

A Short Twentieth-Century History of Guaraná: Melding Environmental and Food History in Brazil

SETH GARFIELD

University of Texas at Austin

Guaraná is a plant native to the Brazilian Amazon with a high caffeine content. Most Brazilians know guaraná, and consume it, as a popular soft drink -- Brazil's "national" soda. Yet the journey from an Amazonian smallholder's cultivar to the input for a multibillion dollar industry was historically complex, playing out over the course of the twentieth century. It was a process that emerged out of agronomic studies, chemical experimentation, technological advances, legal frameworks and state interventions, and shifting cultural patterns. From an environmental perspective, this paper explores how guaraná became one of the "fortunate" plants in the history of botany, ensuring its survival and propagation by seducing humans with its chemical attributes. I focus here on two moments (and sets of actors) that were decisive in the plant's/soft drink's history. The first looks at the role of Amazonian elites during the 1930s and 1940s in promoting the crop and, more specifically, crusading against fraud in namesake sodas that made use of substitute ingredients. The second looks at the impact of the Brazilian state agricultural research institution Embrapa, created by the military government in 1973, in increasing crop cultivation and productivity. In this sense, I seek to link environmental history to the history of regionalism, agroindustry, and mass consumption in Brazil. Guaraná may be celebrated as an authentic Brazilian beverage, but in fact there is little that is "traditional" about the soft drink from an environmental or cultural perspective.