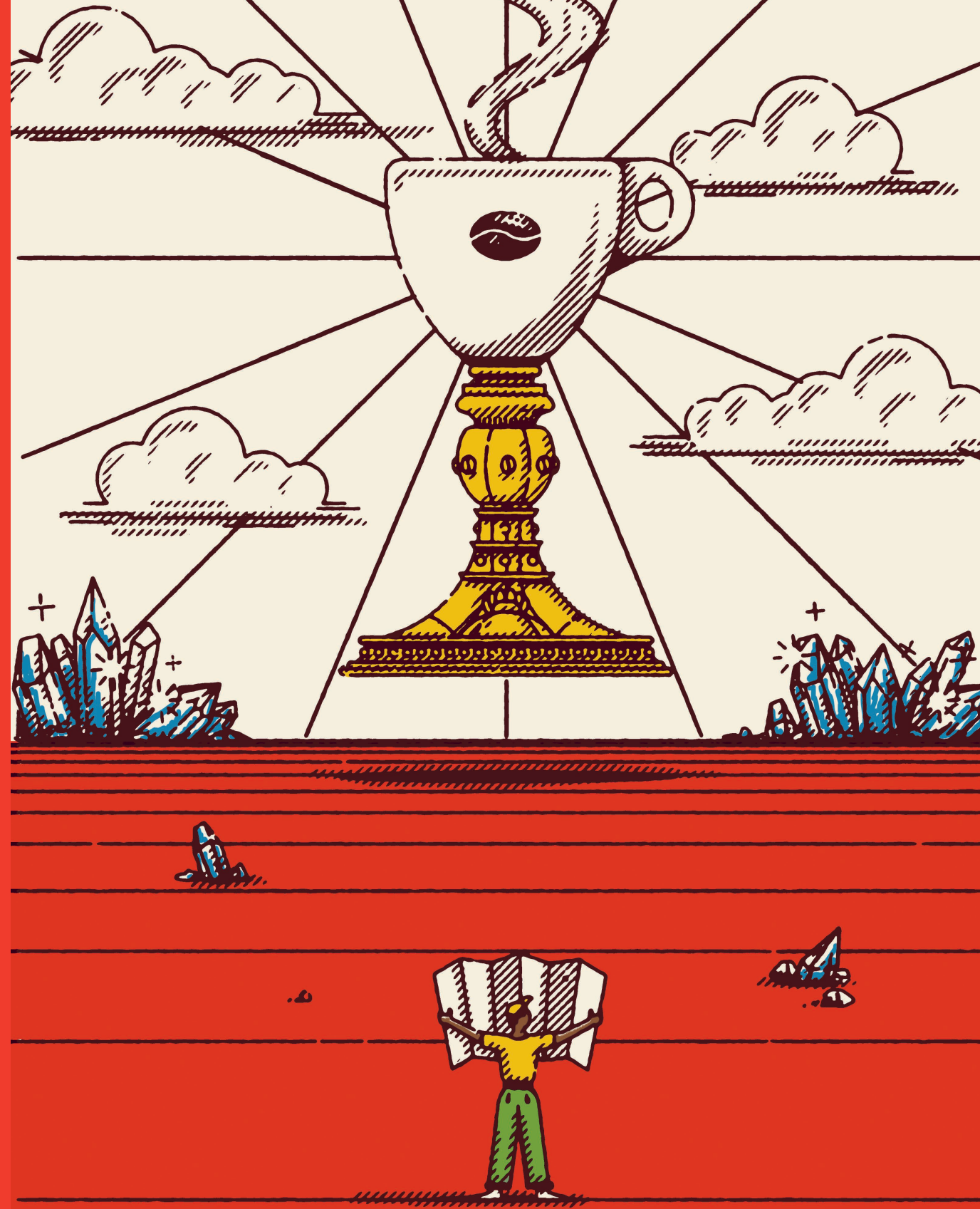


Text by Brian Gaffney  
Images by Michael Haddad

# Wild About Wush Wush:

The story of an Ethiopian coffee,  
its Colombian producer, and an  
American suitor



Until now, the relationship between a coffee cultivar, producer, and end consumer has gone largely unexplored. Here, we recount one enthusiast's technology-enabled journey to a singular varietal, encompassing 14 months, four countries, and nine roasters.

Maybe it's because we're about the same age, only a year or so apart. It could be because I respect its resilient nature, selected as it was, in part, for its resistance to environmental hazards. Perhaps it's because its name is impossible to utter without surrendering a smile. While these are all reasonable explanations for why I am an ardent fan of this coffee, the truth is far simpler: I love the way that a properly prepared cup of Wush Wush presents, from its tropical fruit start to its cocoa close—not to mention a body that recalls the character of a Shiraz from Australia's McLaren Vale region. Courting this cultivar has carried me on a journey to roasters near and far, known and unknown, in pursuit of this exotic, enchanting elixir.

Even by today's specialty coffee standards, Wush Wush is a rare variety. It takes the form of a big tree with good structure, large, hearty leaves, and a strong root system that is native to southwest Ethiopia's Keffa region. It was first collected in 1975 as part of a targeted coffee berry disease (CBD) resistance programme. CBD causes the tree's green cherries to drop before ripening. It was one of only 25 mother trees selected. Wush Wush is also less susceptible and more resilient to coffee leaf rust, which causes infected leaves to fall, short-circuiting a tree's ability to generate energy and yield a crop. However, with good fertilization, proper spacing, and maturity (five or six harvests), Wush Wush produces roughly a kilogram of parchment coffee per harvest. Its name is taken from the initial collection site.

One sample from this first collection was commercially released in 1981, though the variety I thirst for is a sibling of that initial sample, released in 2006—the same year that I began to seriously drink specialty coffee—as part of a local landrace variety programme that re-evaluated



the 1975 selections. Ethiopia's national coffee research institute, the Jimma Agricultural Research Center (JARC), released this second selection as a Specialty Group candidate, having recognized its superior quality and high yield.

### October–December 2018

Wush Wush and I first met in October 2018, introduced by its more worldly and well-known cousin, gesha. I was browsing the website of Italy's Gardelli Specialty Coffee in search of a Gesha Village Coffee Estate natural-process offering when I learned of another variety of Ethiopian origin, this one distinguished by the fact that it is cultivated in Popayán, Colombia by Ceferino Maca on his farm El Zafiro. The description claimed physical characteristics and a cup profile that made it similar to gesha, but with a more pronounced body. It was presented as an unsung hero, a competition-series coffee with a cup score of 93.75 (on *Coffee Review's* 100-point rating scale). I was intrigued by the cultivar's relative obscurity and curiosity triggered, decided to pursue its origin story. I first came across a March 2018 *Time* magazine article waxing epicurean about the 'incomparable, super-complex, and super-rare' Wush Wush being showcased in the special coffee service of New York City's award-winning restaurant Eleven Madison Park (EMP). Maya Albert, EMP's then-coffee director, brewed a Wush Wush from Tolima, Colombia tableside on a Yama Silverton Brewer for \$34 per cup. Satisfied with its *bona fides*, I placed my order, and following a brief detention by US Customs, the coffee arrived.

The dry grounds were reminiscent of preserved tropical fruit, with earth and spice notes that likely result from the anaerobic honey processing. Once brewed, the aroma quickly asserted the coffee's character and confidence; 'I'm not the coffee that America runs on,' it seemed to say. On the palate, the fruit registered as rich and layered; the acidity was balanced; the body presented a jammy volume and viscosity; and the finish was a weird and wonderful combination of cola and cocoa. This coffee felt as good as it tasted.

I brewed the whole of that first 250-gram bag within three weeks, and by the time I returned to the Gardelli website, it was sold out. Undeterred, I renewed my search, ending up at Black & White (B&W) Coffee Roasters (Wake Forest, NC), who were also featuring an anaerobic honey-process Wush Wush. However, this coffee wasn't from El Zafiro, Popayán but rather Finca Monteverde, Tolima—the farm from which EMP likely sourced its Wush Wush. I knew B&W, and the name Finca Monteverde was familiar. A short search through my crate of archived coffee bags was sufficient to reveal a 4-oz pouch from Onyx Coffee Lab (Rogers, AR) that once housed Finca Monteverde's natural-process

gesha. Roaster and farm verified, I ordered, waited, and brewed. It was a solid second outing: pleasant and polite, featuring tasting notes of white wine, complex citrus, and peach.

### January–March 2019

A fresh search for Monteverde’s Wush Wush at the start of 2019 yielded new relationships. First, Switchback Coffee Roasters (Colorado Springs, CO), quickly followed by Steady State Coffee (Carlsbad, CA). Switchback offered Wush Wush processed in two ways: anaerobic honey and anaerobic natural. It wasn’t intended to be a competition, but the natural nonetheless rendered it *nolo contendere*: its aroma and flavour were equally intoxicating. Was this perfume or coffee? The concord grape, strawberry preserve, and ripe black cherry flavours exploded. 12 days off-roast, and it still sang like a chorus in my Chemex. The lyric that ran through my mind whenever I spotted other commuters wielding cups of brew-to-go was, ‘My coffee is a 10, at best you’re all sipping sixes’. Wush Wush and I had now progressed from casual to committed. Steady State also roast an anaerobic natural. Their roast is darker, with a more pungent flavour, and the body is boozy and syrupy.

### April–June 2019

In April 2019, I adopted a more direct approach in my search. Following Finca Monteverde on Instagram showed me its fifth-generation coffee-producing sibling team: Johan, Newerley, and Katerinne Gutiérrez. Katerinne and I subsequently met at the Specialty Coffee Association Expo in Boston, where she generously gifted me with a freshly roasted sample of natural-process Wush Wush. I now had a direct connection with the producer.

Finca Monteverde is a 290-hectare farm located in Herrera, Tolima in west-central Colombia, estimated to be 125 years old. The Gutiérrez family has owned the land for about 80 years. Florestales, as it was originally known, was acquired when the family claimed the abandoned property from the Colombian government circa 1940, when Johan, Newerley, and Katerinne’s grandfather, Oscar Gutiérrez, was less than 10 years old. Coffee varieties such as typica, caturra, and colombia were already growing on the land. After operating the farm as a traditional producer for nearly 70 years, selling wet parchment in town, coffee began to fail the Gutiérrez family, and Oscar and his sons Maximono and Gildardo experienced several difficult seasons in which coffee was not profitable. For a time, they chose to cultivate lulo, the traditional Colombian fruit. Lulo, however, is difficult to grow, labour intensive, and highly susceptible to disease, and did not prove to be



the cash crop the family had hoped. Financial need and a dire outlook forced this traditional coffee-producing family to literally bet the farm on exotic varieties.

Newerley had his first experience with gesha around 2010, when he and Katerinne were pursuing their Q grader licences. The coffee, from Hacienda La Esmeralda (Boquete, Panama), blew his mind, captured his heart, and convinced him that high-specialty coffee, not commodity, could be their farm’s salvation. Johan and Katerinne were easily persuaded and their father Gildardo was supportive of the conversion to gesha, moka, and Wush Wush. Gesha was selected because it commands an established premium, while moka and Wush Wush served as opportunities for differentiation and innovation. The farm’s radical transformation—from 100 per cent traditional varieties to 98 per cent exotic varieties (a small lot of caturra remains)—warranted a new identity, so Florestales became Monteverde, highlighting its beauty and uniqueness in Colombia.

Success wasn’t immediate. The transformation began in 2010. The first harvest followed three years later, and with it came the realization that marketing and selling exotic varieties required new knowledge and skills. Only in the past three or four years have production and sales been consistent, enabling Monteverde to grow from two to approximately 40 buyers, including Brave Bean (Ho Chi Minh, Vietnam), home to the 2019 Vietnamese barista champion Luan Nguyen, who competed with Monteverde’s natural-process Wush Wush.

Newerley (aka Mr Wush Wush) first became aware of the rare variety from Hacienda El Roble (Santander, Colombia) and Colombia’s coffee research institute, CENICAFE. Recounting the first time he cupped a washed Wush Wush, Newerley reminisced: ‘The body was syrupy. Its flavour was floral with spice notes and a sweet finish in the aftertaste; it reminded me of an Ethiopian Yirgacheffe, my favourite coffee.’ Newerley was also intrigued by the name, and believed it would have a real impact. He has been vindicated: Wush Wush now represents 60 per cent of Monteverde’s coffee planting and is processed in five ways, two washed and three natural. The time, money, and effort that the Gutiérrez family has invested to make Wush Wush attractive is now being realized in roasteries and cafés the world over, generating greater consumer awareness and demand—mine included.

Following Expo, my own Wush Wush reserve was in need of replenishment. Web research led me to West Oak Coffee (Denton, TX), who describe Wush Wush as the ‘highest scoring coffee [they’ve] ever purchased’. Brewed, it reminded me of the coffee from Steady State, roasted to accentuate the winy body at the expense of some depth of flavour.

### July–September 2019

Brawn & Brains Coffee (Singapore) would deliver next. They learned of Monteverde's Wush Wush while sourcing coffee beans for Singapore's National Brewers Cup competition, and ended up winning a bronze medal at the 2019 Australian International Coffee Awards and multiple orders from me. With a seven–eight-day span between roast and receipt, the coffee arrived ready to brew. Tasting notes mentioned 'bubblegum, raspberry, sweet peach, pineapple, and cocoa'. Yes, bubblegum!



### October–December 2019

Autumn 2019 found me activating the Expo connection I had made with Katerinne. In mid-October, I replied to one of Monteverde's Instagram stories with an enquiry about US roasteries that sold their coffees, and was directed to Denver, CO.

Queen City Collective Coffee was roasting a red natural-process Wush Wush. A mutual friend introduced them to Katerinne during a recent trip to Denver and after the cupping, they purchased enough to yield approximately fifty 12-oz bags, roasted to showcase 'the coffee's crazy, Jolly Rancher sweetness', according to co-owner Scott Byington. He confessed that Wush Wush had a polarizing effect on Queen City's customers, more 'cup of whoa' than 'cup of joe'. Some loved the unique and intense flavour, but others found it jarring and off-putting. I fell decidedly into the former category, aiding the sell-out of their retail bags, which featured label art by Javier M., a Bogotá-based Colombian artist. Many people drink coffee for its ritual sameness, comfort, and consistency. Wush Wush is not the coffee for them; it is the wild-child I chase after dinner, with a Single Palenque Oaxacan mezcal to add smoke and pepper to the preserved berry fruit.

A later Monteverde referral sent me to Bridge City Coffee (Greenville, SC), who were at that time roasting a red natural-process Wush Wush. This offering was Bridge City's first foray into 'ultra-specialized coffee', and their supply was so limited that it was only available in-store. Thankfully, an email, invoice, and credit card number led to a prompt shipment of two bags. Co-owner Greg Ward told me that Bridge City's team was floored upon first cupping the sample he was given by Katerinne at Expo, and ordered a 35-kilo bag. Bridge City brewed Wush Wush as samples for customers, who could then purchase bags for home brewing, but it sold out so quickly that Greg wasn't able to take one home for himself, despite Wush Wush being his favourite coffee. To me, Bridge City Coffee's roast was superb, featuring notes of coconut, watermelon candy, and wine, and second only to Switchback's natural-process.

My final Monteverde Wush Wush of 2019 came from Rave Coffee (Gloucestershire, England). Unlike my two previous purchases, this



one was not a referral but the result of an Internet search; it was New Year's Eve, after all. Rave were roasting a green natural-process Wush Wush, whose personality was more mellow than the red, featuring notes of pineapple and banana.

No story is complete without an anecdote about the one that got away, and this honour goes to Dou Zhai Coffee & Roast (Taoyuan City, Taiwan). They rated Monteverde's red natural-process Wush Wush a 94, and though I wasn't able to taste their roast, their description is as sublime as the coffee: 'unorthodox but coherent and compelling ... an extraordinary coffee, difficult to characterize in typical coffee language, yet deeply satisfying, ringing with quiet, resonant authority.' I second that!

From October 2018 through December 2019, I had the pleasure of experiencing Finca Monteverde's Wush Wush coffee from eight roasters in three countries and along the way, I became a genuine fan of the Finca Monteverde brand and its principal product. 'You are our most faithful consumer. Please write to us when you need [something],' read the Instagram direct message I received from Monteverde in October 2019. The producer–consumer feedback loop was complete.

### Looking forward

'Very few coffee enthusiasts can name a handful of coffee cultivars and give you their preference. It's just not how we talk about coffee ... yet,' remarked coffee-processing consultant Lucia Solis in her *Making Coffee...* podcast. I agree, and claim that this is because very few coffee enthusiasts possess sufficient experience to have a cultivar preference, which generally requires repeated positive outcomes from one of two scenarios: a) a consumer's patient, perennial relationship with a single roaster who buys from the same producer over multiple seasons; or b) a consumer passionate enough to pursue relationships with multiple roasters, ideally buying from the same producer within a single season. As the technology to support the above scenarios matures and is more widely adopted, we may find that Solis's 'yet' is just around the corner.

As for my own preference, I am indebted to the Gutiérrez family for the opportunity to enjoy the literal fruit of their labour. They not only grow coffee; they guide consumers to it, who then support the roasters selling it. Technology has enabled a revolution in the specialty coffee customer journey. In the words of economist and coffee marketing expert Luis F. Samper, Finca Monteverde is 'beginning to look at their origin—their own farm, community, region, and country—as a brand,' and this positioning has the potential to reverberate throughout the entire specialty coffee value chain. May the Gutiérrez family's harvests forever be profitable and abundant, and may Wush Wush always be available for our consumption.

# Wush

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