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# From South America to the United States: Guayakí and the Transformation of Yerba Mate

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In the early 2000s, California-based Guayakí popularized the caffeinated drink, yerba mate, among young people and creative types. With revenues of \$100 million, Guayakí dominates the U.S. market where it is synonymous with yerba mate. This essay explores how Guayakí transformed a foreign product with deep local meaning, widespread popularity, and a long history in southern South America from a shared beverage and social practice into a healthy energy drink. Typically, localization entails multinational companies and local consumers adapting and giving new meanings to an exotic foreign product or brand. In contrast, local entrepreneurs radically changed yerba mate while preserving part of its narrative. Guayakí promotes product authenticity based on a narrative of South American Indigenous origins, stimulating qualities, and health benefits that fits with superfoods, while a narrative of green capitalism promotes brand authenticity. But that was not enough to popularize yerba mate. The product had to be adapted to consumer taste preferences and values that challenge the foundational ideas of superfoods and green capitalism. As a result of consumer input acquired through grassroots marketing, Guayakí transformed a shared infusion into something closer to a soft drink—a pre-prepared, individual-sized beverage served in a single-use bottle or can with flavoring and sugar levels tailored to U.S. consumers. The essay exposes the role of local entrepreneurs and consumers in shaping product development and localization. It complicates our understanding of product authenticity and brand authenticity while exposing the limitations of green capitalism, ethical consumerism, and activist entrepreneurship.

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**Keywords:** authenticity, green capitalism, localization, superfoods

## Introduction

A 2020 article in the University of California–San Diego’s student newspaper describes how, walking into any library or study room on campus, one would see “students holding an iconic

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yellow can or colored bottle” of yerba mate.<sup>1</sup> And in 2023, a University of California–Santa Barbara student expressed to *Her Campus* (according to *Forbes*, the publication with the largest female college audience), “If you haven’t heard of yerba mate tea by now, you have undoubtedly seen the signature bright yellow Guayakí Yerba Mate can in the hands of your fellow students.”<sup>2</sup> Only several decades earlier, few Americans knew about yerba mate other than travelers who had visited Paraguay, Uruguay, Argentina, or southern Brazil or people who knew someone from the region. Consumed as mate (pronounced *mah-te*) with hot water and tereré with cold water, yerba mate is a caffeinated shared beverage with deep meaning, widespread popularity, and a long history in southern South America. This essay explores how, after over a century of various entrepreneurs marketing the South American beverage in the United States as a substitute for coffee and tea, Guayakí popularized yerba mate among college students and people with creative tendencies<sup>3</sup> by transforming it for American consumers.

It has long been recognized that efforts to market a foreign product without adapting it to local conditions generally fail.<sup>4</sup> Instead, to successfully market in new locations, a process called localization occurs, whereby the foreign product or brand is adapted and takes on new meanings in order to appeal to local consumers.<sup>5</sup> Multinationals market and/or tailor their offerings to fit local sensitivities, while local consumers give new meaning and significance to the products and brands.<sup>6</sup> This essay provides an extreme example of localization. In the case of yerba mate, an entirely new company was created in the new host country that fundamentally changed the product while preserving aspects of its narrative. In doing so, the essay exposes the role of local entrepreneurs rather than foreign multinationals or marketing agencies in reshaping a foreign commodity for the local market.<sup>7</sup>

Often, the foreign and exotic nature of products (the Americanness of Spam in the Philippines and the association of avocados with guacamole in the United States) play a major part in their appeal and give them meaning.<sup>8</sup> This is especially true for many superfoods: foods perceived as having exceptional health benefits. As Jessica Loyer and Christine Knight argue, many superfoods are from Latin America (e.g., quinoa, chia seeds, açai berries, and maca) and were generally unfamiliar to Western consumers before being marketed as having extraordinary nutritional traits based on their long history and use by Indigenous peoples. Thus, being

1. Espinal, “The Rise of Yerba Mate.”

2. Lewis, “What’s with the Hype.”

3. Those, often of a younger generation, who are artists, musicians, and hipsters who eschew mainstream products.

4. Euro Disney initially failed, but after adapting to local preferences and cultural traditions, the relaunched Disneyland Paris became Europe’s number one tourist attraction. Matusitz, “Disneyland Paris.”

5. Some scholars use the variant “glocalization” to emphasize that a product is sold globally and customized to suit the local market. Localization is more appropriate for this essay, because the focus is on the particularizing tendencies and not universalizing tendencies. Pilcher, “‘Tastes Like Horse Piss,’” 28–29; Koese, “Nestlé in the Ottoman Empire”; Robertson, “Globalisation or Glocalisation?”; Shechter, “Glocal Mediators”; Hoogenboom, Bannink, and Trommel, “From Local to Global, and Back.”

6. Yan, “Of Hamburger and Social Space”; Caldwell, “Domesticating the French Fry”; Foster, *Coca-Globalization*. Simi and Matusitz refer to the process as “glocalization.” Simi and Matusitz, “Glocalization of Subway.”

7. Shechter, “Glocal Mediators”; Scanlon, “Mediators in the International Marketplace.”

8. Matejowsky, “SPAM and Fast-Food”; Charles, “Searching for Gold.”

foreign and exotic creates an aura of authenticity that gives credence to claims that the product is a superfood.<sup>9</sup> As Ana Fochesatto has shown, Guayakí has successfully marketed yerba mate in the United States as a superfood due to its Latin American origins and its connection to Indigenous people.<sup>10</sup> Furthermore, the company has also built on yerba mate's long history in South America as a stimulant with an assortment of health benefits. By preserving and even exaggerating long-standing South American narratives about yerba mate, while radically transforming the product, Guayakí expanded yerba mate's categorization from a hot infusion to straddling several categories (energy drink, iced tea, and functional beverage).

Consumers' perceptions of authenticity have been central to Guayakí's success in promoting yerba mate in the United States. Authenticity is the search for the genuine, in contrast to the false, counterfeit, and fabricated. People understand something to be authentic by comparing it to what they consider to be inauthentic. It is a social construction. The diversity of Mexican food, in particular, exposes how authenticity is a social construct. There is no single authentic Mexican food; instead, there are many different regional cuisines and variations.<sup>11</sup> Judgments about authenticity differ based on time, place, and one's experiences. Authenticity implies legitimacy and quality, while in fact, it is often a "a highly negotiated interaction that represents a romanticized representation of reality."<sup>12</sup> The perception of authenticity, especially as it relates to food, is particularly appealing to young and affluent consumers because of its association with quality, status, and sophistication.<sup>13</sup> This essay differentiates two forms of authenticity: product (yerba mate) authenticity and brand (Guayakí) authenticity.

Product authenticity means that yerba mate is perceived as an exotic and truly Latin American beverage that has real stimulating and nutritional benefits. In this case, it is approximate authenticity (connected to the place but without absolute fealty), rather than pure or literal authenticity (perceived as the genuine article).<sup>14</sup> The perception of authenticity surrounding foods is a rich field for study. There are no standard criteria for determining what makes a food authentic, but there are some commonalities. Authenticity often entails the rejection of industrialized, mass-produced food and is frequently associated with ethnic or exotic food that is perceived to be connected to a particular ethnic group, exposes cultural difference, and is less familiar to mainstream consumers.<sup>15</sup> Ironically, while the marketing of yerba mate in the United States emphasizes the beverage's Latin American origins, it is a distorted aura of product authenticity. Not only is it a radically different beverage than what is served in South America, but it is sold premade in industrialized and mass-produced bottles and cans.

Consumers' perception of Guayakí's brand authenticity has also been important for popularizing yerba mate. The brand is not only the name and logo pertaining to a product

9. Loyer and Knight, "Selling the 'Inca Superfood.'" This is ironic, because there is a long history in the United States of Latin American cuisine being considered unhealthy and fattening. Fuster, *Caribeños at the Table*, 69–98; Peyton, *Naturally Healthy Mexican Cooking*, 5.

10. Fochesatto, "Yerba Mate," 59–83.

11. Pilcher, "'Old Stock'"; Pilcher, *Planet Taco*; Gaytán, "From Sombreros to Sincronizadas."

12. Gaytán, "From Sombreros to Sincronizadas," 337.

13. Johnston and Baumann, *Foodies*; Freedman and Jurafsky, "Authenticity in America."

14. Beverland, Lindgreen, and Vink, "Projecting Authenticity."

15. Johnston and Baumann, *Foodies*; Gottlieb, "Dirty, Authentic"; Park, "Ethnic Foodscapes."

(or products) sold by a specific company, it also includes meaning based on customer perceptions and experiences.<sup>16</sup> Businesses have found brands to be important, because brand loyalty stimulates long-term revenue,<sup>17</sup> but a backlash against big brands has threatened this relationship,<sup>18</sup> and as Rafael Castro and Patricio Sáiz assess it, “Their strength as a sign of quality and their power to open people’s wallets are fading.”<sup>19</sup> As a result, consumers’ desire for authenticity has become “one of the cornerstones of contemporary marketing.”<sup>20</sup> Businesses promote brand authenticity, because it is a social construct that gives value to the brand by building status, enabling price premiums, and reducing competition.<sup>21</sup> Initially, companies focused on cultivating authenticity as a reassurance that their products were genuine, but the concept has evolved into imbuing the product with a set of values that differentiate it from other, more commercialized brands.<sup>22</sup> While companies can promote ideas of brand authenticity, consumers make their own judgments about authenticity based on their experiences and beliefs. Research shows that, overall, consumers tend to associate brand authenticity with a commitment to quality, sincerity, and heritage.<sup>23</sup> Companies contrive narratives to promote the perception of brand authenticity. As Michael B. Beverland found for luxury wines, the perception of authenticity entailed “developing a sincere story that enabled the firms to maintain quality and relevance while appearing above commercial considerations.”<sup>24</sup> In other words, companies with authentic brands are seen as being motivated by their passion for the product (rather than for profit) and their desire to serve their customers, and by extension, society. In this essay, I link brand authenticity with green capitalism, an idea popular at the turn of the twenty-first century.

Promoters of green capitalism want to incorporate sustainability and environmentalism into capitalism. Doing so fits with a core idea associated with brand authenticity—that a company is not motivated solely by profit and that it acts in the best interests of its consumers and the planet. Moreover, such ideas often reinforce a narrative about sincerity, quality, and heritage. In the last decades of the twentieth century, environmental concerns became more widespread, and many businesses in the United States and Europe embraced green capitalism, just like healthy foods, as a business opportunity to reach new markets, build customer loyalty, and increase revenues.<sup>25</sup> Organic sales in the United States surpassed \$63 billion in 2021, and there has been significant growth in green construction and green advertising in recent years.<sup>26</sup>

16. As Martin Kornberger explains, “Brands turn consumption into lifestyles.” Kornberger, *Brand Society*, xiii. Brands took on importance for food in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries with the onset of mass production. Brands differentiate a product and build customer loyalty. Wilkins, “When and Why Brand Names,” 16–20. The study of brands is a popular topic for business historians; *Business History* dedicated special issues in 2018 and 2020 to the topic.

17. Bellamy, “The Making of Labatt ‘Blue,’” 123.

18. Klein, *No Logo*.

19. Castro and Sáiz, “Cross-Cultural Factors,” 13.

20. Brown Kozinets, and Sherry, “Teaching Old Brands New Tricks,” 21.

21. Beverland, “Crafting Brand Authenticity.”

22. Beverland, Lindgreen, and Vink, “Projecting Authenticity,” 5.

23. Napoli et al., “Measuring Consumer-based Brand Authenticity.”

24. Beverland, “Crafting Brand Authenticity,” 103, 107. Should be 1003, 1007.

25. Belasco, *Appetite for Change*; Berghoff, “Shades of Green.”

26. Organic Trade Association, “U.S. Organic Industry Survey 2022,” <https://ota.com/organic-market-overview/organic-industry-survey>; Delmas and Colgan, *The Green Bundle*, 4.

Underlying green capitalism is the idea that consumers are political: They make purchases based on values and ethics, not just price or lifestyle.<sup>27</sup> Proponents believe that environmental problems can, and should, be addressed through consumer choice.<sup>28</sup> Despite such optimism, scholars have found that “it remains challenging for citizens to relate their personal behavior to large-scale problems such as climate change, pollution, biodiversity loss, and natural-resource depletion.”<sup>29</sup> While many consumers say that they are willing to buy green goods, only a small minority will accept trade-offs for the environment. Studies reveal that committed green shoppers are at most 15 percent of American consumers. Instead, most green shoppers are “convenient environmentalists”; they only consider the environmental impact if they do not have to sacrifice price, performance, or ease of use. As a result, brands need to emphasize private benefits of their products, such as quality, status, health, and emotion, and not just the environmental benefits.<sup>30</sup> In sum, as Geoffrey Jones concludes in his study of green entrepreneurs, “History shows that profits and sustainability have been hard to reconcile.”<sup>31</sup> Guayakí’s experience as a B-corporation (a for-profit company certified for its commitment to social and environmental performance) supports such findings. Consumers prioritize convenience and taste, often at the cost of environmentalism and social justice. In this case, it is a premade, flavored, sweetened product sold in single-use bottles and cans. As a result, Guayakí has had to compromise on its mission to create environmental value in order to grow the company and popularize yerba mate in the United States.

The essay uses newspaper articles, interviews, and archived versions of websites preserved by the Internet Archive’s Wayback Machine to trace how Guayakí popularized yerba mate by promoting product authenticity and brand authenticity. But at the same time, the company has compromised these values in order to make the product appeal to American consumers. After an overview of yerba mate in South America, the essay moves on to explore how Guayakí’s entrepreneurs in the United States built on South American narratives about yerba mate’s Indigenous origins, stimulating characteristics and health benefits to promote the perception of product authenticity and fit with the growing popularity of superfoods. The essay then explores how, at the same time, Guayakí’s entrepreneurs also emphasized grassroots marketing and a narrative of green capitalism, which cultivated brand authenticity. The following section shows how consumer input obtained through such grassroots marketing revealed that both product authenticity and brand authenticity were not enough to popularize yerba mate. To appeal to the tastes and preferences of American consumers, Guayakí had to transform the product in ways that challenge both product authenticity and brand authenticity. As a result, the company compromised product purity and yerba mate’s distinctive characteristics, along with environmental concerns, to make a single-use, mass-produced product.

27. Micheletti, *Political Virtue and Shopping*, x; Stolle and Micheletti, *Political Consumerism*.

28. Broberg, “Labeling the Good,” 812.

29. Delmas and Colgan, *The Green Bundle*, 3 and 5-6.

30. Rome, “Beyond Compliance,” 431; Delmas and Colgan, *The Green Bundle*, 6.

31. Jones, *Profits and Sustainability*, 400.

## Yerba Mate in South America

For South Americans, drinking loose-leaf yerba mate with hot water or with cold water is a basic necessity, daily ritual, and communal social practice. Both mate and tereré are typically shared. People gather at home, in the office, public parks, and outdoor spaces, and even in the car to share yerba mate. The *cebador* (server) oversees the round: refilling the cup with water, passing it to each person, making sure that the *bombilla* (specialized straw with a filter at the bottom) is set properly, and adding new yerba when the old yerba becomes *lavado* (washed out). In many respects, the process is similar to a Japanese tea ceremony. Both mate and tereré require paraphernalia (gourd, bombilla, thermos, and yerba) that are bulky and a hassle to carry around. Making the drinks also involves complex steps, and there are rules for proper preparation and consumption. The round, often prolonged by conversation, continues for at least thirty minutes, if not several hours (see Figure 1).

The act of sharing food and meals (commensality) is integral to social life and strengthens collective identity by building connections between people.<sup>32</sup> Sucking the infusion from the



Figure 1. Undated photo of young workers sharing mate, Argentina. Archivo General de la Nación, AGAS01, Acervo Gráfico, Audiovisual y Sonoro, Serie Departamento Documentos Fotográficos [Repositorio Gráfico], Fotografía en papel, 320032, “Jóvenes mateando.”

32. Warmind, Chou, and Kerner, *Commensality*.

same bombilla, often while conversing, renders both mate and tereré much more intimate than most other foodstuffs, and this intimacy cultivates community among the drinkers.

The unique way that mate and tereré are consumed, with all of the ceremony and paraphernalia, make them readily distinguishable from other beverages. According to Emojipedia, mate was the most wanted emoji in 2017.<sup>33</sup> With their long history and unique characteristics, mate and tereré are considered by the people of the Southern Cone (Argentina, Paraguay, Uruguay, southern Brazil, and parts of Chile and Bolivia) to be an authentic homegrown cultural practice, autochthonous to the region. The shared significance of yerba mate points to a regional identity that extends beyond national borders, and yet yerba mate also has specific national significance. In 2011, the Paraguayan congress declared tereré a cultural patrimony and the national drink. Two years later, the Argentine government named mate the official national infusion, and in 2016, “Yerba Mate Argentina” became an official geographic indication (*indicación geográfica*), like French champagne and Mexican tequila, even though the tree also grows in Paraguay and southern Brazil. The exception is Matte Leão in Rio de Janeiro, where the city government declared the ambulatory vendors selling this yerba mate iced tea a cultural heritage of the city in 2012.<sup>34</sup> This form of drinking yerba mate has not caught on elsewhere in South America.

With the scientific name *Ilex paraguariensis*, yerba mate is a member of the holly family. It was first used by either the Guaraní (Tupian linguistic family) or the Kaingang (Jê linguistic family) before Europeans came to the Americas. Although we do not know precisely how or when the Indigenous peoples first discovered yerba mate, the Ca’a Yari origin story of yerba mate from Guaraní mythology has become part of popular folklore.<sup>35</sup> The writings of Jesuit missionaries who arrived in the region in the early seventeenth century expose yerba mate’s importance in both Guaraní and Kaingang culture. They repeatedly describe how shamans employed yerba mate in religious ceremonies, using it to “speak with the devil,” and for healing purposes. Guaraní–Spanish and Spanish–Guaraní dictionaries from the period confirm that yerba mate (*caá* and *côgôî*) played an important role in daily life and culture.<sup>36</sup>

When Europeans first encountered it, yerba mate disgusted and repelled them. Its strange color and bitter taste were unlike anything they had encountered (tea and coffee were not yet widely consumed in Europe). Like with chocolate and tobacco (other stimulants from the Americas), the Jesuits and other church officials initially associated yerba mate with the devil.<sup>37</sup> Even so, Europeans in the region quickly started consuming it, adopting this Indigenous practice.

As its popularity spread, yerba mate became recognized as a kind of wonder drug. In 1658, the French traveler Acarate du Biscay described how the inhabitants of Peru’s mining areas depended on yerba mate for survival because “the Vapours that rise out of the Ground suffocate them, and nothing but that Liquor can recover them again, which revives and restores them to their former Vigour ... and for this they have no other remedy, than the Drink

33. “Mate Emoji Proposal,” March 31, 2018, <https://www.unicode.org/L2/L2018/18122-mate-emoji.pdf>. As of March 2023, there isn’t a tereré emoji.

34. Decree 35179, Rio Prefeitura, March 2, 2012.

35. Galeano, “Mate,” 29–30.

36. Sarreal, *Yerba Mate*, 10–47.

37. Norton, *Sacred Gifts*.

which is made with the Herb of *Paraguay*, of which they prepare a great quantity to refresh and moisten 'em, when they come out of the Mines at the times appointed for eating or sleeping."<sup>38</sup> Less than ten years later, Diego de Zavallo, a lawyer living in Peru's capital city of Lima, published a treatise on yerba mate that described it as helping with a wide array of maladies such as flatulence and problems related to various body parts (kidneys, lungs, stomach, and intestines), in addition to hypochondria.<sup>39</sup> Referring to Zavallo's work, the official Jesuit historian of Paraguay asserted in the mid-eighteenth century, "I believe that as virtues continue to be attributed to said yerba, it will soon be called in vulgar terms a cure-all (*sánalo todo*) and universal medicine for all types of ailments."<sup>40</sup>

While colonial-era authors did not know about caffeine, they recognized yerba mate's energizing characteristics. As the Jesuit historian recounted, "The Indians ... say that the principal benefit that they get from this yerba is that it motivates them to work, and gives such vigor that they are not left feeling the lack of food, and you frequently see that an Indian will row for an entire day, without having any other foodstuff than drinking every three hours one or two mate."<sup>41</sup> At the same time, this author and others also acknowledged yerba mate's habit-forming characteristics, criticizing many consumers' frequent and immoderate use of it. As another eighteenth-century Jesuit recounted, consumers would get used to it and "[they] cannot easily leave it, for they affirm their Strength fails them, when they want it, and cannot live long; and so great Slaves are they to this slender diet, that they will almost sell themselves rather than want wherewithal to purchase it."<sup>42</sup>

In the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, various scholars in Argentina and elsewhere studied the chemical composition of yerba mate and discussed its impact on the human body. In doing so, they repeatedly referred to its energizing characteristics. For example, in a presentation to the Faculty of Business Sciences published by the *Anales de la Sociedad Científica Argentina* in 1913, Honorio Leguizamón asserted that the most important attribute of yerba was that it "alleviates fatigue and stimulates work" and that no other aromatic beverage produced equivalent results. In support of such a claim, Leguizamón fondly harkened back to national myths about how mate drinkers achieved impressive feats: during the colonial period, Indians rowed a canoe all day without consuming any other foodstuff; during the independence wars, soldiers endured forced marches for prolonged periods without food or sleep; before the advent of wire fencing, gauchos tirelessly branded livestock from sunup to sundown; at the beginning of the twentieth century after drinking *mate cocido* (yerba mate tea), loggers and settlers returned from the forest or the threshing machine at 2:00 p.m. in the middle of the summer as fresh and relaxed as when they left for work in the morning; and Olegario Andreade wrote immortal lines of literature after his parliamentary work and first-class journalism.<sup>43</sup> Yerba companies also promoted its benefits. For example, a 1915 advertisement for the brand Rigoletto asserted, "The most renowned hygienists advocate the use of

38. du Biscay, *An Account of a Voyage*, 10–11, 51.

39. *Tratado del recto uso de la yerba del Paraguay*, 1609, Lima. Although extensively quoted, Zavallo's book has not been located by modern scholars. Lozano, *Historia de la conquista*, 1:211.

40. Lozano, *Historia de la conquista*, 1:213.

41. Lozano, *Historia de la conquista*, 1:209–210.

42. del Techo, "The History of the Provinces," 693.

43. Leguizamón, "La yerba-mate," 328, 330.



YERBA MATE as the best restorative tonic to remedy the wear and tear produced by neural activities or muscular work.”<sup>44</sup>

And yet, ironically, mate became a clandestine drink for many in the modernizing urban elite and aspiring middle class of Buenos Aires. They considered it antiquated and unsanitary because of the shared bombilla, and a waste of time. Recognizing this perception, the Argentine botanist Cristobal Hicken asked his audience at the Argentine Scientific Society in 1900, “For us, overworked by daily tasks; for us, who cannot take the necessary time for a proper meal; for us who see bacteria, bacillus, and microbes everywhere, would [mate] have any benefit? Could we dedicate ourselves to mate?” And he answered, “I think not!”<sup>45</sup> Three decades later, the Socialist Party deputy Nicolás Repetto more stridently asserted in congressional debates, “Mate is a drink of people who have nothing to do and disdain the value of work,” and he described the act of sharing mate as “a squandering or loss of time.”<sup>46</sup> Indeed, for much of the twentieth century, per capita yerba mate consumption declined in Argentina. But at the close of the century, mate experienced a renaissance there due to its low price, commensality, and autochthonous tradition.<sup>47</sup>

Today, people throughout the Southern Cone of South America celebrate and embrace yerba mate. Mate and tereré’s long history in the region, and their failure to globalize, mark the beverages as authentic and autochthonous. Furthermore, the unique way that both are consumed also contributes to the perception of authenticity. With the bombilla, gourd, and thermos, along with the practice of sharing, the drinks are readily identifiable. It is almost impossible to mistake mate or tereré for any other beverage. This uniqueness is especially attractive in an era of globalization. In the early twentieth century, immigrants to the region frequently drank mate as a way to assimilate. As the Argentine-Jewish journalist and author, Alberto Gerchunoff, explained in a 1930 article for the popular magazine, *Caras y Caretas*, “Even before leaving the *Hotel de Inmigrantes*, the man coming from far away adopts the custom and, it is known, he who tries mate no longer emigrates.”<sup>48</sup> The drinking of mate or tereré is a performance of national or regional identity. This is apparent in “A Mate and a Love,” a poetic homage to mate and its connection to Argentine identity that was made famous in the first decade of the twentieth century by the radio personality, Lalo Mir. The poem describes how mate unites Argentines of all ages, socioeconomic classes, and political beliefs, and how mate is woven throughout daily life in the country. It asserts that preparing mate for oneself is the rite of passage that marks when Argentines leave childhood and become adults.<sup>49</sup> Yerba companies also promote the connection with national identity. In the early 2000s, a television advertisement for Canarias (a Uruguayan brand) concluded with the statement, “The mate of my country,”<sup>50</sup> and a 2020 video advertisement for Campesino

44. Yerba Mate Rigoletto advertisement, Mackinnon y Coelho company, *La Nación*, December 18, 1915.

45. Hicken, “La yerba-mate,” 66

46. “Vigencia de decretos,” 595–596.

47. Sarreal, *Yerba Mate*, 249–278.

48. Gerchunoff, “Tomemos mate.”

49. The poem was first published on Hernán Casciari’s blog, *mujergorda.bitacoras.com*, between September 2003 and July 5, 2004. Casciari, “La existencia.”

50. Publicidad Yerba Canarias.

(a Paraguayan brand) repeated the refrain, “I am Campesino. I am my country.”<sup>51</sup> And in 2020, the United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization reinforced the connection between tereré and Paraguayan identity by declaring this “Guaraní ancestral drink in Paraguay” an intangible cultural heritage.<sup>52</sup> As an easily recognizable symbol of national (or regional) identity, mate and tereré foster community. Performing mate (or tereré) overtly associates the consumer with the Southern Cone.

Both drinks also build community at the individual level, among those sharing. An Argentine friend once told me that the organizers of a workshop about a contentious topic (gender inequality) at her workplace purposefully incorporated mate into the discussions as a way to build community and create an environment conducive for conversation. Similarly, a Paraguayan herb vendor explained to a journalist for the United Nations that tereré promotes harmony and conversation; it “unites cultures, unites people. Because of this, it is important for us, Paraguayans.”<sup>53</sup>

South Americans laud yerba mate’s health benefits. For example, Taragüi, one of the oldest and most popular brands of yerba mate in Argentina provides links to ten health benefits on its website.<sup>54</sup> And *El País*, one of Uruguay’s most important newspapers, published an article in 2021 highlighting four advantages of drinking mate: (1) it has the energizing properties of caffeine; (2) antioxidants; (3) vitamins and minerals that strengthen the immune system and have anti-inflammatory and anti-bacterial properties; and (4) it likely promotes weight loss and reduces cholesterol, sugar, and abdominal fat.<sup>55</sup> Even though South Americans recognize yerba mate as a stimulant with various health benefits, they celebrate both mate and tereré primarily for their commensality and long history as something autochthonous to the region.

## Yerba Mate in the United States

Entrepreneurs and other advocates have promoted yerba mate in the United States for well over a century. Often, they tried to sell it as a cheaper and superior substitute for tea and coffee. Proponents of temperance even lauded it as a substitute for alcohol.<sup>56</sup> Such efforts had limited success until Guayakí took a different approach.

Guayakí began in 1996 in San Luis Obispo, California as the brainchild of Alex Pryor, an Argentine who grew up watching his parents drink mate in the 1970s and 1980s. His father was an agronomist, so the family spent a lot of time traveling around Argentina’s agricultural frontier. His parents were always sharing mate, and one of his earliest memories is the smell of mate. In the mid-1990s, Pryor moved to the United States to study food science at California Polytechnic State University. When he had to come up with a senior project, Pryor returned to

51. Publicidad Yerba Mate Campesino.

52. UNESCO, “Practices and Traditional Knowledge.”

53. “Tereré, una bebida fría que se toma al calor de amistad,” *Noticias ONU*, February 4, 2021, <https://news.un.org/es/story/2021/02/1487512>.

54. “Cuáles son los beneficios de la yerba mate–bebida Argentina–para la salud?,” Taragüi website, <https://www.taragui.com/aprender/salud/10-excelentes-beneficios-del-mate-la-salud>.

55. “Beneficios de tomar yerba mate,” *El País*, January 4, 2021.

56. Sarreal, *Yerba Mate*, 141–148.

Argentina for inspiration. During his stay, he visited both his godfather's yerba mate plantation in Paraguay and Las Marias, the largest yerba mate company in Argentina. An avid mate drinker himself, Pryor returned to Cal Poly with an idea—promote yerba mate in the United States as a healthy alternative to coffee and as a way to both sustain the rainforest and provide jobs to the Guayakí Aché Indians.<sup>57</sup>

Early on, David Karr, a surfer from California and a classmate at Cal Poly who studied business, joined Pryor's venture. Pryor had previously introduced Karr to mate in a social setting, and Karr really liked its energizing properties and health benefits. Karr was also attracted by the opportunity to create a company with a positive social and environmental impact. So he decided to abandon a technology start-up company and join Guayakí. Together, Pryor and Karr marketed Guayakí yerba mate, both in tea bags and loose leaf, as a healthy and environmentally friendly alternative to coffee. They began by selling it at San Luis Obispo stores, restaurants, and cafés, and they set up a stand at the town's farmer's market. Within two years, three more friends joined the company as it embarked on a grassroots marketing campaign. Traveling in a Volkswagen van, and later an RV, the founders got permission to set up a stand to give samples and sell their product at festivals and natural food stores on the West Coast. For some eight to ten years, they were on the road brewing and serving yerba mate tea.<sup>58</sup>

Guayakí Yerba Mate caught on as a hot tea, but only in a niche market limited primarily to natural food stores and health-conscious consumers on the West Coast. In 2005, the company started selling yerba mate as a cold iced tea in individual glass bottles, and several years later, added cans to its product line. It also diversified into flavored and carbonated yerba mate drinks.<sup>59</sup> These individual-sized cans and bottles of iced or carbonated yerba mate are what now dominate U.S. yerba sales. Guayakí is especially popular on the West Coast and among college students. It is by far the most popular item at Pomona College's Coop Store. An assistant manager described Guayakí Yerba Mate as "a campus staple at this point, like a cultural thing at this school."<sup>60</sup> And according to the University of California–Santa Barbara newspaper, "Forget coffee—at UCSB, yerba mate is the lifeblood of most students slaving away at the midnight hour."<sup>61</sup> In 2022, Pryor described Guayakí as generating \$100 million in sales revenue and growing at 20 to 25 percent each year.<sup>62</sup> A number of copycat companies have entered the market, which still remains strongest in the West Coast, with a few pockets elsewhere in the country.

## Product Authenticity

From the beginning, Guayakí's founders built on yerba mate's long-standing narrative of South American Indigenous origins, stimulating characteristics, and health benefits, which created

57. Hebshi, "Wake Up."

58. Latif, "Guayaki: David Karr"; Matéo, "Who Is Really Behind Guayakí?"

59. Latif, "Guayaki: David Karr."

60. Echeverria Bedoya, "Yerb Your Enthusiasm."

61. Hallam, "Yerba Mate."

62. Author interview with Alex Pryor, June 30, 2022.

the perception of product authenticity. The association with South America lends credence to the company's claims about the beverage's unique invigorating properties, just as champagne's association with France, which had the reputation of being the "preeminent capital of the bourgeois world," helped it develop into a "transnational marker of social distinction."<sup>63</sup> The Guayakí logo (see Figure 2), which is visible on all of its packaging, overtly emphasizes South America. It is a heart-shaped wreath of leaves that forms a circle with the continent of South America prominently in the middle. Although Guayakí promotes yerba mate in the form of an iced tea or carbonated beverage, it still references South American mate and tereré in its marketing. Videos and photos of the founders often show them drinking mate; the company website always includes at least one image of mate and it sells loose-leaf yerba and bombillas; and company representatives have a gourd and bombilla on the table when they give away samples. The continued connection to South American mate and tereré cultivates authenticity and appeals to those who want to know more about the drink. Indeed, various English-language Facebook groups and informational pages about yerba mate culture have arisen in recent years, which demonstrates that a number of Americans and Europeans are interested in learning more about yerba mate and its South American roots.<sup>64</sup> All of these sites go beyond the basic bottles and cans of yerba mate; members from around the world

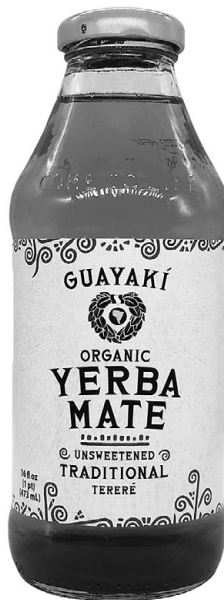


Figure 2. Bottle of Guayakí Yerba Mate with logo and trademark yellow color.

63. Guy, *When Champagne Became French*, 5.

64. As of September 2022, Yerba Mate Underground (created in 2016) has 3,900 members; Yerba Mate (created in 2019) has 2,000 members; Circle of Drink (created in 2012) has 1,300 members; and Yerba Mate Tribe (created in 2017) has 646 members.

regularly share photographs related to yerba mate and ask questions about yerba mate practices. These consumers want a deeper level of authenticity, and they adopt and adapt South American yerba mate practices. But Guayakí consumers also perceive yerba mate as an authentic South American beverage, something entirely different from coffee and tea.

In naming the company, Pryor explicitly created a connection with native peoples. “Guayakí” refers to the Guayakí Indians of South America, who he erroneously described as “a sub-tribe of the Guaraní tribe.”<sup>65</sup> Belying the company’s claim to authenticity, “Guayakí” is a term used by the Guaraní and has derogatory connotations. The people who he called Guayakí instead identify themselves as Aché.<sup>66</sup> But “Guayakí” was appealing for marketing purposes. To Americans, “Guayakí” is a foreign name that points to Indigenous and exotic origins, and as Warren Belasco points out, “Americans had long associated exotic herbs and foods with longevity, potency and cures.”<sup>67</sup> Over time, the company shifted its approach, more respectfully using Aché, while continuing to keep the Guayakí name. For example, the company’s 2006 website summarized, “Our name Guayakí (Gwy-uh-KEE) honors the Aché Guayakí people. The Aché live in the sub-tropical rainforests of Paraguay, Argentina and Brazil, home of the yerba mate tree.”<sup>68</sup> In addition to its name, the company markets its product by alluding to yerba mate’s exotic origins, along with the drink’s long-standing reputation in South America for having an array of health and nutritional benefits. For example, an early Guayakí website from 2000 recounted that yerba mate is “considered the ‘drink of the gods’” according to Guaraní legend and that millions enjoy it as “a daily tonic for optimum health.” More specifically, the website explained, yerba mate “is traditionally believed to ensure health and vitality by inducing mental clarity, sustaining energy, and balancing the body.”<sup>69</sup>

As Ana Fochesatto argues, Guayakí’s use of such rhetoric helped it make yerba mate into a superfood in the United States.<sup>70</sup> Most broadly, a superfood is “a food considered especially nutritious or otherwise beneficial for health and well-being,”<sup>71</sup> More specifically, for Jessica Loyer and Christine Knight, superfoods were generally unfamiliar to Western consumers before being marketed as such based on the rationale of nutritional primitivism—a “framework for knowledge about food and health, not based on scientific evidence, but because it has been passed down through generations and carries an aura of tradition and authenticity that connects modern consumers to an idealized past.”<sup>72</sup> While Loyer and Knight focus their analysis on Andean maca, they emphasize that many superfoods are from Latin America and that the discourse focuses heavily on South American Indigenous peoples and their foodways.<sup>73</sup> Guayakí’s marketing of yerba mate certainly fits with Loyer and Knight’s description. Furthermore, those authors argue that such superfoods are portrayed not only as healthy

65. Hebshi, “Wake Up.”

66. Hill and Hurtado, *Ache Life*, 41.

67. Belasco, *Appetite for Change*, 229.

68. Guayakí official website, June 4, 2006.

69. Guayakí official website, May 31, 2000.

70. Fochesatto, “Yerba Mate,” 69–70.

71. Definition from Oxford English Dictionary.

72. Loyer and Knight, “Selling the ‘Inca Superfood,’” 455–456.

73. Loyer and Knight, “Selling the ‘Inca Superfood,’” 456, 457, 461.

for the individual, but also the “physical and social health of humanity and the planet.”<sup>74</sup> Collaborators promote such perceptions. Numerous websites discuss yerba mate’s potential health benefits. Guayakí’s leadership has promoted such publicity by offering interviews, and as a result, the company is featured in various articles and podcasts that highlight both yerba mate’s health benefits and the company’s efforts at green capitalism.

## Brand Authenticity

Pryor and the other Guayakí founders launched their company based on the principles of green capitalism. From the beginning, they marketed Guayakí brand yerba mate as a healthy energizing beverage that is good for the consumer, the environment, and the Indigenous and small farmers who grow it. In 1996, about three months after first beginning to sell Guayakí Yerba Mate, Pryor told the Cal Poly student newspaper that he wanted to take “a holistic approach to saving the rainforest” by introducing an environmentally friendly product that can be grown underneath the rainforest canopy.<sup>75</sup> The earliest archived version of the Guayakí website, from December 1998, confirms the company’s mission “to sustain and protect the viability of the rainforests through the harvesting of those indigenous plants that are uniquely beneficial environmentally, socially, and economically” and included a photograph of and a link to the twenty-thousand-acre Guayakí Biological Reserve.<sup>76</sup> Throughout the years, Pryor and the other founders have always emphasized the company’s mission to preserve, protect, and regenerate the rainforest and local communities. This rhetoric aligns with the green capitalist vision of a triple bottom line of environmental sustainability (the planet), social responsibility (people), and financial profit replacing a focus solely on shareholder profit. Publicly confirming this commitment, Guayakí was among the first to receive B Corp certification in 2007 for its social and environmental performance.

The commitment to helping the environment and having a positive social impact rather than a focus solely on financial profit aligns with consumers’ ideas about brand authenticity. Companies with authentic brands are thought to be motivated by a desire to serve customers and, by extension, society. And such brand authenticity appeals to consumers. Indeed, cofounder Steve Karr (brother of David Karr) assessed it in 2012, “We know that people become really passionate about Guayakí because of the environmental and social aspects of our company.”<sup>77</sup> Furthermore, consumers also perceive that companies with authentic brands are motivated by their passion for the product, a perception that has also been cultivated by Guayakí’s grassroots marketing.

From the beginning, Guayakí has taken a nontraditional, grassroots marketing approach instead of relying on more traditional commercials and advertisements in the mainstream press. This was a high-risk, expensive, and labor-intensive enterprise shouldered by local entrepreneurs who believed in the product. The founders initially built a following by giving

74. Loyer and Knight, “Selling the ‘Inca Superfood,’” 462.

75. Hebshi, “Wake Up.”

76. Guayakí Sustainable Rainforest Products official website.

77. Matéo, “Who Is Really Behind Guayakí?”

away samples at stores, festivals, concerts, and events. They targeted music and cultural events, thereby building a following among people with creative tendencies. Cofounder David Karr estimates that in the early years, traveling up and down the West Coast, the Guayakí founders personally brewed and served some five million cups of yerba mate directly to potential customers.<sup>78</sup> After launching cans and bottles, the company continued giving away samples (see Figure 3). As cofounder Michael Newton describes it, “there’s always been an element of getting cans in hands.”<sup>79</sup> This approach has paid off. Larry Shadgett, the manager of Sunshine Market (the University of California–San Diego bookstore) recounted that at first Guayakí yerba mate did not seem to be catching on, and the store only sold two cases a week. But then Guayakí began to hold give-away events, and by 2020, its products filled an entire refrigerated wall that needed to be restocked daily and the market sold between seventy-five to one hundred cases a week.<sup>80</sup> These interactions at stores, events, and on college campuses cultivate a connection between the company and consumers. As Newton explains, human engagement builds goodwill. After getting a sample and learning about the company, people



Figure 3. Guayakí representatives giving away cans of Guayakí at Swarthmore College in 2019. Kaminar, “Mate Promoters Distribute Free Samples on Campus.” Courtesy of *The Phoenix: The Independent Newspaper of Swarthmore College*.

78. Latif, “Guayaki: David Karr.”

79. Author interview with Michael Newton, December 16, 2022.

80. Espinal, “The Rise of Yerba Mate.”

often walk away thinking “these guys are doing something unique and innovative as a company.”<sup>81</sup>

Guayakí also actively utilizes social media, which it envisions as a virtual embodiment of a mate circle, where the company acts as the server, sharing stories and information about its products. Like mainstream energy drinks, Guayakí is active on both Facebook and Instagram with 51,000 and 143,000 followers, respectively, as of October 2023. Guayakí posts almost daily on both platforms, but it receives more likes and comments on Instagram. Consumers, vendors, and events or people sponsored by Guayakí regularly tag the company in Instagram and post on its Facebook page. Guayakí is also proactive in getting social influencers (musicians, artists, YouTubers) to publicly consume Guayakí Yerba Mate. Such marketing efforts appeal to young people and build community among consumers.

Guayakí explicitly promotes community by inviting consumers to “join our community,” which also advances the company’s grassroots marketing efforts. As described on the company’s website, the Guayakí Ambacebador Network is designed to carry on the tradition of yerba mate “as a symbol of sharing and hospitality,” and it is based around the cebador, who in traditional yerba mate culture is “the person who shares yerba mate, generally in a circle with friends and family.” As Newton described, the ambecebadores alert the company when there is something going on, for example, a party or before a football game. And if it is a coherent proposal that is submitted with an adequate amount of time, the company provides a couple of cases of Guayakí to be passed out. “That’s also been a major element of us sharing. It’s kind of the more peer-to-peer.”<sup>82</sup>

Cultivating brand authenticity appeals to young adults and adolescents—the biggest consumers of sugar-sweetened sodas. A 2013 study of college students who regularly drink sodas found that many were obsessed with their favorite sugar-sweetened beverage brands and described the pleasure they obtained from that particular beverage. Some even described a level of loyalty akin to addiction. A number acknowledged that because of a strong preference, it would be difficult to change to change drinks. “It takes ... something like really drastic to change.”<sup>83</sup> In sum, Guayakí needed to set itself apart as a brand in order to attract young consumers. Indeed, copycat endeavors such as Honest Yerba Mate (2012) and Brisk Mate (2016) by big companies failed, while Guayakí’s yellow bottles and cans have become synonymous with yerba mate in the United States. The company’s grassroots marketing approach not only fosters a perception of brand authenticity that sells yerba mate, but it has also helped the company reshape the product to better fit consumer tastes and preferences.

### Compromising Product Authenticity and Brand Authenticity

Neither product authenticity nor brand authenticity fully explains the company’s success at popularizing and becoming synonymous with yerba mate in the United States. As cofounder Michael Newton explained, people will make a onetime donation to a good cause, but

81. Author interview with Michael Newton, December 16, 2022.

82. Author interview with Michael Newton, December 16, 2022.

83. Block et al., “If It Tastes Good,” 704.



ultimately, the product has to satisfy their needs. It has to fit their lifestyles, and they have to like how it makes them feel.<sup>84</sup> As local entrepreneurs rather than a large multinational company, Guayakí was more agile and flexible in responding to consumer preferences.

In 2008, Guayakí was primarily selling yerba mate tea bags and loose-leaf yerba in health food stores, and the \$15 million U.S. yerba market was split between two companies: Guayakí (60 percent) and EcoTeas (30 percent). At the time, both companies had a similar profile. Eco Tea's most popular product was loose-leaf yerba mate (just like how yerba mate is sold in South America) and Guayakí's best-selling products were yerba mate tea bags, in addition to the loose leaf.<sup>85</sup> Each company also aligned with the alternative food movement and the idea that yerba mate was a superfood. They both emphasized that they were green businesses and that their yerba mate was organic and produced sustainably by small farmers, but notably, EcoTeas did not emphasize any ties with Indigenous peoples.<sup>86</sup> In contrast, today Guayakí's yearly revenues are \$100 million and it is the dominant yerba company in the United States, while EcoTeas is relatively unknown.

Central to Guayakí's success, and why its sales grew so rapidly as compared with EcoTeas, was its move to promoting new ways of consuming yerba mate. Consumer input, obtained through grassroots marketing, helped the company understand consumer tastes and preferences. Recognizing that it would be difficult to convince American consumers to drink mate or tereré from a shared straw and gourd, Guayakí initially promoted yerba mate tea. When giving samples, the founders first brewed it like coffee and served it strong and dark. As David Karr and Chris Mann recounted, only a very small percentage of people would actually drink it. "Some people were like, 'not for me' and they would walk away. Like 80 percent of the people, they'd smell it and [respond] 'I can't do this, or too strong, or too bitter, or too much.'"<sup>87</sup> The Guayakí founders then started experimenting with adding soy milk and honey.<sup>88</sup> Later, the company also experimented with selling new yerba mate products on its website (e.g., bags of java maté and large bottles of chai latté concentrate) before coming up with a winner in 2005: individual-sized bottles of flavored yerba mate energy drinks to be drunk cold. Prior to this point, Guayakí had only been selling hot yerba mate products.<sup>89</sup> Then, in 2009, the company launched another winner—cans of yerba mate, in addition to yerba mate energy shots. In 2012, Guayakí added carbonated yerba mate to its product line. These new products changed the profile of yerba mate in the United States. As the historian Christine Folch assessed it in 2010, "To make it more accessible to a North American audience, yerba is often treated like a tea—now conveniently packaged in individual serving bags or pre-prepared in bottles."<sup>90</sup>

Guayakí changed the flavor profile of yerba mate to make it more palatable to American consumers, much like other companies have altered other sensorial aspects and the flavor profile of food.<sup>91</sup> When people initially try yerba mate, they often conclude that it has an

84. Author interview with Michael Newton, December 16, 2022.

85. Boyd et al., "Case Study," 63–89.

86. EcoTeas official website, August 20, 2008.

87. Raz, Interview with Guayakí.

88. Interview with Steven Karr on Guayakí official website.

89. Latif, "Guayaki: David Karr."

90. Folch, "Stimulating Consumption," 31.

91. Berenstein, "Designing Flavors"; Hisano, *Visualizing Taste*.

unpleasant taste. As *Food & Wine* described it, “strong, bitter, and vegetal, Yerba Mate has a very distinctive taste that, like coffee, can require adjusting to.”<sup>92</sup> Of the principal flavors (sweet, salty, sour, bitter, and umami), humans share a general distaste for bitterness and preference for sweetness.<sup>93</sup> Caffeine is naturally bitter, and in 2012, a Brazilian scientific study assessed, “This unusual bitter taste of *I. paraguayensis* [the scientific name of yerba mate] might be the cause of aversion to yerba mate-based beverages by a number of people.”<sup>94</sup> Adding sugar is an easy way to increase sweetness and disguise bitterness, thereby making yerba mate more palatable to new consumers who are not culturally accustomed to its natural bitterness. Adding sweetness to help popularize caffeinated beverages is nothing new. Sugar helped facilitate the spread of tea in eighteenth-century Britain and beyond.<sup>95</sup> Likewise, early modern Europeans liked their chocolate sweet.<sup>96</sup> Guayakí utilized this approach. For example, it adds 22 grams of added sugar to its single-serving 16-ounce bottle of mint tereré and even more sugar (24 grams) to its 12-ounce can of sparkling classic gold. While these quantities are significantly less than the sugar added to most soft drinks and energy drinks (a 12-ounce can of Coca-Cola has 39 grams of sugar and a 16-ounce can of Rockstar has 62 grams of sugar), they are still high. The 22 grams of sugar in Guayakí’s 16-ounce bottle of mint tereré equals 5.25 teaspoons of sugar and is equivalent to 44 percent of the U.S. Food and Drug Administration’s Daily Value for added sugar. As Guayakí cofounder Steven Karr explained, the company realized early on that for “the medicine to go down,” it needed to add things like soy milk and honey that made the yerba mate taste good.<sup>97</sup> Moreover, sugar is also addictive.

In addition to making the yerba mate sweet, Guayakí added flavors, creating different blends. According to Karr, the company found that “a lot of people wanted ... [mate] to be mixed with fruit juices and things like that.”<sup>98</sup> Indeed, an article in the University of California–Davis newspaper explains, “Many students agree that compared to the strong, thick taste of coffee, the lightness of Yerba Mates and the infused fruit flavors allow for students to feel less weighed down by the caffeine.”<sup>99</sup> The critical role that taste plays in consumer choice about cold beverages is confirmed by the study of college students who regularly drink sodas. It was the primary factor influencing their decision about which beverage to drink (93 percent), followed by price (58 percent).<sup>100</sup>

In transforming yerba mate, Guayakí responded to local conditions. Although its product takes the form of an iced tea, it is not marketed as such, but is instead linked to the booming energy drink market. Likely Guayakí chose this strategy because of price: when AriZona iced tea hit the market in 1992 with large cans priced at less than \$1, it pushed the price down for iced tea.<sup>101</sup> In contrast, the price for energy drinks is significantly higher. Originating in

92. Krishna, “Everything You Need to Know.”

93. Ferguson, “The Senses of Taste.”

94. Andrade et al., “Safety Assessment,” 328.

95. Mintz, *Sweetness and Power*.

96. Coe and Coe, *The True History*, 114–115.

97. Interview with Steven Karr on Guayakí official website.

98. Matéo, “Who Is Really Behind Guayakí?”

99. Candelaria, “UC Davis Students.”

100. Block et al. “If It Tastes Good,” 704.

101. Neck, Houghton, and Murray, “Case Study.”

Europe and Asia in the 1960s as a dietary supplement, energy drinks first reached the United States in 1997 with the launch of Red Bull by an Australian company. Marketed as boosting mental alertness and physical stamina, energy drinks include ready-to-drink beverages and also come in the form of shots and powders. They are especially popular among males between the ages of eighteen and thirty-four, and as of 2010, the industry had grown to a multi-billion-dollar business with main brands being Red Bull, Monster, and Rockstar.<sup>102</sup> Guayakí's founders sensed opportunity in this market. Looking back, David Karr explained, "Things started changing when we launched the cans in 2009 and 2010 because we realized the people buying this are younger generally or don't want to drink energy drinks that are 'unhealthy.'" As a result, Karr assessed, "A lot of our growth is coming from people leaving the artificial energy drink segment. We don't even market ourselves as 'energy drinks.' That's too simplistic of a definition. We're about clarity of mind, energy, well-being and health. We're very focused on just the yerba mate itself."<sup>103</sup> The big energy drink companies also influenced how Guayakí labels and markets its products. As Michael Newton explained, Guayakí originally printed "organic energy drink" on its first iteration of bottled yerba mate, but the company quickly removed the phrase, because big energy drink companies already had contracts that prevented distributors from stocking any more energy drinks in their warehouses. In stores, Guayakí's placement varies. Unless it has its own refrigerator or shelving unit, Guayakí is almost always next to energy or health drinks that are sold as single cans or bottles.

To turn yerba mate into a healthy energy drink (but without using that label), Guayakí intensified its natural stimulating properties. Brewed yerba mate tea, like black tea, has around 5 milligrams of caffeine per fluid ounce. Energy drinks and coffee have much more caffeine: around 10 and 20 milligrams per fluid ounce. Hence, Guayakí uses yerba mate extract in its beverages. As a result, Guayakí's bottles and cans of yerba mate have almost double the amount of caffeine—an average of 8.8 and 9.7 milligrams of caffeine per fluid ounce—as compared with yerba mate tea. In total, a bottle or can of Guayakí has 140 and 150 milligrams of caffeine, which is comparable to a can of Rockstar or Monster (160 milligrams) or an 8-ounce cup of coffee (163 milligrams).<sup>104</sup>

Guayakí not only adapted the taste and substance of yerba mate to appeal to Americans, it also changed the way that yerba mate is consumed. Americans are focused on the individual; they do not typically drink from the same cup or glass or share utensils. And so, Guayakí created individual-sized cans and bottles of yerba mate for each consumer to drink his or her own yerba mate without having to share. American consumers also prize convenience, the saving of time and effort. For food companies, convenience means food that is quick and easy to prepare. Canned, frozen, and precooked foods are prime examples. For most of the twentieth century, food companies have cultivated the idea of convenience in the United States, and recent studies show that it is a principal motivating factor for American consumers when making purchasing decisions.<sup>105</sup> Indeed, according to cofounder Steve Karr, the company

102. Heckman, Sherry, and Gonzalez de Mejia, "Energy Drinks."

103. As quoted in Hennessy, "If You Survive."

104. "Caffeine Content of Drinks," Caffeine Informer, <https://www.caffeineinformer.com/the-caffeine-data-base>.

105. Weber, "The Cult of Convenience."

found that “a lot of people wanted the benefits of mate, but they also wanted it made for them.”<sup>106</sup> They had a hard time replicating it at home. And so, Guayakí created a grab-and-go product—canned and bottled yerba mate that is already brewed and ready to be consumed without any extra paraphernalia or effort. Afterward, the can or bottle is easily disposed of by throwing it in the trash (or recycling).

The additions of sugar, flavor, and extra caffeine challenge the basic tenets of product authenticity by changing the taste and substance of yerba mate, and new ways of consuming yerba mate also conflict with the foundations behind claims of product authenticity. For South Americans, the unique manner of drinking mate and tereré is deeply meaningful and helps define the beverages. Without the ceremony, paraphernalia, and commensality of mate and tereré, Guayakí’s individual cans and bottles of flavored and sweetened yerba mate are something almost unrecognizable to South Americans. And as explained earlier, the perception of yerba mate’s product authenticity in the United States is based on it being a South American beverage. As Newton acknowledges, Guayakí honors the culture of South American mate and tereré, but the company had to adapt it to the U.S. marketplace.<sup>107</sup>

The individual, single-use bottles and cans also challenge the basic tenets of Guayakí’s brand identity as an environmental company. Similar to Whole Foods and other companies that promote themselves as environmentally or socially activist, Guayakí had to compromise its mission of advancing environmentalism and positive social change in order to grow sales.<sup>108</sup> In prioritizing growth, the founders also compromised on the South American version of the beverage, its health benefits, and the environmental impact. From early on, the company hired people who brought industry experience and contacts to help with marketing, retail, distribution, and vendors.<sup>109</sup> In 2021, Guayakí hired Stefan Kozak, the former CEO of Red Bull North America, a company not known for environmentalism or social causes, as its CEO. Two years later, it raised \$75 million in a sixth round of funding. As Geoffrey Jones argues, sustainable business has been “in part a social or imagined construct, with the ‘real’ impact on the natural environment sometimes debatable and typically partial.”<sup>110</sup> Indeed, by selling a pre-prepared beverage, Guayakí is essentially moving water around the country, and that entails significant environmental costs. Moreover, the one-serving, single-use can or bottle creates a lot of waste, because consumers use it once and then throw it in the trash or recycling. Although the company offsets its carbon footprint and preserves and replants the South American rainforest, its products and the way they are packaged have a negative impact on the environment and are wasteful. The mode for selling yerba mate chosen by Guayakí works against sustainability. But all of this does not matter to most Americans, who prioritize convenience and taste. Indeed, Guayakí’s sales grew significantly after it started selling pre-prepared, flavored, single-use yerba mate products. As the company has broken into new markets, most of its consumers generally are not hard-core environmentalists or activists. As Newton described, early on when Guayakí was sold mostly in health food stores, a lot more of

106. Matéo, “Who Is Really Behind?”

107. Author interview with Michael Newton, December 16, 2022.

108. Davis, *From Head Shops*, 224-27.

109. Author interview with Michael Newton, December 16, 2022.

110. Jones, *Profits and Sustainability*, 401.

its consumers were activists. Now, in developed markets such as San Diego, the Guayakí consumer is often a blue-collar worker who wants the product for its energizing properties.<sup>111</sup> While Guayakí consumers like to think that they are helping to address environmental and social justice problems through their consumption practices, they do not want to be weighed down by the details. Simple keywords, such as the positioning of “organic” at the front center of the Guayakí label and various symbols of organic, non-GMO, B Corporation, Gluten-Free, and Kosher certifications on the back side, along with links to more details on the webpage suffice. Some of these certifications are meaningless. All yerba mate is kosher, non-GMO, and gluten-free, but highlighting those attributes makes consumers think that the company is ethical and socially responsible and that the product is natural and healthy. For most consumers in the United States, that is enough.

## Conclusion

This essay explains how California-based Guayakí popularized yerba mate among young people and creative types in the United States, and in doing so, it contributes to our understanding of localization, authenticity, green capitalism, and grassroots marketing. In most cases, localization entails multinational companies and local consumers adapting and giving new meanings to an exotic foreign product or brand in order to appeal to consumers in the new host country. In contrast, for Guayakí, local entrepreneurs radically transformed yerba mate and emphasized some aspects of yerba mate’s narrative while downplaying others. Yerba mate has a long history in South America as mate and tereré. The beverages originated among the Indigenous people of Paraguay and have long been recognized as having energizing effects and health benefits, in addition to being shared drinks that foster a close social connection among consumers and a common identity.

The essay distinguishes two different types of authenticity—product authenticity (yerba mate) and brand authenticity (Guayakí Yerba Mate). By emphasizing yerba mate’s Indigenous origins, energizing traits, and health benefits, Guayakí cultivated a perception of product authenticity that built on the popularity of superfoods. At the same time, the company’s grassroots marketing efforts and its environmental and social activities promoted the perception of brand authenticity. But both product authenticity and brand authenticity were not enough to popularize Guayakí Yerba Mate. The company’s grassroots marketing efforts revealed that Guayakí had to transform the product to fit American tastes and preferences. And so, Guayakí has compromised product authenticity (shared yerba mate) and brand authenticity (green capitalism). To appeal to American consumers, it added sugar, flavors, and extra caffeine and made a pre-prepared “healthy” energy drink sold in single-use, individual-sized cans and bottles. This story exposes the challenges and limitations of green capitalism, ethical consumerism, and activist entrepreneurship. Consumers’ prioritization of convenience and taste forces companies to compromise on health benefits, social justice, and environmentalism.

111. Author interview with Michael Newton, December 16, 2022.

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