A BUYING GUIDE FOR INDEPENDENT CAFÉS

The Cost-Per-Cup Playbook

How forty independent cafés cut green-coffee spend by **14% in one contract cycle** — without changing a recipe, a roaster, or a single price on the menu board.

11-MINUTE READ · TWO PRINTABLE WORKSHEETS · SPRING 2026 EDITION

14.2%
Median reduction in monthly coffee spend across 38 audited partner cafés

$0.373
What the espresso in a $5.75 latte actually costs — and where the rest goes

9 min
To run your own numbers with the worksheet on page 7

INSIDE THE GUIDE

You do not need a new roaster, a new recipe, or a higher price to find four points of margin. You need to know where the pennies are.

Written for owners buying **150–800 lb a month**, on an open account or coming up to a first contract renewal.

Every figure comes from the 2025 Northwind partner audit — 38 cafés, twelve months of invoices and POS exports.

Print pages 7 and 8. They are worksheets, and they are the point of the whole thing.

WHAT YOU GET, AND WHERE IT IS

Ten pages. Four chapters. Two worksheets you can print.

Every number below comes from invoices and POS exports of 38 wholesale partners between January and December 2025. Where a figure is an estimate, it says so.

WHO THIS IS FOR

Owners and managers of one to four cafés buying **150–800 lb a month**, on an open account or coming up to a first contract renewal.

It assumes you know your drink mix and can find three months of coffee invoices. It does not assume you have read a futures quote in your life.

WHAT YOU WILL NEED

Three months of coffee invoices · your current dose in grams · a POS export of drink counts · your milk and cup case prices.

HOW TO USE IT

Read chapters 1 and 2 in ten minutes. Then print page 7, fill it in over one week of service, and take the result to whoever writes your contract — us or anyone else.

38

Cafés in the audit

One to four sites each, in Oregon, Washington and Idaho. Twelve months of coffee, milk and packaging invoices matched to POS drink counts.

4.1M

Drinks behind the figures

Espresso drinks only. Batch brew, cold brew and retail bag sales are excluded — they behave differently and would flatter the numbers.

0

Figures we could not source

If a number here is modelled rather than measured, the sentence around it says so. There is nothing in this guide we cannot show you the arithmetic for.

THE ONE-SENTENCE VERSION

> Fix your shot waste first, your packaging second and your bean price third — that is the order of the money, and it is almost always the reverse of the order people try.

01

Where the money actually goes

A 12 oz latte at $5.75, taken apart to the tenth of a cent. These are real figures from a Portland café serving 240 drinks a day through 2025.

Most owners can quote their coffee price per pound and nothing else. That single number is the smallest line on the list — and the one everybody negotiates first.

LINE ITEM	BASIS	PER DRINK	SHARE
Espresso, 18 g double	$9.40/lb wholesale · 25.2 doses per lb	**$0.373**	**31.2%**
Milk, 10 oz whole	$4.10 per gallon delivered	**$0.320**	**26.8%**
Direct labour, 42 seconds	$22.50/hr fully loaded, bar only	**$0.263**	**22.0%**
Cup, lid and sleeve	12 oz double-wall, 1,000-case price	**$0.214**	**17.9%**
Syrup, at 22% attach rate	$0.11 on each flavoured drink	**$0.024**	**2.0%**
Total cost of goods	**Menu price $5.75 · gross margin 79.2%**	**$1.194**	**100%**

READ THAT TABLE AGAIN

The coffee is **6.5% of the menu price**. The cup, lid and sleeve cost 57 cents on the dollar of what the coffee costs. Negotiating 10% off your bean price saves you 3.7¢ a drink; a 40-case standing order on cups saved Fieldnotes 2.8¢ in a five-minute phone call.

A

Price per pound is not price per drink

An 18 g dose gives 25.2 doses per pound. A 20 g dose gives 22.7 — the same coffee is 11% more expensive per cup. Change the dose and you have changed your cost line, whatever the invoice says.

B

Roasted pounds hide a 16% loss

Green coffee gives up about 16% of its weight in the roaster. A $3.27/lb green cost is $3.89 before anyone has been paid, freighted or bagged. A quote that mixes green and roasted pounds is not comparable to one that does not.

C

Labour is the second-biggest line

Forty-two seconds of bar time costs more than the coffee does. A workflow change that shaves six seconds a drink is worth more than most price negotiations — and it compounds at the morning peak.

AND WHAT IT LEAVES OUT

Not one of those five lines includes the coffee that never gets sold. Every shot pulled at open to dial in the grinder, every dead shot between rushes, every remake handed back at the bar — all of it is bought, ground, tamped and paid for, and none of it appears on a report anybody reads. **That is the next page.**

THE LINE THAT IS NOT ON THE INVOICE

The most expensive coffee in your café is the coffee that never reaches a cup.

Across 38 audited partner cafés the median shop sent **9.4% of every shot it pulled** to the drain — dial-in at open, dead shots between rushes, remakes at the hand-off. Nobody counted it, because nobody rings it up.

9.4%
Median share of shots pulled and never sold, 2025 audit

$3,030
Annual espresso cost of that waste at 240 drinks a day

61 hrs
Barista time it consumes over the same twelve months

3.4%
What the top quartile runs — two habits, no new equipment

Northwind wholesale partner audit · 38 cafés in Oregon, Washington and Idaho · January–December 2025. Waste measured as shots pulled and not sold, taken from grinder dose counters and cross-checked against POS drink counts.

THE FIX, ONE LINE EACH

Cap the dial-in at three shots. Write the grind setting on the hopper tape at open and after every bag change, so the next barista starts from a number instead of from scratch.

Log the drain. A tally sheet by the knock box for one week is enough. What gets counted falls to about half of what it was, before anybody has been asked to try harder.

WHAT 9.4% COSTS A YEAR, BY VOLUME · AT $0.373 A DOSE, 360 TRADING DAYS

160 DRINKS A DAY	240 DRINKS A DAY	380 DRINKS A DAY	520 DRINKS A DAY
$2,020	$3,029	$4,796	$6,564

02

The four ways to buy coffee

Every wholesale price you will ever be quoted comes out of one of these four structures. They are not equally good — they are good at different volumes.

A green coffee price is two numbers: the **C-market**, which is the world arabica price and moves daily, and the **differential**, which is what one particular lot is worth above it. Each structure below locks a different combination of the two.

STRUCTURE	HOW THE PRICE IS SET	BEST WHEN	WHAT CAN GO WRONG	TERM
Spot / open account The default	You pay the roaster's list price on the day you order. Both numbers float.	Under 150 lb a month, or while you are still changing the menu every quarter.	A 30-day market move lands on you in full. No volume leverage at all.	**None**
Fixed price The workhorse	One $/lb, locked for an agreed volume and period. Both numbers fixed.	150–600 lb a month and you want one decision a year, not twelve.	You sit above market in a falling year. Budget certainty has a price.	**6–12 mo**
Price-to-be-fixed PTBF	Differential locked now; you call the C-market fix later, by a deadline.	Over 400 lb a month and someone on staff will actually watch the market.	You forget to fix. On the deadline it fixes at market, whatever that is.	**12 mo**
Direct allocation Farm-level	Priced at the farm gate against one harvest and fixed at signing.	A single origin is part of your identity and you can commit a year ahead.	Crop risk is partly yours. One harvest window, no top-ups in July.	**1 crop**

WORKED EXAMPLE · 500 LB A MONTH

A Southeast Portland café moved 6,000 lb a year off an open account and onto a nine-month fixed contract in March 2025, quoted **$0.62/lb below** the average list price it had paid over the previous twelve months.

$3,720

Saved across the contract year on the same coffee at the same volume.

$0.025

What that is per drink — small, and it arrives every single day.

THREE THINGS TO ASK FOR BY NAME

01 **A tier at your next volume.** "What is the price at 600 lb?" costs nothing to ask and is usually already on the sheet.

02 **A stated freight term.** Delivered or FOB changes the comparison by 8–14¢ a pound in the Northwest.

03 **A volume band, not a hard number.** Plus or minus 15% on the contract quantity protects you in a slow February.

A FRAMEWORK, ON ONE PAGE

The buying grid

Two questions decide which of the four structures fits you: **how much you buy**, and **whether anyone in the building will watch the C-market**. Be honest on the second one — an unwatched price-to-be-fixed contract is worse than an open account.

WATCHING THE MARKET	UNDER 250 LB A MONTH	OVER 250 LB A MONTH
	LOW VOLUME · NO MARKET VIEW **Short fixed, 3–6 months** Lock only through your busiest season, so a peak-month price move cannot land on you. Re-quote every quarter and keep the account open the rest of the year. Ask for: a quarter-by-quarter quote sheet and a stated freight term.	HIGH VOLUME · NO MARKET VIEW **Fixed, 9–12 months** One decision a year, one price on every invoice, and a number you can put in a budget. This is where most cafés between 250 and 600 lb belong — and most of them are not here. Ask for: a tier at your next volume band and ±15% flexibility on quantity.
	LOW VOLUME · ACTIVE VIEW **Open account, quoted quarterly** Under 250 lb the spread between structures is smaller than the cost of managing them. Stay flexible and spend the attention on your dose and your drain instead. Ask for: this year's list-price history, so you can see the range you are riding.	HIGH VOLUME · ACTIVE VIEW **Price-to-be-fixed** Lock the differential now and fix the C-market when it suits you. The cheapest structure on the sheet, and the only one that punishes inattention — the deadline fixes at market whether you called or not. Ask for: the fix deadline in writing, and a calendar reminder 30 days before it.

01

Moving box is a volume decision

A second grinder or a batch-brew line can push 190 lb to 280 lb inside a month. Re-run the grid whenever your monthly pounds move by more than 20%.

02

"Watching the market" means a person

Not an intention. A named person, a monthly reminder, and a price you have already agreed you would fix at. Without all three you are in the left-hand column.

03

Never sign in your busiest month

Northwest contracts are written February to April against the Central American harvest. A quote in January is worth more than the same conversation in May.

THREE PARTNERS, PLACED ON THE GRID

CAFÉ	LB / MONTH	WHO WATCHES THE MARKET	WHAT THEY BUY ON
Fieldnotes Café · Portland	**480**	Nobody, and they said so	**Fixed, 9 months**
Staple & Oak · Bend	**180**	Owner, most Mondays	**Open account, quoted quarterly**
Container Co. · Seattle, 3 sites	**1,150**	Ops manager, monthly review	**PTBF, February fix**

03

Run your own numbers

Print this page. Eight lines gets you a cost per cup you can defend in a negotiation; one week of the log below tells you what your drain is costing.

Worksheet 1 · Your cost per espresso drink

TAKES 9 MINUTES

A	Wholesale price per pound, delivered From your most recent invoice — include freight if it is billed separately.	______
B	Your dose, in grams Weigh it. Do not use the number somebody wrote on the grinder in 2023.	______
C	Doses per pound = 453.6 ÷ B At 18 g this is 25.2. At 20 g it is 22.7.	______
D	Coffee cost per drink = A ÷ C	______
E	Milk per drink = gallon price × ounces poured ÷ 128	______
F	Cup, lid, sleeve and syrup per drink Case price ÷ units, added together. Include the sleeve even if it is a nickel.	______
G	Bar labour = fully-loaded hourly ÷ 3600 × seconds per drink	______
H	**Total cost per drink** = D + E + F + G · then divide by your menu price	______

Worksheet 2 · Seven-day dial-in log

ONE TALLY SHEET BY THE KNOCK BOX

DAY	SHOTS TO DRAIN	DRINKS SOLD	WASTE %	WHAT CAUSED IT — GRINDER, HAND-OFF, REMAKE, TRAINING
MONDAY				
TUESDAY				
WEDNESDAY				
THURSDAY				
FRIDAY				
SATURDAY				
SUNDAY				

Week total. Divide shots to drain by drinks sold. Under 4% is good, 4–7% is normal, over 7% is worth a Tuesday morning of somebody's attention. Multiply the wasted shots by line D above to put a price on it.

Waste % ______

04

What changed at Fieldnotes Café

One café on SE Division Street, six months, two habits and one contract. No new equipment, no menu change, and no price increase.

Fieldnotes opened in 2019 and serves about 250 drinks a day off a two-group machine. In September 2024 Elena Marsh sent us three months of invoices expecting to be told her coffee was too expensive. It was not — she was buying well. **Her drain was the problem, and her cup case was second.**

The dial-in cap and the hopper tape went in on a Monday and took a fortnight to stick. The nine-month fixed contract at 480 lb a month started in March. The cup order moved to a 40-case standing delivery in one phone call.

FIELDNOTES · PLATE 1

Bar service at 8:10 a.m.,
SE Division Street

SIX MONTHS, MEASURED THE SAME WAY BOTH TIMES

MEASURE	SEPT 2024	MARCH 2025	CHANGE	WHAT DID IT
Monthly coffee spend	$3,180	$2,730	−14.2%	Contract price plus less waste
Shots to drain	9.1%	3.4%	−5.7 pts	Three-shot dial-in cap, grind logged
Cost per espresso drink	$1.21	$1.09	−$0.12	All three changes together
Cup, lid and sleeve	$0.242	$0.214	−$0.028	40-case standing order
Menu price, 12 oz latte	$5.75	$5.75	Unchanged	Deliberately left alone
Annualised margin recovered	—	$9,240	+1.9 pts	On flat volume and a flat price

> **“We did not change the coffee, the recipe, or the price. We changed the order sheet and the opening checklist.”**
>
> ELENA MARSH · OWNER, FIELDNOTES CAFÉ · PORTLAND

What did not work

A shorter 15 g dose was tried in October and reversed in nine days. It saved six cents and cost more in remakes than it saved.

What took longest

The habit, not the contract. Two weeks of reminders before the hopper tape got written without anybody being asked.

What we got wrong

We projected $7,400. The cup renegotiation was Elena's idea and we had not counted it at all.

THE OFFER

Send us three months of invoices. Get back a one-page memo.

We read your coffee, milk and packaging invoices against the 38-café benchmark behind this guide and send you a single page: the contract structure that fits your volume, a target price per pound for your quality tier, and the two line items costing you the most. Free for cafés in Oregon, Washington and Idaho. No sales call unless you ask for one, and the memo is yours to take to any roaster you like.

BOOK IT

northwindroasters.com/audit

OR EMAIL THE INVOICES

wholesale@northwindroasters.com

OR CALL THE WHOLESALE DESK

(503) 555-0182 · Mon–Fri, 7–3 PT

WHAT HAPPENS AFTER YOU SEND THEM

01

You send, we read

Upload or email three months of invoices and, if you have it, a POS export of drink counts. We do the arithmetic from pages 3 and 7 for you and check it against the benchmark set.

02

Thirty minutes, within five days

A call with Riley from the wholesale desk. What your numbers say, where you sit against comparable shops, and what we would do first if it were our café.

03

You get the page

Recommended structure and term, a target price band per pound, your projected cost per cup, and the two lines to fix first. One page, no attachments, no follow-up sequence.

IF YOU WOULD RATHER START WITH THE COFFEE

Ask for the **wholesale sample box**: four current-crop coffees roasted the Monday before they ship, with the green cost, the differential and the cupping score printed on every bag. Free to any café with a business address, once a season.

northwindroasters.com/samples · shipped Tuesdays

TIMING, HONESTLY

Northwest contracts are written February to April against the Central American harvest. A conversation in January gives you a choice of lots; the same conversation in May gives you whatever is left. If you are renewing this year, that is the whole reason to move now.

> NO OBLIGATION, STATED PLAINLY
>
> Roughly a third of the cafés we audit stay with the roaster they already have. We would still rather have written the memo — that is how six of our current partners found us.

"What happens to my invoices?"

Two people read them and they are deleted after 60 days. We never quote one café's prices to another, and we do not add you to a list.

"I'm mid-contract — too late?"

Send them anyway. The useful moment is about 90 days before renewal, and part of what you get back is the date that falls on.

"I'm outside the Northwest."

The memo is free where we can deliver — Oregon, Washington, Idaho. Anywhere else, email the specific question and we will still answer it.

WHO WROTE THIS

Northwind Coffee Roasters Portland, Oregon · since 2011

We roast on a 35 kg Loring in a warehouse off North Interstate and sell almost all of it wholesale. Sixty-two cafés, grocers and offices across Oregon, Washington and Idaho buy from us on contract; a handful more buy on spot, and we are fine with that.

We publish our green cost sheet every quarter — what we paid, the differential and the freight — because a wholesale price nobody can take apart is a price nobody can negotiate. This guide is the same instinct pointed at the other side of the invoice.

62	Wholesale partners across three states, 41 of them on a fixed or price-to-be-fixed contract
09	Producer relationships bought direct in Colombia, Ethiopia and Guatemala
02	Q Graders on staff · every lot cupped on arrival and again before contract
38	Cafés in the 2025 partner audit this guide's figures are drawn from

THE AUTHOR

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HEAD OF WHOLESALE

Twelve years behind and around a bar — five as a café owner in Eugene, seven here. Runs the partner audit, writes the contracts, and answers the wholesale line most mornings.

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ONE MORE THING, AND IT IS FREE

The Green Sheet — four issues a year

A two-page quarterly note on where the C-market has been, what it means for a 500 lb contract, and which origins are worth watching next season. No product news, no discount codes. About 1,400 café owners read it. **northwindroasters.com/greensheet**

Roastery

4180 N Interstate Avenue
Portland, Oregon 97217
Cupping table open to partners, Thursdays 10 a.m.

Wholesale desk

wholesale@northwindroasters.com
(503) 555-0182 · Mon–Fri, 7 a.m.–3 p.m. PT
Orders in by 2 p.m. Monday roast Tuesday.

Delivery

Own vans in Portland and Salem
Overnight freight to Seattle, Bend, Spokane and Boise
Free over 40 lb.

The Cost-Per-Cup Playbook, third edition, Spring 2026. Figures are drawn from the Northwind wholesale partner audit of 38 cafés in Oregon, Washington and Idaho, January–December 2025, and from published green invoices for the same period. Cost examples are illustrative: your milk, labour and packaging prices will differ, which is exactly why page 7 is a worksheet and not a table.