



THE HISTORY OF COFFEE

Circa A.D. 800-900

The discovery of coffee berries (cherries) was made by an Ethiopian goat farmer named Kaldi. Legend has it that Kaldi became intrigued after he observed his goats becoming quite energetic and dancing around after eating the red fruit of the coffee shrub. He decided to try one of these magical berries and found that they made him more lively and active as well!

Fortunately for us, a clever monk came across Kaldi and his dancing goats. This monk picked some berries and crushed them into a powder. He placed the powder into boiling water and made the first cup of coffee. He then realized after tasting this crazy concoction that it released energy. Ecstatic with his findings he rushed back to his monastery to enlighten his fellow monks. The monks hailed this discovery as a “gift from the Lord”, as they could now pray long into the night.

Before it became our beverage of choice, coffee had a variety of preparations. Keep in mind that coffee is a cherry-like fruit that has a bean at the center of the red coffee fruit. At one point, the fermented pulp of the fruit was used to make a wine-like concoction. It was also mixed with animal fat to make a protein-rich snack bar.

Circa A.D. 1000

Arabian traders brought this special plant across the Red Sea into Yemen (Arabia). This is where the idea of roasting coffee was conceived. They cultivated coffee on plantations, roasted them, and boiled the beans to create a drink they called “qahwa” (literally meaning “that which prevents sleep”). The term “qahwa” is synonymous with a romantic term for “wine and drinks dark in color.” Coffee has roots in several languages; it later became the Turkish “kahveh,” then Dutch “koffie” and finally “coffee” in English.

1300's

Muslims drank coffee prepared somewhat like a bean broth. Their superstitious nature led them to believe that this broth would help them ward off evil. Since the Muslim practice of Islam was spreading to Asia, Mediterranean, and North Africa, coffee was a necessity that was along for the ride. However, the Arabs were stingy and quite smart. They boiled the coffee beans so they couldn't sprout outside of Arabia. We can thank an Indian pilgrim who smuggled some fertile coffee beans out of Mecca to grow elsewhere.

1450-1650

Ottoman Turks imported coffee to Constantinople (Istanbul). Coffeehouses were quite the rage in the Arabian world, and men would meet there to play games, socialize, and drink very hot, black coffee. In this time period, women were not allowed to frequent these gatherings but still used coffee for more “medicinal” purposes. Since coffee was considered an aphrodisiac, under Turkish law women could sue for divorce if their husbands did not supply them with enough coffee!

1615-1700

A Venetian merchant visited Turkey and fell in love with coffee. Enraptured with coffee, he imported it through the Port of Venice and began selling it. Coffee became quite the commodity in Venice and would quickly spread throughout Europe. Coffeehouses started opening around 1645 in Italy, 1652 in London, and 1672 in Paris. These gathering places helped people form important institutions. In fact, the group of stockbrokers who gathered at Garraway’s in London would later evolve into the London Stock Exchange.

1690

The Dutch smuggled a coffee plant out of an Arab port in Mocha. The Dutch were the first to successfully transport and cultivate coffee commercially. They started in Ceylon and their East Indian colony of Java. This is why coffee has the nickname “java.” Amsterdam eventually became a coffee trading center.

1714

The Dutch knew what they were doing. They now knew how to grow coffee in large amounts and used this surplus to smooch over European royals. Coffee trees were popular gifts and one recipient was King Louis XIV. He adored coffee and planted his “Noble Tree” in the royal gardens. Now here’s where it gets good. While King Louis XIV was on leave in Paris, an opportunist naval officer stole a sprout. He protected this sprout through storms, drought, and dismemberment. It finally made its way to Martinique in the Caribbean. Once there, the coffee plant thrived and is now considered the father of Coffea Arabica trees alive today in Central and Latin America.

1727

The French were very protective of their New World coffee plantations. Spreading the cultivation of coffee was a taboo, but that didn’t stop Brazilian Lieutenant Colonel Francisco de Melo Palheta. On his mission to resolve conflict between Dutch and French colonies in Guiana, he saw an opportunity. Simultaneously working to smooth things over, Palheta also seduced the wife of French Guiana’s governor. Although their affair had to come to an end, the governor’s wife concealed fertile coffee seeds in a farewell bouquet to Palheta. This scandalous act is the reason Brazil was able to become the world’s largest coffee-producing country. It would also bridge the gap from coffee being a luxury for the elite into a pleasure for everyday people.

1882

The New York Coffee Exchange opens.

1900-1910

This was a decade of innovation for coffee. R.W. Hills pioneered vacuum-packing technology to extend the freshness of coffee beans. An Italian businessman named Luigi Bezzera invented the first commercial “espresso” machine. The story goes that Bezzera wanted his workers to have shorter coffee breaks, so he engineered a machine that would speed up this process of brewing coffee. Express coffee = espresso.

1933

Dr. Ernesto Illy developed the first automatic espresso machine. He believed the perfect shot of coffee should “paint the tongue”. Illy is considered the “Father of Espresso.”

1945

Achille Gaggia spent many years developing an espresso machine that abandoned the steam method and opted for manually-operated piston pumps and water to extract the coffee at a higher pressure. Up until this point, steam-based machines produced espresso that tasted bitter and burnt. The results of Gaggia’s new espresso machine yielded an unexpected discovery, “crema”. Crema is the beautiful light-colored foam on top of modern espresso shots that gives espresso that subtly sweet taste.

1966

Alfred Peet started custom coffee roasting and spread the culture in North America. He founded Peet’s Coffee & Tea in Berkeley California. Peet was a huge advocate of dark-roasted coffees. He would go on to mentor the founders of Starbucks in his roasting style.

