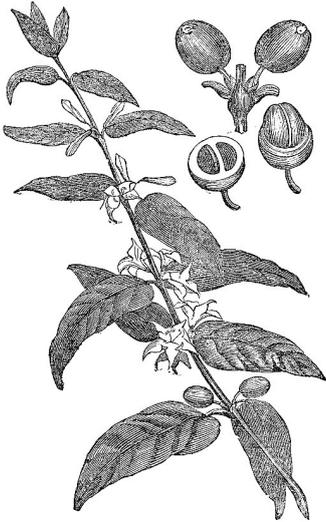


Coffee



Coffee is a brewed beverage prepared from the roasted seeds of several species of an evergreen plant thought to have originated in Ethiopia and nearby parts of Africa. Of the two main species grown, Arabica coffee (from *C. arabica*) is generally more highly regarded than Robusta coffee (from *C. canephora*). Robusta has less flavor, tends to be slightly bitter but it has better body, is less susceptible to disease and can be cultivated in lower altitudes and warmer climates.

The coffee tree is a beautiful tree with glossy green leaves and jasmine-scented white flowers appearing along the stems in summer-autumn. The fruits start off green then maturing to a bright red cherry-like fruits. Typically, there are two seeds per fruit packed with the flat end facing each other - however that is not always the case: there is the pea berry, which is a single seed, and sometimes, there are more than two seeds per fruit.

Traditionally, only fruits at their peak of ripeness are selected and picked by hand, a very labor-intensive job. More commonly nowadays, machine harvests the fruits simultaneously regardless of their ripeness. Getting from the fresh fruit to the ground bean ready for a steaming cup is a multi-stage process. Firstly, the pulp surrounding the bean has

to be removed, then the bean washed and dried; then the parchment and silver skin taken off, leaving the green bean, which will be roasted to varying degrees, depending on the desired flavor, then ground before brewed to finally create the drink coffee. The roasting process changes the seed both physically and chemically. Physically, the seed becomes less dense as moisture is lost. Chemically, during the roasting process, sucrose caramelizes and alters the color and flavor of the seed. Roasting also changes the flavor of the oils and acids. In general, darker roasts have a more sugary flavor, lighter roasts have a more complex flavor as a result of aromatic oils and acids otherwise destroyed by longer roasting times.

A rich mythology, full of dancing goats and sleepy monks, was woven around the discovery of the coffee tree. A 9th-century Ethiopian goat-herder, who, noticing the energizing effects when his flock nibbled on the bright red berries of a certain bush, chewed on the fruit himself. His exhilaration prompted him to bring the berries to a monk in a nearby monastery. But the monk disapproved of their use and threw them into the fire, from which an enticing aroma billowed that made all the monks come out to investigate. The roasted beans were quickly raked from the embers, ground up and dissolved in hot water, yielding the world's first cup of coffee! Another story attributes the discovery to Sheik Omar, who was known for his ability to cure the sick through prayer, and who was once exiled from Mocha, Yemen. Starving, Omar chewed berries from nearby shrubbery, but found them to be bitter. He tried roasting the seeds to improve the flavor, but they became hard. He then tried boiling to soften them, which resulted in a fragrant brown liquid. Upon drinking the liquid he was revitalized and sustained for days. As stories of this 'miracle' reached Mocha, Omar was asked to return and was made a saint.

The earliest credible evidence of either coffee drinking or knowledge of the coffee tree dates in the middle of the 15th century, in the Muslim monasteries around Mocha in Yemen. It was here that coffee seeds were first roasted and brewed, in a similar way to how it is now prepared. The beverage acquired its name 'Qahwah', originally a poetic name for wine. By the 16th century, coffee reached the rest of the Middle East, Persia, Turkey and North Africa. The first coffee smuggled out of the Middle East was to Mysore, India in 1670. Coffee thereafter spread to Italy, and to the rest of Europe, to Indonesia and to the Americas.

Coffee was used originally in native religious ceremonies, however at some points in its history, it was seen as an undermining substance; Islam perceived the camaraderie that coffee fostered as a threat to religious life - the mosques were empty, the coffee houses full. For some time, the Ethiopian Church banned the secular consumption of coffee as the practice conflicted with the beliefs of the Christian church. At another time, authorities in the Vatican saw coffee as a threat to Christianity - '*Satan's latest trap to catch Christian souls*'. The beverage was also banned in Ottoman Empire Turkey during the 17th century for political reasons, as it was associated with rebellious political activities in Europe.

The caffeine content of coffee and its stimulating effect on human health has been a subject of many studies; the majority suggests that moderate coffee consumption is benign or mildly beneficial in healthy adults.

Some coffee undergoes a peculiar process. It is made from the seeds of coffee berries which have been eaten by the Asian Palm civet and other related civets, passing through its digestive tract. The beans are harvested from the animal's waste, cleaned, roasted, packaged and sold. They are widely noted as the best tasting beans in the world and consequently fetch the most outrageous price. On this note, my humble comment is that just like when you buy food, in the end, you are essentially paying for poop!

