

## COMMODITIES AND DEVELOPING SOUTHERN CONE NATIONS

*Yerba Mate: The Drink That Shaped a Nation*. By Julia J. S. Sarreal. Oakland: University of California Press, 2022. Pp. 375. \$85.00 cloth; \$29.95 paper; \$29.95 e-book.  
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Commodities have played a central role in the development of Latin American nations, and scholars have produced a considerable body of work on products such as silver, sugar, and coffee, which were exported primarily to Europe and the United States. Sarreal advances the field with a monograph on *yerba mate*, a commodity whose production, trade, and consumption have been chiefly confined to South America. Yerba mate is a beverage infusion derived from the leaves of a species of trees native to areas of the Atlantic forest in northeastern Argentina, southern Brazil, and eastern Paraguay, and it is primarily consumed in the Southern Cone.

Within South America, yerba mate's history is profoundly transnational. Historically, it has been a crucial item in the trade between different countries in the region. However, the book primarily focuses on Argentina, the largest producer, consumer, and exporter of yerba mate. Sarreal explores how yerba mate shaped the formation of modern Argentina by examining its politics, economy, and culture. According to Sarreal, the drinking of mate in Argentina is intricately linked with class issues, being historically associated with the lower classes and looked down on by the elite—a perception that persists even today despite its widespread consumption and close association with Argentine national identity.

The book begins with a two-chapter prologue centered on colonial Paraguay, showcasing how Guaraní- and Jê-speaking groups started harvesting from wild yerba mate groves before the arrival of Iberian colonizers. Yerba mate quickly gained popularity among colonial populations beyond its production area, reaching as far as Buenos Aires, Santiago, and Cuzco, thus linking Paraguay, a remote upriver periphery, to the rest of the Spanish empire in South America.

Once she has laid out the origins of yerba mate, Sarreal shifts her focus to modern Argentina, where she stays until the end of the book, with chapters on yerba mate's political economy and cultural aspects. In the nineteenth century, Argentina failed to develop a robust domestic production of yerba mate in northeastern Misiones and Corrientes, relying heavily on yerba from Brazil. Over time, mate became associated with the lower classes, rural lifestyles, and gauchos (cowboys), while the upper class embraced European cosmopolitanism and abandoned the beverage. However, working-class immigrants quickly adopted mate, debunking the notion that the drink would disappear due to immigration.

At the turn of the century, the project of nationalizing yerba mate production in Misiones became a reality with government support, leading to the European

colonization of the territory and the cultivation of mate on Argentine farms while it continued to be harvested in the wild in Brazil and Paraguay. This intentional cultivation contributed to Argentina surpassing its neighbors as the largest producer of yerba mate. In the 1930s, a trade war between Argentina and Brazil ensued, involving wheat and yerba mate, their main respective exports to each other. Different lobbies in Argentina framed the commodities along class and national lines, with some advocating protectionism against Brazilian yerba mate imports and others promoting laissez-faire policies to boost Argentine wheat exports. During this time, left-leaning journalists, writers, and film directors denounced worker exploitation in mate plantations, shaping how the rest of the country perceived the mate boom in northeastern Argentina.

Looking at changes in cultural norms and the economy in the postwar period, Sarreal reveals how yerba mate consumption began to decline steadily beginning with Perón, as “Argentina’s blue-collar workers found that mate did not fit with the idealized middle-class life to which they aspired” (246). However, this decline was reversed during the economic distress of the 1980s and 1990s, when mate’s popularity rebounded due to its affordability and the sense of community it provided.

Sarreal aims to tell a story centered on questions of national identity and national economy without losing sight of the profoundly transnational character of yerba mate within the Southern Cone. She succeeds, for the most part, but some crucial gaps remain. For example, when reading about mate imports to Argentina in the early twentieth century, one gets the sense that details about mate production in Paraguay and Brazil, the two leading producers until the 1920s, are missing. Nevertheless, this is a well-researched and well-written book providing a much-needed intervention in a field that is overtly focused on overseas commodity chains.

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FREDERICO FREITAS

## DEVELOPMENT OF A NATIONAL DRINK AND NATIONAL SYMBOL

*Guaraná: How Brazil Embraced the World’s Most Caffeine-Rich Plant.* By Seth Garfield.  
 Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2022. \$99.00 cloth; \$34.95  
 paper; \$22.99 e-book.  
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Seth Garfield’s book fills a gap in the historiography by providing the first thorough study on the history of *guaraná*. Using a variety of sources such as missionary accounts, scientific journals, government reports, newspapers, advertisements, and ethnographies the author provides a fascinating interdisciplinary study on the plant from the time it