Roasters, first heard about Howell as a legend, but later ended up in the same 4x4 convoy in Ethiopia, camping in the western bush and eating goat around a campfire.

“This is something I'll never forget, and it's something that everyone who's traveled with George knows: riding around with him in Land Cruisers and then hearing him lean over and start taking notes to himself

on his little audio recorder. It's like listening to Morgan Freeman narrate some documentary, saying 'The farm is at 2,300 meters, we are doing blah blah blah, eighty percent *typica*, this is their process.' Because this is how much he's into the details of terroir and everything he's doing."

"He's like one of those adults who are really cool and talk to children like they're adults, too," says Giuliano of Howell's vibe with much younger third-wavers. "He reaches out, and he has no sense of age, status, anything. He's out there learning all the time."

Howell and I taste our way through eight coffees that he and his daughter Jenny (of his six children, she's the one who works closely with him in tasting and sourcing) brought back from a recent trip to Guatemala, roasted, ground, and left to brew in rocks glasses lined up on a long table, identified only by numbers. The process of cupping, at least with George and Jenny Howell, has a dramatic edge—violent slurps, esoteric flavor descriptions, George bounding from cup to cup while gesticulating with a hot spoon, a dash of competition to see who can ID all the coffees correctly based on taste alone.

This time, Howell has a new theory on the line—he had sorted a single lot of green beans from one farm into three separate categories, using an obscenely time-consuming method that he wishes to keep secret for the time being. His hypothesis is that this meticulous sorting will yield three drastically different cups of coffee.

One of the three sorted coffees tastes like any *meh* cup of coffee. The second tastes like a very good cup of coffee by the standards of balance, acidity, sweetness, and clarity of flavor, by which the industry judges coffee quality (standards, it should be said, that Howell established). But the third cup tastes unbelievable, so good that each hit from the cupping spoon exerts a magnetic effect on my

tongue as powerful as the crumbs at the bottom of a bag of Doritos. I want to live in a vat of this stuff, and I feign an academic interest in nailing the tasting notes ("slippery elm?") as an excuse to keep dipping into the cup.

Unsorted, those beans would have yielded something like the middle-good coffee, or possibly something closer to the lamest of the lot. Howell is postulating that great coffee doesn't come from one year's harvest from a single farm, but rather from an even more discriminating level: individual gems in plain sight, potentially inside every bag of coffee. The third coffee owes its deliciousness to the farmer, the workers who picked and washed the ripe coffee cherries, the coffee varietal that produced those beans, and even the farm itself—the dirt, the elevation, the rain that one week in early December last year—but it was also a measure of the taste and intuition of the roaster. Howell pronounces the coffee a masterpiece with a conspiratorial chuckle, like a new best friend showing you his favorite movie, knowing you'll love it.



These are boom times for fancy coffee. You can buy locally roasted bags of expensive Ethiopian varieties in small American towns, and every major city with a recently gentrified neighborhood is now home to at least one coffee bar serving pour-over made with single-origin beans and a small roaster setting up shop in a industrial brown zone near a canal.

A few years ago, Stumptown sucked up a large chunk of private equity to fund new roasteries, new shops, and deeper penetration of their bottled cold brew into elite bodegas and Whole Foods nationwide. This year, Blue Bottle raised \$70 million in venture

capital, topping off the \$45.7 million it had raised in previous years. In a 2011 column on *Esquire*, La Colombe's cofounder Todd Carmichael penned a self-congratulatory screed against Stumptown taking on outside investment; then, in 2014, he picked up \$28.5 million in investment money himself. Counter Culture, another early surfer of the third wave, hasn't jumped into any swimming pools of money, but continues to expand.

Howell has one café in one of the smaller squares of Newtonville, a kiosk in a new permanent locally sourced market building in Boston, plus his roasting plant and office. He's only just opening a splashy storefront in a refurbished hotel downtown, after four-to-five years of location scouting. He was third wave before it was a thing—so why isn't he in the fray?

"I did that once," he says when I ask. "And I'm not getting back on that eight-lane highway. It's insane."

Plus, he hates some of the du jour fashions—cold brew in particular.

"It's crap. You can quote me."

Decades in the business have finely tuned Howell's crap meter. In 1975, when Howell and his wife decided to open their first Coffee Connection in Harvard Square, they were met with all manner of crap.

"We start to look in the Yellow Pages for roasters, because we want fresh, and we find one in New Hampshire that says it only does gourmet coffee, blabidiblah, and so we call up the guy," Howell says. "He comes to our apartment, and he's got three bags of coffee. One's Brazilian, one's Colombian, and the other one's a Central American—he says it doesn't matter which. Then he tells us he blends these beans one way and calls it Jamaica Blue Mountain, another way and it's Kenya AA, because they're all really the same—it's all just the imagination. And I'm going. *Holy shit.*"

Howell got in touch with a friend on the West Coast named Michael

da Silva, who put him in touch with Erna Knutsen. Knutsen had worked her way from a job as a secretary at B.C. Ireland, a coffee importer in San Francisco, to selling smaller lots of high-quality beans (Sumatra Mandheling being her favorite), and eventually ended up owning the company outright and opening her own importer before officially retiring at ninety-three in 2014.

“There was nobody like her,” Howell said, “and even in the eighties, when other importers and roasters started coming in, they’d get Sumatra or this or that, and you’d taste them side by side, and they didn’t hold a candle to her.”

Beans in place, Howell set up a roasting plant in Burlington, fifteen miles of north of Harvard Square, where he’d roast twice a week, in the middle of the night, and then drive the beans to the store (and new locations, as they opened) in time for the morning rush. From that point on, Howell’s mission has been to devise ways to show customers that great coffee is not in their imagination.

“At first I was serving urn coffee from the Bunn, but then I thought, *How do I get people to taste this coffee?* The French press. So we’re the first ones to do the coffee bar—a long counter with a marble top we got from the owner of the building, jars with all the coffees we sold lined up, and you could say ‘I’d like to have that brewed for me,’ and we’d do it on the spot in the press.”

People loved it.

Soon after the Harvard shop opened, the organizers of the newly revitalized Faneuil Hall Marketplace approached the Howells about opening a stand in the market. As the market shifted from produce to prepared food, the Coffee Connection kiosk started selling cups of coffee instead of beans out of barrels. “It was a cash cow,” Howell says.

“Then what happened was what

I like to call opportunistic growth. You’d drive around certain towns like Lexington and Newton that were clearly very well-to-do, you’d see a FOR RENT sign on a space that was perfectly located, and then go for it.”

Over the next decade plus, Howell opened a new Coffee Connection every couple years, steadily taking over the suburbs bound by Route 128 and selling legions of Coffee Connection travel mugs that rattle around the unexamined corners of Bay State kitchen cupboards to this day.

Then in 1988, two alternate futures presented themselves. On one side, under the shadow of the sign of the mermaid, he saw money, growth, and Frappuccinos, a pitched battle for America’s dark-roasted heart. On the other, he saw red cherries ripening on the flanks of tropical hills, topographical maps of Costa Rica, Ethiopia, Burundi, Brazil, cuppings, washing troughs, drying racks—the possibility of perfection. Both would come to pass. But first, the Frappuccino.



y ’88, Howard Schulz had taken over Starbucks, opened thirty-three stores in Seattle, Chicago, and Vancouver, and set his sights on the rest of the country.

“I learned that this was the first professional café,” Howell says of Starbucks. “They could run circles around us in terms of the efficiency and friendliness of their service,” with well-trained staff and espresso machines up on the front counter, which let baristas make small talk while they pulled shots.

Howell traveled to Seattle to meet with Schulz, who was interested in buying out Coffee Connection as its entry into the Boston market. Howell wasn’t ready to sell yet, and although

Starbucks would play a role in his future, the trip had a more immediate impact on his coffee career. While in Seattle, he stopped by Torrefazione Italia and had a sip of something he had read about, but never actually tasted: an iced cappuccino.

Espresso granitas had been a part of Italian coffee culture since time immemorial, traditionally served slushy and topped with whipped cream. “From my point of view, the real kudos [for the proliferation of cold coffee drinks] need to go to Ted Lingle, the executive director of the SCAA for many years, who started writing sometime around ’83 or ’84 about doing iced cappuccinos as a way for cafés to make money in the summer,” Howell says.

Lingle sold coffee granitas from a cart during the ’84 LA Olympics, and from there it spread north. By the end of the eighties, it was becoming a standby on café menus. Howell picked up an old granita machine and started working out the recipe. He asked a star employee named Andrew Frank to futz with the formula. “I have no idea about the physics,” Howell said, “but he found that the amount of sugar was what made it either smooth or crystalline. And then, being the marketing brilliance he was, he came up with the name ‘Frappuccino’—from *frappe*, the New England-specific word for a milkshake, and *cappuccino*—“and the minute he said it, we were all on board—it was perfect.”

In the summer of ’92, Howell debuted the fully formed Frappuccino™ on his Coffee Connection menus. He ditched the finicky granita machines for Dairy Queen-grade soft-serve units, and the frozen coffee shakes started selling faster than strawberry margs at a Jimmy Buffet concert. “In order to do what you love, to get the great coffee, you need the cash. Frappuccinos paved the way. I would have done it with or without Starbucks.”

By 1994, Schultz had twice offered to buy out Coffee Connection, but Howell hadn't budged.

"We knew it was only a matter of time before they were here, in full glory and power," Howell says. He recruited a board for Coffee Connection, sought out VC money, and opened twelve new stores within a year, doubling the size of his Boston coffee fiefdom. But Starbucks opened twelve stores that same year in DC, bringing their total location count to over four hundred.

The rapid expansion was taking its toll on Howell. "I found I made a lot more mistakes," he says. "The venture-capital road does not... I don't like it. It sends you into the stratosphere, then it becomes very hard to maintain the original mission."

In March of '94, Schultz finally made an offer that Howell could live with—he'd keep the Coffee Connection name on the stores for two years, keep the roasting plant running, and bring Howell on as a coffee consultant. Howell sold the company for \$23 million in Starbucks stock and signed a seven-year noncompete agreement for roasting and retail. In 1996, Starbucks changed Howell's stores over, and Coffee Connection was history.

According to Schultz's autobiography, *Pour Your Heart Into It*, by summer 1996, the Frappuccino was "a runaway home run" for Starbucks, pulling in \$52 million in sales by the end of that first year. Starbucks partnered with PepsiCo to make the

bottled Frappuccino later that year, and by 2011, Forbes estimated that the Frappuccino brand, born in Boston, was worth \$2 billion.



George tells it, when he was a teenager in the 1960s, living in a neighborhood of Mexico City called San Ángel, where his father's career as the heir to a plastics manufacturing business had taken his family from suburban New Jersey, he would ride his bike up a road by his house that winds through the foothills and climbs four thousand feet from the cobblestoned colonial streets, up through the pine forest at the top of the mountains separating the capital from Toluca, to the west. His young lungs had adapted to the altitude, and his legs had done the climb enough times that he could bike all the way without getting off and walking, and when he got to the summit, to the abandoned Carmelite monastery called Desierto de los Leones, a pale stone hulk empty since the turn of the nineteenth century, he would catch his breath, turn his bike around, and then hurtle, brakeless, back home.

When he was sixteen, the biking stopped; his knees started giving out on him. "I had sixteen or more dislocations in each knee by the age of sixteen, and finally everything went to pieces. It had nothing to do with

the biking. Birth defects," he explains. "I became a grand experiment. That kept me a year out of school, I got tutored and such, but that's when I got into music, because I really had nothing else to do, and then the art and the books and reading and everything else, it was just an explosion."

A year after the Starbucks buyout, Howell and his family moved into the dream house they had built in Wayland, a town just west of 128, where the citified Boston suburbs give way to old-money colonials spread out along lampless country roads. Howell made sure the blueprints included two rooms with very particular purposes: One, in the in-law apartment close to the pond—nice for the kids—was built for roasting on his little Probat and holding cuppings of new coffees. The other, "the black room," was built in the basement of the main house. I first heard of it from Jenny Howell. "It sounds creepy, but it was the coolest thing ever: it was soundproofed, and the walls, the ceilings, the couches, the rugs were all black. It had an incredible stereo system, and then the yarn paintings"—the same Huichol art that had hung in the Harvard Square Coffee Connection—"were hung all around, with these special light fixtures. It looked like they were glowing, coming out of the walls."

But as George explains, it was more than just a freaky, psychedelic sound/art chamber, "I had the slide projector in there and the screen, and that's where I could work at all

On Cupping

"Cupping" is a codified and formal way of evaluating coffee. The official standards available from the Specialty Coffee Association of America make it seem as byzantine as a Catholic mass conducted in Latin and roughly twice as precise as a space shuttle launch. But reduced to a crude stick-person drawing, cupping looks like this:

- You sniff the just-ground coffee in a little tumbler and make notes on a score sheet.
- Hot water is poured over the grounds and allowed to sit for 3 minutes, then the raft of coffee grounds that floats on the top of the cup (called the "crust") is broken and stirred into the cup in a prescribed manner. More sniffing and note-making.
- After a few more minutes, once the coffee cools down to hotter than bath water but still cooler than gas-station-coffee temperature, slurping is done with the aid

of a spoon. The coffee is to be "aspirated" in the mouth, which means you slurp it in LOUDLY, with air, and swish it about. This looks and sounds stupid, but it does help you more fully taste the coffee. Notes are made, and the coffee is slurped in this fashion up to a couple more times. More notes are made.

The note-making happens on a sheet that prompts you to consider fragrance and aroma and aftertaste and all kinds of different aspects of the coffee. If you attend a coffee cupping organized by a coffee roaster, you will be directed to pay attention to various aspects of the coffee-tasting experience throughout the process. If you are hosting a coffee cupping at home for fun, you know all of this already because you are a huge coffee nerd, and you don't need me telling you any more about it. —Peter Meehan



hours of the day, developing my whole slide show.” That was the birth of his multi-hour coffee-education Power-Points, culled from the photos he had been taking since his first trip to origin back in ’88, the same year he had flown to Seattle to scope out the competition. The whole time he had been Frappuccinoing and VCing and trying to box Starbucks out of the Bay State, Howell had also been unpacking the whole coffee economy, homing in on single-region, then single-farm, then single-lot coffee beans.

He had seen what life was like for coffee farmers, how higher altitudes seemed to produce better beans, how bad processing or unexpected rain could destroy a whole year’s harvest, and how the whole system was rigged to separate the farmer from the roaster. In Kenya, for instance, the government ran official auctions for all the coffee produced in the country.

“It really got the quality up; it was a brilliant idea,” Howell says, “but it got corrupted from within, so money was not filtering down to the farmers.” Howell, in conjunction with Jeremy Block, one of America’s leading coffee exporters, devised a competition to identify the finest Kenyan-grown

coffees, in which the farmers got a chunk of change for their efforts, while Howell and Block got a lead on the best producers in advance of the official auctions.

Block came up with the format: \$5,000 as a first prize to the coffee co-op that produced the best coffee (as judged by a panel of coffee buyers and roasters), a portion of which went into investing in infrastructure (generators, machinery) to keep the good coffee coming. He also made a trophy, “like the Stanley Cup,” that the winning co-op would keep until the next year’s competition.

At the same time, the Kenyan government was trying to convince farmers to rip up their plantations and start growing a new disease-resistant strain, Ruiru 11. “The government and Nestlé had pronounced that it was fine, but it was crap,” Howell said. “We told farmers, *For god’s sake, in your highest location, where you’re doing quality, do not grow this new coffee.*”

The government accused Howell of being a carpetbagging American who was bribing coffee growers to pervert the economic freedom of Kenya. His struggles there made him see championing quality coffee as a cause that

could put economic self-determination in the hands of growers (and small specialty-coffee buyers) instead of governments and huge coffee companies buying beans at the commodity price.

Then the UN called. The International Coffee Organization, a group created in the sixties through the UN to regulate coffee export quotas and prices, was launching a program (in tandem with two other UN-affiliated development organizations) called the Gourmet Coffee Project to develop the growing specialty market for higher-priced coffees in five producing countries. They tapped Howell to serve as one of the program’s consultants in Brazil. (“I was the quality guy.”)

Working with a farmer named Marcel Vieira, Howell started traveling across the Brazilian coffee belt, trying to get a handle on how the world’s biggest coffee-growing country worked. He ended up working on two projects: one to set up model farms as labs to test out new growing ideas and teach farmers how to apply them, and a competition called Cup of Excellence. The farms never got off the ground; Cup of Excellence changed the entire coffee industry.

It was based on the competition

and auction formats Howell had seen in Kenya. Small farmers submitted their beans, a panel of jurors (in the early years, often made up of the people who'd end up buying the coffees) cupped them and ranked them, and then the beans went up on an online auction, allowing anyone in the world to bid. At the time, this was not normal. "The very first one, the farmers thought we were crazy," says Susie Spindler, who started Cup of Excellence with Howell in 1999 and ran it until 2014. "They made us buy the coffee before we even took it to auction. But George, he had such an incredible reputation that just having him involved increased the trust level significantly."

Within four years, the price of the top coffees in the Brazilian competition jumped from \$2.60 to \$10.15 a pound; ten years in, it was \$24.05. Without the program, those top-dollar coffees would have ended up mixed into generic regional blends, and the farmers would have been stuck selling at rock-bottom commodity prices. Like the Kenyan competition before it, Cup of Excellence connected farmers to roasters and importers willing to pay big bucks for better coffee—the people with the money got the special product they wanted, and the people with the special product got more money. The competition spread around the world, to Nicaragua, Rwanda, Burundi, Honduras, Mexico, Guatemala, Costa Rica, El Salvador, Bolivia, and Colombia, where prices have also continued to rise. A recent study found that the program has led to more than \$160 million of extra income for farmers in just Brazil and Honduras, while costing only \$3 million to coordinate and run.¹

¹ The Alliance for Coffee Excellence, the umbrella organization that now runs Cup of Excellence, announced this past summer that it was shutting down half of its programs in 2016 in order to update the auction interface and logistics and move to an electronic weighted cupping form, but the full roster should come back online in the following years.

The early success of Cup of Excellence reinforced a feeling that Howell hadn't experience since the heady days of his VC-fueled expansion: "It's corporate thinking—people want to change things on a massive scale, and you can't bring about change that way. But something tiny can affect everything."

Howell quit Cup of Excellence in 2002. A stint serving as a national coffee consultant to Peru, during which, he says, most (if not all) of his official suggestions were ignored, had dimmed his enthusiasm for the politics of origin, and Cup of Excellence had turned into a ship too big for him to steer on his own. "I was no longer able to effect change," he says. "If I said, 'Let's go this way,' it was 'No.'"

So, a couple of years after his noncompete with Starbucks finally expired, he decided to set up his own roasting and retail operation again, fueled by everything he'd learned about coffee in the years since Coffee Connection closed.

But reentry, starting with a café-restaurant called Copacafé in Lexington, a comfortably bougie suburb of Boston, did not go entirely as planned.

The coffee was great. Tim Wendelboe, a coffee geek's coffee geek who just bought his own farm in Colombia that he plans on working himself, gives Howell, and Copacafé, the credit for his own coffee enlightenment. "The first time I tasted his coffee was probably the best experience I've had with a Kenyan coffee ever," said Wendelboe. "It was in 2003, and it was the first cup of coffee where I could actually taste a black-currant flavor. That blew my mind a little bit. After that I went home and started cupping more, and I felt like I sort of understood what taste was about."

But, Howell says, Copacafé "was a four-thousand-square-foot experiment in the wrong location." Things quickly spiraled. Howell wanted the

food to be what he called "morsels," something like mini tapas, but the menu soon ballooned to big tapas. The staff, Howell says, was poorly trained, and even if Wendelboe got to it in time, the coffee got lost in the mix. Copacafé was dead within a year.

Howell fell back on the roastery he'd opened in nearby Acton to provide beans for the café, selling beans wholesale to other restaurants and cafés. But by 2008, he says, "It was pretty clear that wholesale was not made for me, and I wasn't made for wholesale."

The problem of quality control drove Howell nuts. Even at the best restaurants, he saw his painstakingly sourced and roasted beans die a slow death in carafes left unattended on the Bunn-O-Matic hot plate all night, or mangled into bad cappuccinos pulled by untrained waiters on espresso machines that hadn't been cleaned in months. He was much happier selling to cafés, but even there, he could never be sure that baristas weren't somehow mucking his beans up.

"In his view, everything and everyone should be a servant to the coffee," says Peter Giuliano. "If a machine makes that easier, great, if it takes a person, great—anything that can remove a potential place for things to go wrong."

Howell is not built to be a part of the process—he has to be the whole thing.



In 2012, Howell bought another café, this time in Newtonville, Massachusetts. Howell's COO, Rebecca Fitzgerald—an

old-school Coffee Connection fan and MIT B-school grad—convinced Howell to put his own name on it, and thus was born George Howell Coffee.

The full gamut of George Howell beans are arrayed in vertical stainless steel chutes along one wall of the café, like a terroir-focused pipe organ, which Howell thinks is a “brilliant” alternative to the prevailing shelf-piled-with-random-bags approach you see in most coffee shops. They’ve started making drip coffee directly into cups full of steel ice cubes, a process that “gets rid of the whole cold-brew issue” and preserves the more acidic and floral notes of the coffee, even if it means baristas have to shuttle giant bags full of steel cubes back and forth between the dishwasher and the industrial freezer.

Newtonville is a “village” in Newton with a commercial hub consisting of a Gordon’s Fine Wines & Liquors, a handful of small storefronts (including a Starbucks), and a supermarket whose shadow hangs ominously over all six lanes of the Mass Pike. “It’s not in the center of attention, so I could make lots of mistakes in the beginning,” Howell says of the location. “You forget things more quickly than you might imagine.”

As part of that process, “I really have had to concede that my taste buds are not king of the hill, and there are other valid ways to really appreciate coffee.”

This was not an easy conclusion for Howell to come to. “I had to think this out for a while, because I’ve been talking farmer, farmer, farmer, farmer. Okay, but where’s my final loyalty? Is it farmer, or consumer? Farmer, consumer? And it has to be consumer, otherwise I’m a liar. Consumer first, and right behind it, the farmer.”

Howell believes that, like the Frappuccino before it, this turn toward pleasing the crowd can help fund the stuff he’s really into. The specialty-coffee market, for all its attention to terroir and economic justice and tidy brand narratives, is still a market, and size is power. For example, when the company started

expanding in the early aughts, Stumptown threw its weight around to buy up all of the prized Bourbon beans from El Injerto, one of the most famous Guatemalan farms. “They allowed me to take some of it, but then there came a day when they said, ‘Look, we’re going through it so fast, we want it all,’ and I could only say, ‘Thank you very much for letting me have it while you did.’ And that was that.”

Opening a new kiosk in the Boston Public Market and store in downtown Boston’s Godfrey Hotel won’t suddenly inflate Howell to Stumptown proportions, but he does hope it will be the first of many more George Howells dotting the cities of the nation, and give him a platform to make his coffee case to the public.

He’s most giddy telling me about the three-thousand-square-foot teaching kitchen that will be at his disposal at the Boston Public Market (and which *America’s Test Kitchen* will be sharing). “I sent them a plan already,” he says. “We want to do three different things,” including a class on home espresso machines, a pairing session with other vendors in the Market, and, of course, his PowerPoint presentation, expanded into what he calls Coffee 101, which comes with cuppings and tastings to illustrate whatever’s going on onscreen.

But the shop in the Godfrey will be the true test: either the third-wave coffee temple that Coffee Connection or Copacafé could have been, or perhaps the last word in the storied coffee career of George Howell.

When we spoke, he already knew what it would look like: glass on all sides, with soft woods and cool-toned tiles near the big bar and warmer fabrics toward the back. Two big Kees van der Westen espresso machines on the right, a Modbar off to the left by the plein-air pastry pile to brew the drip, a place for customers to sit

down and order flights of pour-over—Howell’s happy apotheosis of the Coffee Connection French-press bar. Over in a corner, there’s a shrine to beans and a retail zone, with a rollable island for tastings and classes and a whole Williams-Sonoma’s worth of coffee equipment.

Howell looks forward to showing people what he means when he talks about sweetness and clarity, why beans that aren’t frozen taste stale within weeks, and why—this is another pet peeve—talking about coffee as a seasonal product is “crap—I’m not a grocer, I’m a wine merchant.” He’ll show them pictures of his favorite farms on the video-screen menu boards, and get them to blow their *minds* on a new batch fresh from Acton.

Because of all the windowed walls, there might not be much space for the Huichol art, but Howell is determined at least to bring in a coffee tree—whichever kind won’t die in a café near Downtown Crossing in Boston—and plop it in a planter so people know that what they’re drinking came from a plant. (Starbucks already has a few plants in their roaster and tasting room in Seattle, but who cares, he says: “They’re like the 1950s oil billionaire who goes and builds a château in Texas.”)

Behind the bar, or possibly in a back room, there’s going to be an industrial soft-serve machine churning out a “Frappuccino-type drink,” made in the old-school slushie style, and with real espresso (at Starbucks, it’s been made with concentrate for more than a decade).

And there is also a chance that, even in this apex location, the culmination of forty years of cupping and sniffing and beauty and money and bean after bean in the heat of the Probat, there will be cold brew. “I might sell it,” he concedes, “and I will make sure it’s damn good.”

“But I’m not gonna drink it.” **LP**