

## RESEARCH REPORT



### The Cult of Coffee

By Gloria Meehan

Ah, Coffee! Known by hundreds of names - Java, Cup 'o Joe, Buna, The Bean, Bucket of Mud, or as I affectionately call it, 'the brown fluid of life' – from instant, freeze-dried Folgers to the exotic Kopi Luwak<sup>1</sup>, the coffee drinking experience transcends income levels, generations, and cultures.

As a child, I remember my parents downing pots of the dark brown liquid on a daily basis. Curious about the affinity my parents had for the beverage and thinking how 'adult' and sophisticated it must be to drink coffee; I'd constantly beg my mother to let me drink a cup of coffee. She finally succumbed. Therefore, around the age of 8, I had my first coffee experience, courtesy of a faux version: Postum<sup>2</sup>, which turned out to be a truly vile concoction and I would find out sometime later, contained no real coffee at all. The experience turned me off to the prospects of ever trying to drink coffee again and I thought my parents were thoroughly insane for continuing on with their version of the beverage.

Times change and so did I. In the meantime, however, I became a consummate tea drinker until the mid-90's when I moved to Seattle and became a neophyte of coffee, eager to join in the nearly sacred affinity for the coffee drinking experience.

**"Let's go have a coffee"..."Meet me for a coffee"..."Gotta have my cup of coffee in the morning/noon/night"...**

My office compatriots are a multi-national bunch. In fact, my boss, a first generation Italian-American, insisted that during a recent coffee machine 'upgrade' we also include an espresso machine. A couple of weeks ago, while seeking out my morning cup of coffee at work, I sauntered into the break room where one of my co-workers – a young man of Pakistani heritage, raised in London - was slumped over the coffee machine preparing his morning brew. After a brief discussion extolling the virtues of the brown stuff, I got to thinking, "Where did this lowly bean come from, and what are the implications to 'taking a coffee break' in New York as opposed to Dubai? "Does this (alleged) ritualistic behavior mean the same to someone in Montreal as it does to someone in Denpasar?" And mostly, I considered that 24/7, somewhere in the world; someone was seeking the Cult of Coffee.

### History of the Bean

The popular theory is that coffee was 'discovered' by Kaldi, an Ethiopian goatherder from Caffa. Kaldi noticed that his goats would act exceptionally lively after eating certain red "cherries" from a squat plant. Intrigued as to what the plant was doing to his small herd, Kaldi tried some of the 'cherries', and the caffeine buzz was born. However, some local religious fellows – dervishes - thought Kaldi's 'cherry high' was sacrilegious. However, the dervishes decided to try some themselves and soon found that if they ate some of the

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cherries too, they could stay up later for their prayers- or so the story goes. And well, there is that whole notion of a ‘whirling dervish’.

In another legendary story, an Arab by the name of Omar and some of his trusty men were banished to the desert. Near starvation, the desperate Omar and his friends boiled the red fruit from an unknown plant. Not only did the broth and the fruit save their lives, but also the residents of a nearby town –Mocha – took the survival of Omar and his band of merry men as a religious sign. Therefore, the plant and its subsequent beverage garnered the new name of Mocha to honor the event.

Historically, what is known with more certainty is that slaves taken from present day Sudan into Yemen and Arabia, through one of the great ports of the day –Mocha – a name nearly tantamount with coffee ate the juicy outer skin of the “cherry”. Coffee was certainly being cultivated in Yemen by the 15th century and probably much earlier than that.

Mocha was also the main port for the one and only sea route to Mecca, and was the busiest place in the world at the time. But the Arabs had a strict policy not to export any fertile beans, so that coffee could not be cultivated anywhere else. The coffee bean is the seed of the coffee tree, but when stripped of its outer layers it becomes infertile.

Yemen actively encouraged coffee drinking as it was considered preferable to the extreme side effects of Kat, a shrub whose buds and leaves were chewed as a stimulant. The first coffeehouses were opened in Mecca and were called 'kaveh kanes'. They quickly spread throughout the Arab world and became successful places where chess was played, gossip was exchanged, and singing, dancing, and music were enjoyed. They were luxuriously decorated and each had an individual character. Nothing quite like the coffeehouse had existed before: a place where society and business could be conducted in comfortable surroundings and where anyone could go, for the price of coffee. Sound familiar? Looks like the Starbuck’s model has been around for a while.

**“Don’t roast your coffee beans in the marketplace. (Don’t tell secrets to strangers.)”  
– Oromo nomad saying**

Originally the coffee plant grew naturally in Ethiopia, but once transplanted to Arabia, the Arabs then monopolized the plant. Basically, there are two species of coffee beans: the luscious Arabica from East Africa, which prefers higher elevations, and the lowly Robusta from Zaire, which grows just about anywhere. One interesting and early use for coffee other than drinking comes from the nomadic Oromos from Kefa<sup>3</sup>, Ethiopia. They would wrap the beans in animal fat as their only source of nutrition while on raiding parties.

Coffee was introduced much later to countries beyond Arabia whose inhabitants believed it to be a delicacy and guarded its secret as if they were top-secret military plans. Since the government did not allow transportation of the plant out of the Moslem nations, the

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actual spread of coffee was started illegally. One Arab named Baba Budan smuggled beans to some mountains near Mysore, India, and started a farm there. Early in this century, the descendants of those original plants were found still growing fruitfully in the region. Eventually, however, even the Dutch were able to get their hands on the potent bean and in 1616, brought some back to Holland where they were grown in greenhouses.

Today, coffee is grown and enjoyed worldwide, and is one of the few crops small farmers in emerging nations can profitably export.

Coffee was believed by some Christians to be the devil's drink<sup>4</sup>. Pope Clement VIII heard about the drink and decided to taste it before he banished it. It seems religious apostolates are a magnanimous bunch. Pope Clem enjoyed it so much he baptized it, saying, "Coffee is so delicious it would be a pity to let the infidels have exclusive use of it."

Regardless, The Turks were the first country to adopt it as a drink, often adding spices such as clove, cinnamon, cardamom, and anise to the brew. From personal experience, this is typically the way the beverage is served to this day.

### Traditional Blend



Coffeehouse in the Palestine

Ethiopians were drinking coffee while Europeans were still swilling beer for breakfast, and over the centuries, the Ethiopians developed a coffee ceremony. From Epicurean magazine: "The long involved process starts with the ceremonial apparatus being arranged upon a bed of long scented grasses. The roasting of the coffee beans is done in a flat pan over a tiny charcoal stove, the pungent smell mingling with the heady scent of incense that is always burned during the ceremony. The lady who is conducting the ceremony gently washes a handful of coffee beans on the heated pan, then stirs and shakes the husks away. When the coffee beans have turned black and shining and the aromatic oil is coaxed out of them, A small ode to friendship is offered, and the beans are ground by a pestle and a long handled mortar. The ground coffee is slowly stirred into the black clay coffee pot locally known as 'jebena', which is round at the bottom with a straw lid. The lady finally serves the coffee in tiny china cups to her family, friends and neighbors gracefully pouring a thin golden stream of coffee into each little cup from a height of one foot." In the full-fledged ceremony, which can last up to an hour, you must drink three cups: *Abole-Berke-Sostga*, one-two-three, for friendship. Talk about a buzz! I'd be pretty friendly after three cups of Ethiopian coffee in an hour.

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### A 'Reader's Digest' Version of Coffee in America

As an American, I can say I come from a proud history of coffee drinkers. At least in our relatively short history there has been quite an evolution – and revolution - of this lowly beverage.



First Starbuck's Café in Seattle

#### *The Boston Tea Party*

Coffee came to America with the tastes of the British. In the middle 1700s, tea and coffee were equally favored and many taverns doubled as coffee houses. This all changed as a result of the famous Boston Tea Party of 1773 where a large shipment of tea was dumped into Boston harbor to protest the British tax on tea, proclaiming "no taxation without representation". From then on, it was unpatriotic to drink tea. The Americans soon found they could import coffee grown in Central and South America (more about that later) and by the beginning of the 1900s, America was consuming 1/2 of all coffee produced in the world.

#### *Cowboy Coffee*

Early on, coffee was prepared in America in a similar manner to how it was prepared in Ethiopia. Green beans were roasted over a stove, ground in a mortar and pestle and then boiled on the stove until done. However, the unceremonious Cowboy Coffee was just a common and simple method of brewing coffee and was used the longest by real cowboys on cattle drives and frontier camps of the early West, who had only a campfire, a hand grinder and a large pot to make coffee. When ready, they would pour the coffee into tin cups and drink it. Other less luxurious methods were employed including putting ground coffee into a clean sock and immersing it in cold water, then heating the sock over a campfire. Yum! Typical camp supplies were bags of pre-roasted coffee and a hand powered grinder. One coffee company - Arbuckle's Coffee - put a peppermint stick in each bag of coffee. Camp cooks rarely had to grind the coffee, as the cowboys would volunteer to grind the coffee -- as long as they got to keep the peppermint stick.

#### *The Coffee Percolator*

James Mason patented the first American coffee percolator in 1865. The percolator method still boils the coffee – over and over – as it passes over coffee grounds in a basket until it gains enough strength. The electric percolators, which came out around 1910, were very popular with the day's busy housewife because the coffee maker could now “watch itself” and be trusted not to boil over on the stove. Coffee percolators could also be scaled to very large sizes, making large pots of coffee all at one time.

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### *Coffee Goes to War*

During World War I, American soldiers were accustomed to drinking coffee - whether by large mugs from the mess hall percolators or dehydrated packets of coffee in their military rations – and heating it with the matches also included in the ration pack. The term "Cuppa Joe" came from "G.I. Joe" - who always had his coffee.

### *The Lunch Counter*

American soldiers, who were so used to drinking coffee several times a day when they were overseas, also consumed great amounts of coffee when they returned to the United States. Coffee houses became the new place to socialize. Coffee was still brewed in huge electric percolators - the only large scale brewing method of the time. When people wanted something to eat with their coffee, the ubiquitous lunch counters, and drugstore soda fountains were born.

### *Drip Coffee Makers*

My first recollection of a coffee maker, the Drip coffee makers came on to the scene in the 1960s. They used a method similar to a percolator, drawing hot water up a tube and spraying it over the coffee, but they didn't re-circulate the coffee, the hot water dripped through ground coffee and into a waiting pot. The result was a much better tasting coffee than the percolator as well as an easier to clean appliance.

### *Travel Coffee Mug*

What's a long drive without a mug 'o coffee? The automobile sent people to the roads to explore the nation. All sorts of places to eat and drink, including coffee, sprang up to serve them. At that time drivers actually stopped to enjoy their coffee, which would soon change as drivers wanted to be able to take their coffee with them. Auto cup holders and Coffee Travel Mugs were a natural progression.

### *The Coffee Break*

The British may have invented "Tea Time" but America invented the "Coffee Break". The practice began during the WW II era war effort when factories gave workers a brief rest and a jolt of caffeine. Thanks to a clever advertising campaign in the mid 1950s by the Pan American Coffee Bureau, 70-80% of American workers were taking a coffee break – both factory and office workers. General Eisenhower used the coffee break idea for "Operation Coffee Cup" during his presidential campaign to meet with voters, which continued to spread the social trend of the coffee break.

Elsewhere, coffee has played a huge role in both history and literature because of the large effects the coffee industry has had on cultures where it is produced or consumed. Coffee is often mentioned as one of the main economic goods used in imperial control of trade, and with colonized trade patterns in "goods" such as slaves, coffee, and sugar,

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which defined Brazilian trade, for example, for centuries. Coffee in culture or trade is a central theme and prominently referenced in much poetry, fiction, and regional history.

The United States has the largest market for coffee, followed by Germany and Japan. Consumption has even increased in the UK in recent years. The Nordic countries consume the most coffee per capita, with Finland typically occupying the top spot with a per-capita consumption in excess of 22 lbs.(!) per year, closely followed by Norway, Sweden and Denmark. It appears those cold, northern nights require a jolt of caffeine to suffice you until warmer weather.

### Coffee: Society's Cup

The social aspects of coffee can be experienced anywhere in the world.

Coffee Culture is a term used to describe a social atmosphere that depends heavily upon coffee shops - espresso in particular - to act as a social lubricant. And nowhere but Seattle is the term used as frequently to describe the ubiquitous presence of hundreds of espresso stands and coffee shops in the Seattle Metro area and the spread of franchises of businesses such as Starbucks and their clones across the United States and much of the world.

Although the term Coffee Culture seems to be exclusively American, the formation of culture around coffee and coffee houses in fact dates back to the earliest coffeehouses founded in the 16th century Turkey. Coffeehouses, or enterprises that specialize in the preparation of coffee drinks, have traditionally been social hubs and artistic centers. Trademarks of today's coffeehouses have their origins in early coffee houses and help to form the distinctive concept of "coffee culture".



Storyteller at a coffeehouse in the Ottoman Empire

With the popularity of coffee reaching its full potential, the modern coffeehouse – or café - in both North and South America, the Middle East, and Europe also provide other services along with their Cup ‘O Joe, such as sandwiches, pastries, and other light refreshments and wired or wireless internet access (thus the name, "internet café" — which has carried over to some places that provide internet service without any actual coffee) for their customers, many of which do business in these locations for hours on a regular, daily basis, and casual dating and group social activities. A "first date" at a coffee shop is often seen as a safe and non-threatening atmosphere in which to get to know somebody without the commitment of an expensive dinner, alcohol, or excessively noisy surroundings.

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### International Flavor

American coffee shops are also often connected with indie, jazz, and acoustic music, and will often be playing either live or recorded music in their shops. Coffeehouses are often gathering places for underage youths who cannot go to bars.

In the UK traditional coffeehouses as gathering places for young people were unpopular after the 1960s, but the concept has been revived since the 1990s by chains such as Starbucks, Coffee Republic, Costa Coffee, and Caffè Nero as places for professional workers to meet and eat out or simply to buy beverages and snack foods on their way to and from the workplace.



“Discussing the War in a Paris Café”, Illustrated London News September 17, 1870

In France, a cafe also serves alcoholic beverages. French cafes often serve simple snacks such as sandwiches. They may have a restaurant section. A brasserie is a cafe that serves meals; generally single dishes, in a more relaxed setting than a restaurant. A bistro is a cafe / restaurant, especially in Paris. Cafés have also historically been an important social gathering point in Paris.

Northern European coffee parties are a popular form of entertainment. Besides coffee, the host or hostess at the coffee party will typically serve homemade cake and pastries.

In Australian cities, a traditional European cafe culture is thriving as a result of significant immigration from mainland Europe in the 19th century and 20th century. These establishments often cluster along certain streets and with the weather allowing curbside seating much of the year certain areas resemble a large party on a Friday or Saturday evening.

One time in Germany, the government hired a special force known as Kaffee Schnufflers, to sniff out illicit coffee roasters and smugglers. It was an intense campaign brought about by King Frederick who did not believe that coffee-drinking soldiers could be depended upon. Fortunately, the campaign failed. It seems King Freddy was a ‘closet caffeine’ addict.

In China, an abundance of recently started domestic coffeehouse chains may be seen accommodating business people. These coffee houses are more for show and status than anything else, with coffee prices often even higher than in the west.

In Malaysia and Singapore, traditional breakfast and coffee shops are called *kopi tiams*. The word is a modified ‘pigeon’ of the Malay word for coffee (as borrowed and altered from the Portuguese) and the Hokkien dialect word for shop (POJ: tiàm). Menus typically feature simple offerings: a variety of foods based on egg, toast, and kaya (jam), plus coffee, tea, and Milo, a malted chocolate drink which is extremely popular in Southeast Asia and Australasia, particularly Singapore and Malaysia.

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In parts of the Netherlands where the sale of cannabis is decriminalized, many cannabis shops call themselves coffee shops.

In modern Egypt, Turkey and Syria, coffeehouses attract many men and boys to watch TV or play chess and smoke *shisha*<sup>5</sup>.

Turkish bridegrooms were once required to make a promise during their wedding ceremonies to always provide their new wives with coffee. If they failed to do so, it was grounds for divorce! (Ouch!)

Who knew Kaldi's lowly 'red cherries' would survive into modernity? More so than ever, the traditions surrounding this essentially legal drug have grown with very little evolution. Great thinkers and poets from the 'angry eye'-d, absinthe swilling Rimbaud<sup>6</sup>, who scrapped his hedonistic Parisian lifestyle and headed to what is present day Ethiopia (then known as Abyssinia) to become a coffee merchant in Harrar (Rimbaud risked his life for the bean - in fact, it killed him - is perhaps not so unreasonable since the locals were fond of selling him beans laced with goat crap) to our country's founding fathers, where the American Revolution grew from roots planted by patriots in the Green Dragon (some say it was the Green Lion) Public House in the Lloyd's District of London, coffee and it's expected stimulation has spurred humankind for centuries.

As I stumble downstairs every morning, bleary-eyed and in search of that brown liquid, which offers a glimmer of hope for my day, I don't see the diminishing of coffee's influence anytime soon.

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<sup>1</sup> Kopi Luwak - coffee made from coffee berries, which have been eaten by and passed through the digestive tract of the Asian Palm Civet. Kopi is the Indonesian word for coffee, and luwak is a local name of the Asian Palm Civet. The civets eat the berries, but the beans inside pass through their system undigested. The raw, red coffee berries are part of the civets' normal diet. Kopi Luwak can be found on the islands of Sumatra, Java and Sulawesi in the Indonesian Archipelago, and in the Philippines (where the product is called Kape Alamid). Vietnam has a similar type of coffee, called weasel coffee, which are coffee berries; which have been defecated by local weasels. In actuality the "weasel" is just the local version of the Asian Palm Civet.

Kopi Luwak is the most expensive coffee in the world, selling for between \$120 and \$600 USD per pound, and is sold mainly in Japan and the United States.

<sup>2</sup> Postum - is a powdered roasted grain beverage previously sold by the Kraft Foods Company as a coffee substitute. The caffeine-free beverage mix was originally created by company founder C. W. Post in 1895 and marketed as a healthy alternative to coffee. Post was a student of Dr. John Harvey Kellogg who believed caffeine to be unhealthy. Postum is made from wheat bran, wheat, molasses, and corn dextrin. It is no longer available; it was discontinued in the winter of 2007

<sup>3</sup> Kefa - some say, is the root for the word *coffee*. Others say that the word *coffee* is derived from the Arabic word *qahwa*, from the root q-h-w-y, "to make something repugnant." *Qahwa* originally referred to wine, which made food repugnant, and was applied to coffee because it made sleep repugnant. It's interesting to note that Ethiopia is the only country in the world that does not use a word similar to coffee for the brew; there, it's called *buna*, which means bean.

The Kefans also gave us the world's first baristas, a cast called the Tofaco, who not only brewed the king's coffee but also poured it down his throat.

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<sup>4</sup> *The Devil's Cup: A History of the World According to Coffee* – Stewart Lee Allen, Ballentine Books, NY, NY 1999

<sup>5</sup> shisha is a single or multi-stemmed (often glass-based) water pipe device, similar to a hookah and used for smoking. Originating in India, Nepal, it has gained popularity, especially in the Arab World.

<sup>6</sup> Excerpt from *Une Saison en Enfer (A Season in Hell)* – Arthur Rimbaud, describing his intention to go to Abyssinia (present day Ethiopia): “And now I am on the beaches of Brittany. Let cities light their lamps in the evening. My daytime is done; I am leaving Europe. The air of the sea will burn my lungs; lost climates will turn my skin to leather. To swim, to pulverize grass, to hunt, above all to smoke; to drink strong drinks, as strong as molten ore, - as did those dear ancestors around their fires.

I will come back with limbs of iron, with dark skin, and angry eyes: in this mask, they will think I belong to a strong race. I will have gold: I will be brutal and indolent. Women nurse these ferocious invalids come back from the tropics. I will become involved in politics. Saved.”