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Coffee Through and Through

The Story of the World's Most Popular Drink



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Illustrated by Alina Jan

Coffee is an ancient drink, steeped in history and well-loved for its use as a mild stimulant. From its earliest discovery, coffee has been strongly associated with intellectualism. Myths of its discovery involve saints and mystics. Indeed, the earliest credible accounts of coffee's use come from Sufi monasteries in Yemen, where it was used to keep monks awake during nighttime vigils. When coffee spread outward to Egypt, coffee shops quickly sprung up around the University of Azhar, thus beginning the grand tradition of studying in a café. Centuries later in England, coffee houses became a focal point for religious and political discussion. The habit of subversive talk in such houses grew to a degree that in 1675, Charles II tried to ban all coffee houses. His attempt failed, however, and coffee flourished. Ironically enough, it is not England that is known today for having a ridiculous number of fancy coffee-based concoctions. That honor goes to France. France was introduced to the art of coffee in 1669, when Soleiman Agha, an ambassador from the Ottoman Empire, brought coffee beans on a diplomatic mission. He anchored coffee drinking as a habit by gifting the Parisian court with not only ground coffee, but also unroasted beans with which to grow coffee plants. Coffee eventually made its way to the Americas around 1720 when seedlings were brought to the Caribbean. It became popular as a drink following the Boston Tea Party, when suddenly, tea was unpatriotic, but everyone still needed a source of caffeine. Coffee filled the gap, finding a place in America that lasts to this day.

Coffee trees spend their first year of life in nurseries before being transplanted to a farm. After around four years, a tree will bear its first harvest. Coffee plants begin as fragrant, white flowers, small, with narrow petals. When these flowers are pollinated, they develop into round fruits that go from green to a luscious red. Such red fruits are called coffee cherries, due to their color. Inside each cherry there are two seeds which, once roasted and ground, can be brewed to make coffee.

Harvesting these cherries is often a labor intensive process, as in most places they are picked by hand. Indeed, only coffee in Brazil is harvested by machine, as it is grown on much flatter land there than anywhere else. In addition, machines can only harvest by strip picking. This means that all the cherries are picked at once, regardless of whether or not they are ripe. The other method of picking is called selectively picking, and as the name indicates, the process is more selective. Only ripe cherries are picked and pickers rotate among the trees every eight



to ten days to collect them. This method is much more expensive and far more labor-intensive than strip picking, and so it is mainly used when harvesting finer, more expensive coffee such as Arabica beans or the famous Jamaican Blue Mountain.

Once picked, the beans are collected from the cherries and dried. Before they can be exported as coffee beans, however, they must be milled. Hulling machines remove the final parchment layer from around the bean. Polishing is an optional step that removes any remaining silver skin. Polishing does not change the flavor of the coffee, but is merely an aesthetic step. Finally, the beans are roasted at about 550 degrees Fahrenheit. At 400 degrees, the beans turn brown and an oil called cafeeol begins to come to the surface.

Technically, the last step before brewing the coffee is grinding it, but this step is sometimes done at home rather than as part of the production process. Grinding is better done closer to drinking the coffee because coffee begins to lose its flavor once ground and a fresh grind tastes better. Taste is often sacrificed for convenience, however, and pre-ground coffee can be bought nowadays.

Brewing coffee can be a simple and effortless process, especially considering the machines at one's disposal in this day and age. One could simply grab a Keurig cup and have at it. However, such a method is unlikely to make a truly fine cup of coffee. It has long been shown that the longer it takes to brew a cup of coffee, the less bitterness can be found in the cup. Most fancy coffee shops will have a drip stand on display, which slowly makes coffee at room temperature. This method can, however, be taken even further. Take, for instance, cold brew coffee. Lately, it has been given a bad name by companies like Starbucks and Dunkin' Doughnuts, which basically sell regular coffee that is refrigerated after brewing. But cold brew coffee is different. The biggest and most common mistake made is to heat the water. Many people boil the water, put the ground coffee in, then let the concoction rest in the fridge, just as the companies do. This method is not true cold brew practice. The water must be cold when the coffee is added, and then the brew must be left overnight in a fridge. The cold temperature delays the brewing process enough that the resulting drink is not bitter. This technique, however, is not practical for most people. Coffee must be quick and convenient in the morning, propelling busy people on their way. In many ways, coffee has lost its value for its taste and is instead valued for its caffeine content, which is the very feature that first gained it recognition so many years ago. Coffee is an ancient invention, yes, but it is a very modern drink. ●