

Your choice of latte
can give coffee
growers thousands of
miles away a real lift.



1 Java with justice

Since 1999 the nonprofit TransFair USA has certified more than 100 million pounds of Fair Trade coffee, guaranteeing farmers a reasonable price for their crop. The extra income has brought running water, medical services, and scholarship funds to remote Latin American, Asian, and African villages. Wildlife benefits, too: Typically, the beans are grown under shade trees that provide shelter for migratory birds—unlike conventional, sun-grown coffee, which contributes to deforestation and soil erosion. A number of roasters beyond Green Mountain—for example, Equal Exchange and Pura Vida—carry the ethical coffee. Just look for the “fair trade certified” label. “The more people buy it, the stronger the market becomes, and the more difference it will make,” says Gareth Green, PhD, an associate professor at Seattle University’s Albers School of Business and Economics. TransFair USA, the only organization of its kind in the country, also certifies tea, chocolate, fresh fruit, sugar, and rice. ▶

The Good Shopper

Organic flowers. Fair-traded coffee. Local produce. If every one of us made a few tiny, easy adjustments to our shopping lists, we could—no exaggeration—change the world.

What are we waiting for? Barry Yeoman gets us started.

BEFORE 2001 THE COFFEE-growing families of Xanica, a tiny village in Mexico’s Oaxaca State, had no electricity, no place to buy groceries, no money for girls’ education. “These people lived in dirt poverty, under the thumb of a large plantation owner,” says Matt Warning, PhD, an economist at the University of Puget Sound who has visited several times for research.

Today, however, a tidy store sells cooking oil, soap, and canned goods. Many houses have new concrete floors and, in some cases, power. The girls attend school. There’s a storehouse for corn, a small-business-loan program for women, a carpentry shop, and a community beekeeping enterprise.

The dramatic change is the result of the farmers’ banding together and—with the help of an Oregon-based company, Sustainable

Harvest Coffee Importers—forming a cooperative to get better prices for their coffee. The beans are certified as “Fair Trade” and sold in the United States by specialty firms such as Green Mountain Coffee Roasters. “I have never seen anything so successful,” says Warning. “It isn’t a charity but rather a way for small producers to integrate themselves into the global market.”

As Xanica’s transformation shows, bean counting takes on a whole new meaning when it comes to choosing your coffee. That’s also true for clothing, jewelry, furniture, food, and home decor. Our simplest shopping decisions can protect the environment, save family farms, lift villages from destitution, and restore dignity to war-torn communities—not just thousands of miles away but also at home. Check out these nine ways to improve the world while enjoying its material pleasures:



2 Baskets of peace

When Noeleen Heyzer, executive director of the United Nations Development Fund for Women, visited Rwanda in 2002, she met with widows from that country's infamous genocide. The women had formed tight bonds across ethnic lines and even adopted the orphan children of their former enemies. But they were desperate for money, and many were HIV-positive from wartime rape.

The women showed Heyzer the traditional baskets they create. "You are master weavers," she remembers telling them. "This product is so beautiful, I'm sure I can do something when I get back to the United States." The result is the Rwanda Path to Peace project, which markets the patterned baskets in the United States (they're available at macys.com/rwanda). The proceeds fund better nutrition, healthcare, and school supplies for the weavers' families.



3 Forest-friendly furniture

Healthy forests are critical to the planet's well-being—they purify the air and water, control disease, and provide habitat to half the world's animal and plant species. But "since the first Earth Day in 1970, we've lost more than a billion acres of tropical forest," says Don Melnick, PhD, a professor of conservation biology at Columbia University. "There's a voracious appetite for tropical hardwoods like teak and mahogany."

Harvesting trees does not have to ruin the ecosystem. An FSC (Forest Stewardship Council) certification assures the lumber has been removed in ways that conserve water, protect animal nesting and feeding areas, minimize forest damage during road construction, restrict pesticides, and control soil erosion. The FSC logo also guarantees that indigenous people maintain control of their land and receive fair compensation for its use. The home-furnishings chain IKEA (ikea.com) carries FSC furniture. So do handcrafters such as Cotswold Furniture Makers (cotswoldfurniture.com) and Charles Shackleton Furniture (shackletonthomas.com), both in Vermont.



4 Eating local

Produce from farmers'

markets tastes better—the melons are sweeter, the tomatoes fleshier. But there are other reasons to load up at outdoor greenmarkets. "You know the money is going to the local growers directly, and it is helping them keep their farms viable," says Gail Feenstra, a food systems analyst with the University of California Sustainable Agriculture Research and Education Program. "Small-scale farmers help rural communities stay alive. If we want to see their farms stay on the landscape, we need to support them." What's more, locally grown fruits and vegetables don't have to be shipped long distances, making them a wiser environmental choice.



5 Global at home

The online marketplace

Novica (novica.com) offers a cornucopia of rugs, handbags, masks, mirrors, and fine carved furniture, but with a twist: The company sells its products to the public directly from traditional artisans in Asia, Latin America, and Africa, eliminating the usual middlemen. "The whole system of intermediaries is done away with," says cofounder and CEO Roberto Milk. This means craftmakers earn considerably more for their work—and, at the same time, consumers save money.

Novica, which is owned in part by National Geographic, has helped revive dying crafts through its Internet-based sales. Peruvian weaver Leoncio Tinoco had all but abandoned his traditional method of making tapestries so intricate they resemble photographs. With Novica's support, he received the Amauta Title, Peru's most prestigious arts award, in 2001, and now earns a livable wage.



6 Clean jewelry
Gold may look pure, but its shiny veneer belies a devastating cost to the environment. When gold is mined, says Helen DaSilva, a spokesperson for the international development organization Oxfam America, “basically, the earth is blasted and massive craters are dug. Cyanide is poured over the ore to extract the gold—and some companies dump the contaminated waste rock into oceans and rivers.”

The best alternatives to conventional gold jewelry are vintage and recycled products. Companies like GreenKarat (greenkarat.com) and Leber Jeweler (leberjeweler.com) make exquisite jewelry with reclaimed gold, which is chemically identical to the newly mined metal. If you're set on a piece from freshly extracted gold, think about patronizing the retailers that have pledged to support mining reform. The list includes Tiffany & Co., Piaget, Cartier, Van Cleef & Arpels, Helzberg Diamonds, and Zale Corporation, and is available at nodirtygold.org.



7 Flower power
South America's prettiest export is also one of its most toxic. Workers on flower plantations in Colombia and Ecuador—two of the largest floral suppliers to the United States—are exposed to dozens of pesticides, many of them banned here. Studies suggest that these workers face headaches, impaired vision, respiratory and neurological problems, miscarriages, and cancer, and that their children could suffer birth defects. The International Labor Rights Fund has also found sexual harassment, violence, and child labor rampant in Ecuador's cut-flower industry. By contrast, flowers certified with the VeriFlora label are raised organically, with special efforts to conserve water and restore habitat. The growers pledge to protect workers from discrimination, forced labor, and physical abuse. The flowers are available online at organicbouquet.com.



8 Pure threads
“Whenever I start to teach about cotton, students think it's an environmentally desirable product,” says M. Suzanne Sontag, PhD, a professor emeritus of human ecology and apparel and textiles at Michigan State University. “What they don't know is that most of the cotton produced is very intensive in its use of pesticides.” According to the North Carolina and Texas Cooperative Extensions, some chemicals used on cotton are highly toxic—sometimes even fatal—to birds, fish, and other wildlife.

A growing number of firms now manufacture clothing from organic cotton, which adheres to government standards prohibiting the use of toxic and persistent chemicals. “There's more variety in the style of products available,” says Holly Givens, a spokesperson for the Organic Trade Association, which maintains a listing at theorganicpages.com. Leading the way is Patagonia, which in 1996 converted all of its sportswear to 100 percent organic cotton.



9 Fish without a catch
Seafood may offer health benefits, but more than 70 percent of the earth's fish are being caught as fast as they can reproduce, or faster. “The adage that there are other fish in the sea is not entirely true,” says Jennifer Dianto, manager of the Monterey Bay Aquarium's Seafood Watch program. What's more, some fishing methods ensnare seals, dolphins, and even seabirds along with the intended catch.

Dianto's program offers seafood-shipping guides at seafoodwatch.org. Farmed oysters and mussels get the thumbs-up; often the harvest of Chilean sea bass damages the ocean floor and kills endangered albatross. If each person were to make one or two changes, says Dianto—from farmed to wild-caught Alaskan salmon, for example, or from Caribbean to spiny U.S. lobster—“it could make a real difference.”

That goes for many things we buy. “American consumers are one of the most powerful forces for change in the history of mankind,” says Paul Rice, founder and CEO of TransFair USA. “We are sleeping giants awakening to our power.”

Barry Yeoman has written for The New York Times, Mother Jones, and Discover.