Competitive Coffee Making and the Crafting of the Ideal Barista

Abstract: Despite widespread attention to issues of gender and economic exploitation at coffee’s agricultural origins, works within coffee scholarship systematically overlook the workers at the final stage of production: baristas, the coffee shop employees who prepare and serve beverages. This article draws from data collected from over four hundred female American specialty coffee baristas to examine how their gender impacts their experiences at coffee competitions. I argue that barista competitions exist in order to legitimate the barista as a type of skilled laborer, but that these attempts rest on highly gendered understandings of skill, professionalism, and performance. Barista competitions attempt to present a unified industry face, but gender remains a salient issue through its unequal presence that renders female baristas as distinct and different from the ideal barista, who is assumed to be male. The conclusions drawn from this case study have broad significance for our understandings of gender and precariousness in the food industry, and the relationship between, and negotiation of, skill and perceived value. The rarefied world of specialty coffee competition magnifies and illuminates extant workplace issues regarding gender, which are characteristic of many forms of low-wage service labor in the United States.

Introduction

At the age of 17, I began a part-time job in a high-end specialty coffee shop, the kind that subscribes to the trade publication Barista Magazine. One day in autumn, a new issue landed that featured on its cover the 2007 World Barista Champion, James Hoffmann. My immediate reaction was: The World Barista what? Although I trust that my inquiries have become more refined over the following 13 years, throughout which I have been involved in coffee both professionally and academically, the underlying question that first sparked my interest in coffee competitions remains: What is a barista champion? Which leads to the possibly more relevant question: Why have one?

The United States Coffee Championships (USCC) are the largest and most hotly contested series of national coffee competitions in the world, forming part of a system that feeds into the World Coffee Championships (WCC). Falling under the umbrella of the USCC are competition events in the categories of barista, latte art, roasting, cup tasting, and manual brewing, in which competing baristas are tasked with serving drinks and performing other duties common to the job, using state-of-the-art coffee brewing equipment. The central role the United States plays in driving global coffee consumption may in part explain why the USCC are the most competitive of the over 50 editions of national coffee championships in terms of both number of regional competitions, rounds, and overall competitor numbers.¹ The USCC attracts baristas who work in specialty coffee, a burgeoning industry that differs from what we consider to be traditional American coffee culture (famous for low-quality, on-the-go coffee whose primary purpose is perhaps to raise productivity rather than provide pleasure) in that it revolves around high-grade coffees that offer unique sensory characteristics. Specialty coffee now accounts for 59 percent of the $12 billion-a-year American coffee industry (Sethi 2017).

In this article, I argue that barista competitions are constructed to be separate from and superior to the coffee shop, while at the same time functioning as a source of inspiration for specialty baristas, offering a clear path to technical improvement for those who aspire to develop in their craft. These competitions exist partly as a means to legitimate the idea of the specialty barista as a serious profession, and partly to position specialty coffee as an industry whose practitioners are highly skilled; coffee competitions normalize a refined product that requires professional labor to a customer base that pays significantly more on average than for a cup of standard drip coffee. When we critically examine what a barista champion is and who can be one, it becomes clear that there are certain identities that are a ready fit for such a role, and that others—like women—are not. The tensions that are thrown into relief in the sphere of competition reflect the larger problem of the inequalities that define the specialty barista’s quotidian experiences in the café and reflect the unequal advancement of women within the specialty coffee industry at large.
The conclusions I draw from this case study have broad significance for our understandings of gender and precariousness in the food industry and the relationship between, and negotiation of, skill and perceived value. The rarefied world of specialty coffee competition magnifies and illuminates extant workplace issues regarding gender, which are characteristic of many forms of low-wage service labor in the United States.

Research Methods

This article details primary data regarding women’s experiences in coffee competitions that were collected between September 2014 and March 2015. The research focuses on whether and to what extent gendered inequalities and discrimination are inherent in the apparatuses of barista competitions; whether, and if so the extent to which, these have affected women’s participation and success in the USCC; and the implications that these findings have for women’s advancement in the profession. In addition to conducting participant-observation at the 2015 USCC in Long Beach, California, which encompassed five separate categories of competition, I watched hundreds of videos of competition routines from previous years, and have attended many other national and international barista competitions to collect data on the differential experiences of men and women competitors. The United States Barista Championship (USBC), the largest of the USCC’s competitions in terms of competitor numbers, forms the backbone of this article’s analysis, but data from other events under the USCC umbrella, in particular the United States Latte Art Championship (USLAC) and United States Brewers Cup (USBrC), are included.

To gather data for this article, I identified participants through social contacts and word-of-mouth referral sampling and distributed a 35-question survey online via coffee industry forums and social media that asked for female American specialty baristas who were willing to talk about their workplace and competition experiences. A total of 423 respondents completed surveys, of whom 25 were selected for follow-up interviews. All names have been changed and identifying details removed, except for the publicly available names of competition winners.

This article examines the USCC and a consideration of the ideal barista that the event aims to construct, in light of the intersections between precarious labor, professionalization, and gender. I show how the competition format struggles with gender, even as it purports to support a unified barista community and professional identity. At specialty coffee competitions, it becomes evident that a woman is never just a barista; that the qualifier “woman” is always necessary, and that the ideal barista is constructed and reinforced as a man.

Here, it is imperative to clarify the term “barista,” and the particular category of barista with which this article concerns itself. “Barista” refers to anyone whose primary job is making and serving coffee—one can think of them as the coffee industry’s version of bartenders—but this definition encompasses a broad range of sites of employment, from drive-thru kiosks on the sides of highways to cafés inside supermarkets, any Starbucks location, and upscale coffee houses. While the construction of “specialty” will be considered in-depth later in this work, note that unless otherwise specified, this article concerns itself with specialty baristas—i.e., those baristas working in shops that serve specialty coffee, and where the predominant focus is coffee itself. Specialty baristas are classed as such based not only on their individual skills but also the quality of the product they serve and the types of establishments in which they work. Specialty coffee shops in the United States are largely independent businesses, either individual stores or small—generally local or regional—chains.

Situating the Work of Specialty Baristas

Coffee has joined a host of other beverages and foodstuffs experiencing a surge in artisanal forms in recent decades, particularly in developed economies (see Gatrell, Reid, and Steiger 2014 for an overview of the resurgence of artisanal foods). While “specialty coffee” can, in its broadest definition, refer to the material quality of a raw coffee—any coffee graded at 80 or above on the Specialty Coffee Association’s (SCA) 100-point grading scale—the designation is as much an abstract construction of social value as an indicator of coffee’s material quality (Fischer 2017). The SCA, the foremost international organization dedicated to specialty coffee, establishes standards that are “a quantifiable and qualifiable measure, based upon scientific testing, [and] which set values and/or ranges for coffee” (SCA 2019a). To conduct grading assessments, professional coffee tasters assess the tastes and aromas of brewed coffee and look for the presence of defects in a process known as cupping, which first occurs at the farm where the coffee is grown but is then repeated throughout the supply chain as the coffee moves toward the consumer. In order to retain its classification, a specialty coffee must maintain a minimum score of 80 at all stages until it reaches the barista to be used as the base material for a specialty coffee beverage; as the SCA (2019a) puts it, “specialty can only occur when all of those involved in the coffee value chain work in harmony and maintain a keen focus on standards and excellence from start to finish.”
Many specialty coffee establishments today identify as “third wave” coffee, a coexisting classificatory category that helps to make sense of the tension between the social and material definitions of specialty. According to the late food critic Jonathan Gold (2008), third wave is a movement toward beans “sourced from farms instead of countries,” and “[where] roasting is about bringing out rather than incinerating the unique characteristics of each bean.” It entails a focus on quality at both ends of the production chain. Many specialty coffee professionals advocate a parallel between high-end coffee and fine wines in terms of the respective industries’ emphasis on terroir and the geographic rootedness of the base agricultural product (Scholer 2018). While second-wave coffee was characterized by the Starbucks model—informed by Italian espresso culture and intended to bring reliably good espresso-based coffee beverages to the masses—Starbucks does not fit within current industry understandings of specialty or third-wave coffee, in part because it does not necessarily use beans that meet the 80-point threshold and in part because of the company’s reliance on automatic espresso machines that automate much of the work of the barista. Third-wave coffee places great emphasis on machinery and technology which, as sociologist John Manzo (2014: 5) has written, “facilitate[s] and militate[s] a social form that one does not find in chain ‘second wave’ shops.” The purpose of this technology, however, is to extract the absolute highest-quality coffee—and not necessarily to do so in the most efficient way. Moreover, the presence of a high-end piece of coffee equipment is not valuable in itself: a technically skilled barista is necessary to craft the best coffee possible in concert with the machinery. These shifting definitions work together to differentiate specialty by emphasizing certain aspects of coffee (e.g., its unique sensory characteristics) and downplaying others (e.g., coffee as a commodity).

The nebulous boundaries of what is known as the “specialty coffee industry” or the “specialty coffee community” ring a production and supply chain that reaches from the agricultural origin of the bean to the beverage served by the barista (Quintão, Brito, and Belk 2017). While specialty coffee consumption has been investigated in literature on consumers’ preferences, aesthetics, ethics, and understandings of commodity and supply chains (Bookman 2013, 2014; Raynolds 2002; Reitz 2007; Smith 2018), particularly with regard to the emerging middle and creative classes (Ferreira and Ferreira 2018; Shaker Ardekani and Rath 2017), there has been relatively little research on baristas. There are no reliable statistics on the number of baristas in the United States, typically taught by senior staff members staff or designated trainers. As Piercy (2013) has noted, “depending on the workplace environment, the identity of the barista can be bestowed by members of the community of practice involving others in the industry, including workers, owners, roasters and other coffee industry experts.” To be successful in specialty coffee, a barista needs technological competence, a knack for mental arithmetic (in order to, for example, adjust standard brewing beans, water, and time ratios), the ability to think on one’s feet, and multisensory awareness. To create a perfect espresso at a bar, the barista must juggle these skills in “a performance that lasts 90 seconds” (Madrigal 2014). Nearly all baristas who compete in competitions work in high-end third-wave establishments characterized by an emphasis on superior sensory experiences, service, and education. For instance, 29 of the 52 competitors of the 2018 USBC worked for and competed in the name of establishments that are classified by the SCA as specialty coffee shops (at least 55 percent of their revenue derives from coffee and coffee-related products), with only two being independent competitors who did not represent a specific establishment, and the remaining barista working in a high-end restaurant that offers a quality coffee program.

Skilled baristas are required to master the embodied knowledge of coffee making and sensory experience, yet in the United States they typically receive the minimum wage, plus tips. A 2014 survey found that the average specialty coffee barista earned $22,000—nearly $30,000 under that year’s median income (Nylander 2014). While there is no formal distinction between full- and part-time baristas, it is worth noting that it is rare for even full-time baristas to be salaried workers—most are paid by the hour. Two recent doctoral theses have examined the role of baristas as key players in coffee’s value chain. Gemma Piercy (2018) looked at how the artisanal skills of baristas are obscured by the nature of the service encounter as a form of commodity fetishism within contemporary capitalism, which renders invisible the personal and human aspects of the worker, while Brian Ott (2018) has proposed a framework of “low-wage connoisseurship” to describe the skilled embodied and sensory labor that baristas perform for modest remuneration. Both scholars place baristas squarely within the “precariat”: like many in the food-service and hospitality industries, baristas are often employed in low-wage, hourly positions, enjoying few if any benefits, and following unstable and shifting work schedules (Bernson 2013; USDoL 2019).
The labor of baristas sits at an uneasy nexus between the production and consumption ends of the coffee supply chain. Baristas are involved in the creation of the final beverage product but remain distant from the rural landscapes that dominate the stereotypical image of coffee production. Overall, the role can be said to reflect this dualism; baristas guide the customer through the process of choosing and understanding their coffee. Agnieszka Rojewska, the 2018 World Barista Champion (and the first-ever female WBC winner), has stated that the job of the specialty barista is to be the point of “communication between customers and the coffee industry. [Baristas] should be that bridge that represents the values of the whole industry” (Muñoz Hernández 2018). Specialty baristas master high-end equipment, prepare quality drinks, and are ready to impart in-depth knowledge about coffee to consumers such as its origin, how it was grown, what flavors to expect, and how one should best drink it (Guimarães et al. 2016).

In the United States, service industry positions such as the barista are typically considered to be unskilled; according to Phillips and Taylor (1980: 82), “Skill is often an ideological category imposed on certain types of work by virtue of the sex and power of the workers who perform it.” The barista is an excellent case in point; jobs typically associated with part-time employment (such as restaurant and coffee-shop work) tend to be accompanied by connotations of little prestige and skill, and are disproportionately held by women (Horrell, Rubery, and Burchell 1990; Hesmondhalgh and Baker 2015). There has been an increasingly vocal movement within the industry to re-categorize the barista as a form of skilled labor. In the words of Counter Culture Coffee educator Jenna Gotthelf, there is an urgent need to “change the perception of being a barista from a job with an expiration date to a skilled career of potential” (Joseph 2019).

There is limited research which indicates that, as in other food service industry positions, women in specialty coffee continue to bear the brunt of lower-status tasks such as dishwashing, cleaning, and cashing, and spend less time working directly with coffee than their male counterparts. Participants in my study (Parrish 2018) reported significant differences in the ways men and women experience the café workspace, which the author compares with sociologist Elaine Hall’s notion of gendered work organization, whereby “job tasks, and not just the workers performing them, are loaded with gendered meanings” (1993: 454). Likewise, respondents in Brickner and Dalton’s study of Canadian barista unionization efforts, also reported a strong employer preference toward cis-gendered males, who are “cut more slack in terms of their performance,” while women tend to be “made to cook and clean more or stay longer or do more of the emotional care work” (2019: 492). Recent parallel research looking at chefs in high-end restaurants has echoed these findings; Harris and Giuffre (2015) have established that women are obliged to perform more menial work tasks, and that it takes longer for them to be moved up to higher-prestige kitchen positions. Another study pointed out the difficulties inherent in studying women in overworked service positions, with the authors claiming that they were “limited by women’s lack of availability for interviews due to their professional duties” (Haddaji, Albors-Garrigós, and García-Segovia 2017: 336). The actions of customers within coffee shops tend to mirror the common gendered understanding of job tasks and perpetuate the association between women and less technical and more servile duties.

A clear pattern emerges based on the reports of the female baristas who participated in these studies: they are expected to spend more time engaging in duties coded a priori as feminine (such as cleaning and cashing), while there is a similar perception that their male counterparts spend more time on the craftsman duties of preparing coffee. These and other differential workplace expectations were cited by my participants as significant impediments in their path to competition. This suggests that preconceived associations between men and skilled labor and between women and menial tasks remain entrenched within specialty coffee workplaces, even as definitions of skill are being renegotiated in relation to the culinary status potential of coffee.

Anyone familiar with the corpus of social science writing on gender and labor will be aware of the devaluation of female labor as activities traditionally associated with the domestic world move into the public sphere and become “professionalized” and concurrently “masculinized.” The dominance of men as chefs (Harris and Giuffre 2010; Hyman 2008) and fashion designers (Coyle 1982; Crane 1999) are two well-worked examples of this trend; in the context of traditional society, most cooking and clothes-making was done by women in the home, but as a result of increasing industrialization, these activities are now typically performed in the public sphere in restaurants and factories, and their attendant association with men led to higher prestige.

Coffee, it turns out, is no different. When it first spread beyond its indigenous areas of cultivation, coffee was a rare, luxury good, and the domain of men; it was mostly prepared and taken in coffee houses from which, in many instances, women were outright barred (Pendergrast 2010). As Mintz (1985) has written, coffee followed the trajectory of sugar, and made its way into the home as it became more common, affordable, and advantageous to participation within capitalist-industrialist society. By the late nineteenth century, the preparation of coffee was firmly entrenched in the domestic domain.
and was considered to fall within the sphere of women (Reitz 2007). However, the invention of the espresso machine in Italy in the early twentieth century and the institutionalization of the coffee break in American workplaces—then dominated by men—complicated the spatial split of where coffee was consumed, moving these new masculinized styles of coffee consumption back outside domesticity on both sides of the Atlantic (Morris 2013, 2018). Early steam-powered lever espresso machines required not only technical proficiency but also significant upper-body strength to operate, which largely restricted their use to men. This may go some way toward explaining the enduring link between men and the espresso machine, as well as why women’s association with coffee remained confined to the home kitchen.

COMPETITION AND COMMERCE

In the context of low-wage service work that nonetheless demands a high degree of sensory and technical skill, barista competitions present specialty coffee as being both worthy of professional appreciation and a sophisticated culinary endeavor. New York City Coffee: A Caffeinated History author Erin Meister (2013) wrote elsewhere that barista competitions “prove that coffee is something that can be prepared meaningfully; showcased professionally and theatrically; and taken seriously.” As such, competitions are important aspects of the creation of the “ideal barista,” produce a specific cultural image of and celebrate the barista, and offer the promise of recognition of hard work, drive, and knowledge, as baristas work together to create a shared standard for and celebration of excellence. Importantly, success in coffee competitions can give rise to lucrative career opportunities that would otherwise remain inaccessible. A profile of 2018 USBC winner Cole McBride notes that as a “repeat USBC finalist, he’s had his pick of gigs” (Chandra 2018). A successful competition can represent a sought-after escape from shift work, while maintaining the cachet of working in the specialty coffee industry—no longer populated by Ott’s minimum-wage connoisseurs but instead home to salaried workers with contracts and perhaps even benefits such as health care.

The USBC does not offer an immediate financial motive to compete—the grand prize is a trip to a coffee-producing country—but winning the top slot confers a plethora of indirect benefits. Competition winners have repeatedly gone on to start their own well-known coffee shops and roasteries, while several have told me that their champion status has helped them to obtain business loans and attract potential partners. Winning a competition helps baristas “gain celebrity status that bring[es] high-paying contracts for consultancy and endorsements” of specialized coffee products such as grinders or cleaning solutions (Morris 2018: 161).

Specialty coffee’s name openly acknowledges the long-established connection between food, class, and prestige, which scholarship has addressed, particularly after the pioneering work of Goody (1982) and Bourdieu (1984). The coffee industry strives to position barista work as a culinary craft in order to gain legitimacy and increase public respect for what is often perceived to be unskilled labor. This approach is a response to the fact that barista work is rarely considered a legitimate career choice and may well result in economic hardship; evolving the position of a barista from “coffee server” to “coffee artist” enables practitioners to draw more cultural capital, setting both producers and product apart from the socially dominant fast-coffee experience exemplified by the Starbucks model (Elliott 2001; Smith Maguire and Hu 2013). The enduring association between women and unskilled labor and between men and technological proficiency plays out in the realm of specialty coffee in such a way that male baristas are better able to take advantage of the class and prestige advantages that are slowly accruing to barista work.

The Making of the Barista Champion

The site of a coffee competition—an environment insulated from the menial distractions and tasks of the café space—not only creates a space where the nature of the ideal barista can be negotiated but also functions as a locus where the tensions and contradictions between what makes a good barista and what makes a good barista champion are thrown into relief. What, then, makes a barista champion? The USCC’s competition rules and regulations state:

The judges are looking for baristas who:

I. Have a mastery of technical skills, craftsmanship, communication skills, and service skills and are passionate about the barista profession

II. Have a broad understanding of coffee knowledge beyond the drinks being served in the competition

III. Prepare and serve high quality beverages; and

IV. May serve as role models and a source of inspiration for others. (USBC 2019: 14)

Competitors are judged based on four broad criteria: competition area (i.e., station cleanliness at the beginning and termination of the routine); taste evaluation (i.e., following a tasting of each individual drink); beverage presentation (i.e., the visual presentation, inclusive of the appearance of the drinks and the
style of the presentation); and technical skills (i.e., operation of the coffee equipment). Baristas are also evaluated based on their professionalism, attention to detail, and appropriateness of apparel—factors intended to quantify the hospitality experience. In the end, all these elements are combined as the judges come to an overall impression. Nothing in this description admits for a gendered bias toward those who would best meet the criteria, yet the female participants in this research repeatedly indicated that they felt that their ability to succeed in the competition environment is restricted by systemic disadvantages and obstacles that penalize and other them as women.

As of January 2020, women hold seven of the 18 USBC titles. Statistics from 2010 to 2017 (the years for which complete datasets are available) indicate that women perform very well overall throughout the competition arena. 31 percent of competitors at the USCC are women, and 41 percent of them advance past the first round. Men make up 69 percent of all competitors and advance past the first round at a rate of 52 percent. Consider a hypothetical situation in which the 161 competitors included in this dataset were made up of equal numbers of men and women. Based on the above rates at which women and men advance to the semifinals, instead of the 25:51 split we currently see, the breakdown would be closer to 11:14—narrowing the gender gap at the semifinal stage considerably. These data prove that women are capable and competent competitors in coffee tournaments, but that there exist bottlenecks at both the point of entry to the competitions (there are substantially fewer female entrants than male) and at the level of the overall champion (fewer than half of all USBC champions have been women).

These competitions cannot be divorced from the day-to-day experiences of the barista working in her café, so it is relevant to consider the rates of women’s competitive success in the context of work experiences and competition aspirations. Competitions only test craft-based skills such as technical precision, deep knowledge of coffee (both sensorially and historically), and knowledge transfer, to the exclusion of banal yet no less crucial skills that are essential for all baristas (specialty or otherwise), whether they are working in a stand in the mall, Starbucks, or a chic brew bar in Brooklyn, such as managing unruly customers, mental arithmetic, handling money, dealing with unexpected and disruptive events, and cleaning. This restriction to “glamorous” skills serves to place the competition barista and craft coffee as “above” the more tedious realities of low-wage shift work, highlighting the underlying tension between specialty coffee’s ethical orientation and the need for coffee businesses to remain economically viable.

As I have shown (Parrish 2018), male baristas perform fewer noncraft tasks than their female colleagues and are thereby able to spend more time honing the skills that are tested in competition. Due to the gendered differences in the café work environment, female competitors are forced to work against an inherent structural disadvantage, while companies frequently choose to sponsor baristas already recognized as technically superb to attend competitions, and these are much more likely to be male. Competition participation further helps baristas to hone their technical skills, and signals to employers that baristas are serious about coffee as a craft and profession; nevertheless, the persistence of gendered understandings of who is to perform technical and skilled labor means that this avenue for career progression is unavailable to many women.

The following sections will present ethnographic examples from women baristas that examine their unequal access to the competition sphere, physical aspects of the competition space, expectations they face concerning appearance and presentation, and the discursive construction of women competitors as “women” first and “baristas” second. These testimonials indicate that despite women’s on-average exceptional performance at competition, they are still experientially and symbolically rendered as “the other” within the competition realm, as distinct from an assumed default.

ACCESS AND INFRASTRUCTURE

“Honestly, a lot of the lady baristas I know feel like they’re already on show, under scrutiny, when they’re at work. In general, they don’t feel like seeking out more of that, or harsher judgment, in their free time,” according to Ellie, a barista with five years’ experience. A great many of the other women interviewed for this article reported no interest in competing, in part because of their reluctance to endure further and more formal judgment of their workplace performance and appearance. There was a strong perception among the respondents that coffee competitions were “boys’ clubs,” “pissing contests,” and “dick-measuring contests,” and a space in which women would or do feel unwelcome.

Of the women who are nonetheless still motivated to compete, many report a lack of support for their aspirations that affects their ability to access and prepare for competitions. The respondents said that when they express initial interest in competing, their ambitions are frequently brushed off or even ridiculed by co-workers or superiors. Selma was overjoyed to be offered a position at an internationally renowned coffee company known for fielding many high-achieving competitive baristas. “I was so excited at the prospect of competition and wanted to get my skills and knowledge up to that level. I got a job at [company redacted] for that reason,” she said. “But after
a year on the cash register with little training, I grew disheartened and left.” Selma was by no means a novice or inexperienced barista; at the time of her hire by the company, she had already worked for six years as a professional barista.

Sarah also mentioned an interest in entering competitions but faced even more direct resistance and dismissal than Selma. “In my shop,” Sarah stated, “it’s always expected that the guys will compete … but even suggesting that I wanted to compete was taken as a complete joke. My boss actually laughed in my face!”

An additional infrastructural barrier is the financial burden of competition, highlighted by many respondents as an influence on their decision not to compete. Although competing is universally costly (requiring competitors to foot the bill for travel, lodging, time off work, and investment in supplies, among other expenses), some women reported gendered inequalities in the price of tournament participation. Lena stated that for months, she paid out of pocket for the beans and milk she used to practice, before discovering that her company was fully covering the cost of supplies for the two male competitors also representing her company. On the other side of the country at a completely unrelated company, Myra reported exactly the same situation and evinced the same response to it: “Yeah, I felt like shit [when I found out].”

Travel costs can be a particular burden for women, given that many are unwilling to share rooms with male competitors, and are therefore forced to pay more for accommodation than men, who are better able to secure roommates, given their higher numbers. In the words of one competitor, “It’s unreasonable to expect that I’d be okay sharing a room with multiple male co-workers, especially as coffee events often involve a lot of drinking. I have to put myself in unsafe situations or spend money I don’t have because my company thinks I’m the one being unreasonable.” Laura, a barista with over a decade of experience, echoed the sentiment, emphasizing that while a competition is expensive for everyone, “There are often multiple male competitors who can share costs and housing, while women don’t necessarily have that option. So things can add up quickly.”

Another common issue raised by many respondents is the heights of tables at coffee competitions, accompanied by corresponding anxieties ranging from concerns about technical know-how to a justified fear about whether their clothes will be deemed appropriate—and the knowledge that their male peers will not be subjected to a similar sartorial judgment. While the criterion for the appropriateness of competitors’ apparel was changed in 2012 from a 0–6 to a yes/no score (now based only on the presence or absence of an apron), clothing choice can still count toward judges’ overall impression score, alongside nebulous factors such as how they interpret the “professionalism” of the barista. During the performance itself, this can be very frustrating, as Beatrice experienced: “All of the equipment was way too high during my competition, and when I was standing behind the espresso machine, the judges and audience couldn’t see me!”

While none of the participants stated that they wear heels during shift work, some women said that they are concerned that doing so in a competition may be interpreted as signaling a lack of professionalism or commitment. In the words of Jessica, “I worry that if [the judges] think I won’t be able to stand all day in my shoes, they won’t take me seriously, even though I’m only competing for fifteen minutes.” The issue as to when and where heels are an appropriate part of professional women’s workplace attire has been covered extensively in the academic and popular literature (Reynolds et al. 2018) but is yet to be resolved in the lived experiences of women, particularly with regard to situations such as barista competitions, which take place outside the workplace norm as sites of potentially magnified ambiguity and explicit judgment, where typical protocols may not be relevant. The physical height of some competition stations forces some women to wear high-heeled shoes, which is an obvious instrument of discrimination, albeit an inadvertent one. Since 2017, the World Barista Championship Rules and Regulations update allows baristas to select one of two performance stations of different heights—although the espresso machine table remains at a fixed height for all competitors (World Coffee Events 2019). Unfortunately, there are no such changes scheduled to occur at regional and national competitions in the United States.

The female respondents stated that bare arms, cleavage, and makeup are also sources of concern in competition scenarios, which mirrors research into how workplace culture affects women in other spheres (Dellinger 2002). This is not simply a matter of fashion consciousness; how female baristas dress can have a real impact on others’ perceptions of their workplace and competition performance. For instance, Noola Griffith’s 2008 study of concert violinists found that audiences rated those who wear all-black and modest concert dress as better performers, compared to those who prefer to wear casual or revealing clothes, and similarly, the female baristas who responded to this research expressed worry that their clothing might negatively influence purportedly impartial judging panels. These concerns voiced by women competitors, alongside a review of photo galleries of past editions of the USBC and USBrC, indicate that women tend to adopt individualized solutions to the issue of how to dress “appropriately” and “professionally.” This is an additional source of pre-competition anxiety for some
women, while there is no evidence that this issue affects their male counterparts; male professional dress is treated as the default and tends not to vary much among competitors—button-down shirts and smart trousers or jeans are the established norm. The experiences of the respondents in this article explicitly bear out the theoretical notion that clothing choices are a central element of gender construction. Ashley explained how she decides what to wear on the day of competition: “Do I wear womenswear or menswear?” She has an answer but not a solution: “Both are dangerous. If I wear womenswear, I’m in danger of people calling my outfit ‘too sexy’ or ‘not professional’ or ‘overly formal’ or ‘not formal enough.’ On the other hand, if I wear menswear, [it might be seen as] ‘not feminine enough’ or ‘costumey’… Can’t win.” While Ashley acknowledges the likelihood that she will be penalized whatever her clothing choice, Teresa claimed that the best choice for a female participant in a coffee competition is to dress in a style more reflective of men’s professional clothing: “My most professional outfits are pencil skirts and blazers and heels—which are not appropriate for competition. For men, it’s the same no matter what—nice slacks, comfortable shoes, and a button-down. The best we gals can do in competitions is to dress like the men.”

WINNING WHILE FEMALE

In the realm of competitive coffee, women are constructed in unidimensional terms: through the consistent employment of gendered attributes in event emcee commentary, interviews, media coverage, and their own reported experiences, women are othered; this gendered construction differentiates them from the default, unmodulated barista, who is a man. A gendered qualifier is always needed for women; the default barista who is negotiated and constructed at competitions is male. A case in point is that of Sarah Anderson, crowned the first female winner of the 2015 US Brewers Cup. When she was announced as the winner, the organizers played the 1971 Tom Jones song “She’s a Lady.”

As the song unfolded, the two men seated next to me looked at each other and then at me; the nearer man asked me, “Is this really happening?” Much of the audience appeared visibly uncomfortable, as the hosts danced and sang along to a song that specifically highlighted Anderson’s identity as a woman. Needless to say, there were no equivalent musical selections for any of the male competitors, despite many public tongue-in-check calls on social media for the song to be played again for the overall USBC winner (whether male or female), or for “It’s Raining Men” to be used to announce a male victor.

The othering of female competitors, and the tacit belief that the default competitor is a man, are also demonstrated by the experiences of Angie Chun; when she was crowned the winner of the 2015 US Latte Art Championship, the host exclaimed, “[She’s] making sure the females represent!” His co-host replied, “Did you see that look of surprise on her face when she was announced? Stunning!” Many respondents raised concerns about how their looks tend to take precedence over their technical skills at competitions; Rebecca, a seasoned competitor, mentioned that on one occasion, “Members of specialty coffee whom I greatly respected and admired focused more on my physicality than on my routines.” This was a significant disadvantage in training and preparing for competition because “it was difficult to gain accurate feedback from male baristas. On more than one occasion, my outward appearance was commented on more so than my actual routine.” Another female competitor voiced her dissatisfaction with announcers’ propensity for commenting on women’s appearance: “I can’t tell them to fuck off. The judges are still there. I know they are supposed to stop judging as soon as I call time, but I don’t want to leave them with any negative impression.” In the competition context, it can be difficult or even detrimental for women to speak up about the discrimination they face.

When the announcer said that Angie Chun was “making sure the females represent,” Chun’s status as a woman was brought front and center; this comment negated any professional or other intersectional identity she may possess. Given that Chun’s brother finished third at the USLAC, and that the two work together at a coffee shop they also own, this interesting family background offers the announcer an easy opportunity to make some relevant patter, introducing Angie as “making sure the Chun family represent.” Given the contemporary controversy as to how to publicly talk about race and ethnicity in the United States (see Pollock 2005), it should not be surprising that the announcers chose not to mention that Chun was “making sure Korean Americans represent.” In the event, the hosts chose to draw attention to the success of women to showcase the alleged inclusivity deemed to be a feature of specialty coffee as an industry, and to refrain from answering uncomfortable questions that address issues of race, ethnicity, or other intersectional identities.

The example of Angie Chun compares unfavorably with the celebrations of US Barista Champion Charles Babinski when he was crowned minutes later at the USBC: there was generic instrumental dance music, no mention of his gender, and subsequent media coverage emphasized the excellence of his coffee and how he deserved his victory, having finished as runner-up for the preceding three years. The two female winners of the USCC were presented explicitly as women, thereby positing gender as a salient issue through its unequal
industry-approved, masculinized expectations reinforces and perpetuates the exclusion of nonhegemonic performances and identities, while at the same time reinforcing gendered interpretations of skilled versus unskilled labor. In her writing on race in beauty pageants, Sarah Banet-Weiser (1999: 129) states that in both culture and competition, “[d]ifference is bounded by a heavily surveyed conception of ‘moral bodies’ that is, in turn, tightly bound up in—indeed constitutive of—discourses of whiteness.” While the experiences of Angie Chun allude to the importance of race, in coffee competitions, difference is primarily bound up in discourses of gender, and the contemporary competition format is unable to adequately contain these differences.

The common strategies employed to legitimate the designation of sensory and craft practitioners such as baristas as skilled labor—not to mention the notion that specialty coffee is worth paying more for—tie this skill to a long tradition of male visibility and success outside the home and the devaluation of women’s labor within capitalist systems. It is interesting to note that women perform better than men at coffee competitions, relative to their rate of participation, suggesting that female baristas possess a high level of skill overall, despite the disadvantages they face both entering and performing at competition. When women compete, they remain “the other,” a distinct entity compared to the default (male) barista, which should make us look more critically at the presentation through competitions of a unified and professional barista community. While the data gathered in this research has only looked directly at gender, participants’ comments make it clear that other intersectional identities also have a profound impact on their work experience and competition trajectories. Brickner and Dalton (2019) have begun important work on the precarious nature of employment among queer baristas in Canada, but continued research on specialty coffee must endeavor to understand how these other aspects of identity affect how service workers from diverse backgrounds navigate the forms of discrimination they may encounter in the workplace and beyond.

The gaps and contradictions that affect the ways in which the coffee competition system has attempted to grapple with gender issues in the course of the professionalization and legitimation of the field have proved a useful angle from which to answer the questions I first asked myself, when I discovered that barista competitions exist: What is a barista champion? Why have such competitions and barista champions at all? The goal of these competitions is to promote excellence in the coffee craft, and to create unity within a geographically dispersed professional community, but this is only one part of the picture; competitions also create and promote normative ways
of doing, making, and being within the specialty coffee community, and do so with the aim of professionalizing the industry to ensure its long-term economic success. The existence of barista champions helps to showcase an image of career potential and longevity for baristas, as well as recognizing the hard work and skill that is a feature of a career path that nevertheless remains low-paid. Furthermore, it should be remembered that barista competitions are not exclusively aimed at baristas and coffee industry professionals; they are intended to legitimate the notion of the barista as a serious profession among broader society, and position coffee work as a craft whose practitioners are highly skilled in order to normalize the product and the labor among the growing customer base.

Competitions are a platform where the notion of the ideal barista is negotiated and performed, and the cultural values of specialty coffee are embodied. However, barista competitions are problematic for women, given the presence of structural elements that make it more difficult for women to access them and succeed at them; ultimately, the symbolic ideal barista who is presented to both the industry and the public is male. Coffee remains entangled in complex historical narratives that dictate which forms of consumption and production are considered domestic and which are deemed to belong in the public space. The framing of mastery in masculine terms, and the enduring association between male baristas and greater technical skill, have real-world consequences for women, who can find themselves shut out of one of the most effective avenues for career progression available in the industry.

Within the economically precarious labor environment of hourly shift work the United States presents, the promise of recognition and reward that accompanies victory in a craft coffee competition is a tantalizing prospect, but the way extant competitions choose to professionalize baristas entails privileging certain representational types over others. An analysis of barista competitions allows us to probe which kinds of representations and differences are effectively incorporated in the ideological construction of specialty coffee baristas and which are too large to be contained effectively. The tensions and contradictions between the ethos of independence and artisanship that has historically characterized the specialty coffee movement (Morris 2018), along with the need to survive within a capitalist system, underpin much of these struggles. The rarefied world of coffee competition magnifies and illuminates issues that are already a feature of the workplace, and are characteristic of many forms of low-wage service labor in the United States.

NOTES
1. World Coffee Events (WCE) is the SCA subsidiary that is responsible for organizing and licensing the competitions referenced in this article, as well as the corresponding national championships in other countries and the world championships. WCE-sanctioned events are not the only barista competitions, but they remain the dominant competition. Coffee Masters, started in 2015 and which has now seen editions in New York, London, and Milan, is the primary challenger to WCE competitions. Even within the portfolio of events run by WCE, the World Barista Championship (WBC) remains the most prestigious and aspirational—for instance, Barista Magazine reserves one of its covers and feature stories each year for the WBC winner; no such provision exists for the winner of any other competition.
2. Cupping is the process whereby a professional slurps coffee at varying temperatures, coats their palate to obtain the utmost in flavor and aroma, and spits out the coffee while filling in score sheets. The process is reminiscent of a much noisier wine tasting, but here the professional must avoid overcaffeination, not inebriation.
3. The US Department of Labor Statistics counts only the much broader category of “Food and Beverage Serving and Related Workers,” of which there are estimated to be over 5 million.

REFERENCES