



Global History of Coffee

COFFEE COMMONS
2025

THE PREHISTORIC BEAN

Long before humans walked the earth, *Coffea arabica* was born in the Ethiopian highlands. Recent genomic research reveals that between 600,000 and 1 million years ago, a natural hybridisation occurred between two parent species: *Coffea canephora* (Robusta) and *Coffea eugenioides*.

This ancient union created the species that now accounts for 60% of global coffee production. However, its history is one of survival. Severe population bottlenecks—periods where the population shrank dramatically—have left Arabica with limited genetic diversity, making it highly vulnerable to disease and climate change. Today, the montane rainforests of Ethiopia serve as a living library of this genetic heritage. Protecting these shrinking forests is not just an environmental necessity, but a vital safeguard for the future of coffee.



FROM BERRY TO BREW: EARLY HUMAN INTERACTIONS



Long before the invention of the coffee pot, the relationship between humans and coffee was purely pragmatic. In the Ethiopian highlands, the earliest consumption involved chewing the raw, sweet-tasting cherries for a quick boost of caffeine and sugar.

The Oromo people refined this practice by mixing ground coffee beans with ghee (clarified butter) to create high-density energy rations—effectively the world's first "power bar"—to sustain hunters and travellers. Traders crossing the desert to the Arabian Peninsula also relied on chewing beans to stay alert. This utilitarian use set the stage for the eventual discovery of roasting and brewing, transforming a survival tool into a cultural icon.

THE LEGEND OF KALDI: MYTH AND REALITY

The most famous story of coffee's origin features Kaldi, a 9th-century Ethiopian goatherd. As the legend goes, Kaldi noticed his goats "dancing" after eating red berries. When he took his find to a local monastery, disapproving monks threw the beans into a fire. The resulting aroma was so enticing that they rescued the beans, ground them, and brewed the first cup to stay awake for prayer.

While charming, this story first appeared in writing in 1671, centuries after the fact. There is no historical evidence for Kaldi. Instead, the "discovery" was likely a gradual process by indigenous communities who, over generations of experimentation, unlocked the secrets of roasting and brewing.



THE BUNA: A RITUAL OF SPIRIT AND COMMUNITY

In Ethiopia, coffee is not merely a drink; it is a vehicle for social cohesion. The traditional coffee ceremony, or buna, is a multi-sensory ritual of hospitality that can last for hours. Performed typically by the woman of the household, it takes place on a floor strewn with fresh grass and scented by burning incense (itan).

The process is deliberate and symbolic: green beans are washed, roasted over charcoal, and ground by hand. The host wafts the roasting smoke toward guests as a sign of welcome. The coffee is then brewed in a clay pot known as a jebena and served in small cups (sini). It is always served in three rounds—awol, tona, and baraka (blessing)—transforming the act of drinking into a prolonged gathering for news, storytelling, and conflict resolution.



THE ART OF BUNA: OBJECTS OF RITUAL



The buna ceremony is defined by its tools, which are revered as cherished heirlooms rather than mere utensils. Center stage is the jebena, a clay pot with a spherical base and long neck, designed for slow brewing. Often passed down through generations, the jebena varies in style by region but serves as a universal symbol of Ethiopian hospitality.

The brewed coffee is poured from a height into handleless cups called sini, arranged on a specialized tray known as a rekebot. This artistry takes place in a carefully prepared space: fresh grass carpets the floor and burning incense (itan) purifies the air, transforming the home into a sacred sanctuary.

VOICES FROM THE BUNA: WOMEN AND ORAL TRADITION

The buna ceremony is a vital social institution centred on the agency of women. As the master of ceremonies, the hostess commands the ritual, creating a powerful platform for female solidarity. In many communities, this gathering serves as an informal council—a rare space where women can speak freely, exchange advice, and strengthen social networks.

Beyond its gender dynamics, the ceremony acts as a "living library." Amidst the ritual of roasting and brewing, elders transmit oral traditions, family histories, and proverbs to the next generation. Ultimately, the buna is a vehicle for radical hospitality that bridges social divides, uniting neighbours, friends, and strangers in a shared experience of kinship.

THE YEMENI CONNECTION: FROM WILD TO CULTIVATED

While coffee was born in Ethiopia, it "grew up" in Yemen. Around the 15th century, the plant crossed the Red Sea, where Yemeni farmers developed the first systematic cultivation techniques using terraced mountainsides. This marked the pivotal transition of coffee from a wild plant to an agricultural commodity.

The epicenter of this boom was the port city of Mocha (al-Mukha). From the 16th to the 18th century, Mocha held a near-total monopoly on the global supply. The beans exported here—sun-dried with the fruit attached—were renowned for their rich, chocolatey notes. This distinctive flavor profile was so prized that "Mocha" became synonymous with coffee itself, laying the economic foundation for the modern global industry.

THE SUFI'S BREW

In 15th-century Yemen, coffee was not a morning pick-me-up, but a tool for spiritual transcendence. Sufi mystics were the first to adopt the drink, using its caffeine to fuel dhikr—nightly devotional rituals of chanting and meditation.

They called the drink qahwa, historically a term for wine, rebranding it as the non-intoxicating "Wine of Islam" that sharpened the spirit rather than dulling the senses. Despite attempts by conservative jurists to ban the "innovative" substance, the Sufis defended it. From their religious lodges (khanqahs), the habit spread to the streets, birthing the public coffeehouse and transforming a sacred aid into a social necessity.

GUARDING THE GOLDEN BEAN



For over two centuries, Yemen held an iron grip on the world's coffee supply. To protect this "golden bean," authorities at the port of Mocha enforced a strict policy: every bean exported was first boiled or roasted to render it infertile. This ensured that no foreign nation could grow its own supply.

The monopoly was finally broken not by war, but by smuggling. In the 17th century, an Indian Sufi pilgrim named Baba Budan allegedly strapped seven fertile seeds to his chest and smuggled them to the hills of Chikmagalur, India. Soon after, the Dutch and French acquired seeds for their colonies, ending Yemen's reign and turning coffee into a global commodity.

THE GLOBAL LEAP

From its African roots, coffee reached Europe via Venetian merchants in the 17th century. Though initially controversial, it was famously "baptized" by Pope Clement VIII, allowing it to flourish. European coffeehouses soon became the engines of the Enlightenment, serving as hubs for politics, art, and revolution.

To satisfy booming demand, colonial powers fought to break the Arab monopoly, establishing plantations across Asia and the Americas. This global expansion, however, had a dark side: it was often built on the brutal labor of enslaved people. Today, coffee is grown in over 50 countries along the "Bean Belt," a global legacy that began in the Ethiopian highlands.



THE BITTER TASTE OF EMPIRE



The late 19th-century "Scramble for Africa" transformed coffee from a local crop into a tool of colonial exploitation. European powers seized vast tracts of land—most notoriously the "White Highlands" of Kenya—displacing indigenous communities like the Kikuyu and Maasai.

Coffee production became a colonial imperative. In German East Africa (Tanzania) and beyond, authorities used coercive taxes and physical violence, such as the kiboko whip, to force Africans to labor on plantations for little or no pay. While profits flowed to Europe, the crops left a legacy of social disruption and soil degradation. Yet, this oppression fueled resistance. From everyday acts of sabotage to the Mau Mau Uprising in Kenya, the coffee fields became battlegrounds for land, dignity, and eventually, freedom.

BREWING REVOLUTION AND INNOVATION

Africans were never passive victims of the coffee trade; they were innovators and revolutionaries.

During the colonial era, African researchers at Kenya's Scott Laboratories helped develop the renowned SL28 and SL34 varieties, while the Haya people of Tanzania adapted traditional processing methods to enter the cash economy.

As the drive for independence grew, the coffeehouse became the engine of political discourse. From Addis Ababa to Accra, these spaces functioned as "penny universities" where activists and intellectuals plotted liberation. Post-independence, African nations fought to reclaim economic sovereignty. While early state-run marketing boards often failed, a new era of powerful farmer cooperatives and commodity exchanges is now working to keep the value of the crop within the continent

An illustration of a person's torso and arms. They are wearing a light-colored, short-sleeved shirt with a decorative patch on the left chest. They are holding a small, dark, round pot in their right hand, pouring a dark liquid into a small, light-colored cup held in their left hand. The person is wearing a watch on their left wrist and a ring on their left hand.

CAFÉ TOUBA: THE SPIRITUAL BREW

In Senegal, coffee is a vehicle for faith. Café Touba is a distinctive, spicy beverage flavoured with djar (grains of Selim) and cloves. Its origins are attributed to Sheikh Amadou Bamba, founder of the Mouride Brotherhood, who viewed the drink as a medicine and a spiritual aid for late-night prayer.

Today, Café Touba has transcended its religious roots to become a national symbol of identity. During the Grand Magal pilgrimage, it is served freely to millions, embodying the values of community, generosity, and resilience.

FROM TRAGEDY TO TRIUMPH: THE NEW WAVE

Perhaps nowhere is the resilience of African coffee more evident than in Rwanda. Decimated by the 1994 genocide, the sector has been rebuilt as a vehicle for reconciliation. Hutu and Tutsi farmers now work side-by-side in cooperatives, processing high-quality beans that command premium prices globally.



This shift toward quality is happening across the continent. The "Speciality Coffee" movement allows African farmers to reject the bulk commodity model and market their beans based on unique flavours and terroir.

Aided by Fair Trade initiatives that return profits to community development, a new generation of farmers is reclaiming Africa's status not just as a source of raw material, but as the producer of the world's finest coffees.

My Friends
put me on to



THE FUTURE IN A CUP

Africa is the cradle of coffee, but its future is under siege. Rising temperatures and changing rainfall patterns threaten up to 70% of the land currently suitable for Arabica coffee. Pests and diseases are thriving in the warming climate, putting millions of smallholder livelihoods at risk.

The fight to save African coffee is now a race for adaptation. Scientists and farmers are exploring heat-tolerant wild species and agroforestry techniques to protect the crop. As we leave this exhibition, we are reminded that coffee is more than a beverage—it is a lifeline for millions. Protecting its future requires a global commitment to climate justice and economic equity.

"It's Great!"

Packed