

History of Coffee Part 1



# *The birthplace of coffee*

Coffee has its historical home in NE Africa and the Arabian peninsular where it grows wild. Legends abound about who discovered it; the most popular being that of an Abyssinian goatherd whose flock pranced around more playfully than usual after they ate red berries from a particular tree. Another is of a hungry, exiled sheik who chewed the berries and found them too bitter, cooked them over a fire and found them too hard, so boiled them to discover a lovely fragrant brew.

One historian claims that the 'forbidden fruit' in the Garden of Eden may have been, in fact, coffee berries. Another believes Hippocrates, the father of medicine, was aware of coffee and administered it to his patients.

Because of its curious power over the human body, coffee was quick to attract the attention of ambassadors and travellers in Arab lands – for hundreds of years, long before its arrival in Western countries. It was of particular interest to scientists, botanists and physicians.

A German physician, Leonhart Rauwolf was one of the first to describe the preparation and drinking of coffee in his logbook of 1581, *Travels in the Orient*. A little later, Prospero Alpin, a botanist and physician from Italy is believed to have been the first to describe and illustrate a coffee plant in his book, *The Plants of Egypt*. French writer, Antoine Galland makes reference to coffee in the famous 12-volume epic, *The Thousand and One Nights*, which was based on Arab texts he translated. So Sinbad the Sailor, Aladdin and Ali Baba might have been among the very earliest coffee enthusiasts!

The first coffee consumption was by wandering tribesmen who rolled the berries into balls of fat to be used as sustenance – especially if they needed to be kept awake on a long journey,

I suppose. Only some time later it was consumed as a beverage – by religious devotees to keep them alert during long hours of prayer and dervishes who believed its power could enhance their mystical dance.

There are three types of beverage preparation. The first involves roasting the beans in a little pan over an open fire, crushing them using a mortar and pestle and finally, boiling them slowly with water and sugar in a long handled pot – often half buried in sand. Served in small cups, this is the basis of Turkish style coffee, little changed from how we know it today. The second produces a much weaker brew, made by slowly simmering the ground beans in a tall pot with a lid and a long spout. This method has its origins in Bedouin communities and is still served this way in Arab countries today. Using the third method, the dried fruit of the coffee berry is boiled up to make a tea-like concoction. It is intriguing that somewhere along the course of history, this method has been mostly lost. But it is staging a comeback – popularised perhaps by the fact that 2011 World Barista Champion, Alejandro Mendez from El Salvador, used such a tea in his signature beverage. Known as cascara, it is now starting to appear in cutting-edge cafes as 'something new'.

Kiva Han was the first coffee house as such; opened in Constantinople (now Istanbul) some time in the 1470s, with others following throughout the great Arab cities of the time, including Mecca, Damascus, Baghdad and Cairo. Early coffee houses were more than places of lively caffeine-fuelled conversation. They were also places to play games such as chess and trictrac (an early form of backgammon), listen to storytellers and poets or be entertained by dancers and musicians.

How coffee was sold varied somewhat. It seems that the earliest sellers had no fixed place and simply went about the streets with cups of coffee on trays selling to local businesses. Others set up on a mat or a rough bench wherever there was a passing crowd. Eventually coffee was sold in established locations and these varied from rough and rowdy – to luxurious and leisurely. Some were elaborately decorated with carpets and cushions to lean on, low ornate tables, marble fountains, and lots of little lamps. Known as 'Schools of the Wise', like-minded scholars went to listen and share ideas.

Because coffee was always to blame for the unruly behaviour often incited by opinionated conversation, there were several attempts to ban it. In 1511, Kahir Beg, a corrupt governor of Mecca, lost his life after attempting to ban coffee. Fearing it might fuel opposition to his rule, he coerced local physicians, lawyers and coffee drinkers to testify that coffee was harmful to health. He declared coffee to be illegal and incinerated great quantities of beans. The whole plot backfired as, upon hearing of all this, the Sultan declared coffee to be sacred and ordered the governor's death. The coffee houses of Mecca were later closed in 1524 because of their disorderliness, with coffee drinking only permitted in homes. They were eventually allowed to reopen under licence. In 1532, coffee was also banned in Cairo. Started by religious fanatics who were concerned about the intoxicating effect of coffee, they divided the city into 'for' and 'against' factions and ransacked many of the coffee houses. Religious fanatics in Constantinople also fired up opposition in 1570. This time it was about closure of coffee houses for religious reasons, classing coffee in the same category as wine and therefore forbidden by the Koran. One punishment was a dunking in the Bosphorus Sea in a leather bag. Impossible to enforce, coffee drinking remained popular.



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Early Arabic and Turkish coffee houses were the domain of men but women could consume coffee at home. How it came about is anyone's guess, but at some stage it was made lawful that a husband must supply his wife with coffee, and to fail in doing so was grounds for divorce. If and how it was enforced, is also open to suggestion, but certainly any visit to a palace in the Middle East today will

reveal a small coffee preparation area in the centre of almost every room – and you can just imagine the womenfolk lolling around on soft cushions, passing the time of day and entertaining guests.

The lovely Turkish habit of 'keyif', the leisurely art of 'savouring the passage of time' has its origins around this time – along with the Turkish practice of telling one's fortune in a coffee cup.



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Earlier in the year when in Vienna for the World of Coffee, I was fortunate to stumble upon a café where they were offering such coffee cup readings. The resident psychic, Susanna, explained the whole process as she ground my beans in her tall brass grinder and boiled them three times in her little pot with a little sugar, careful not to spill any as the frothy brew bubbled to the top. After I had drunk my coffee, I was instructed to place the saucer over the cup and quickly tip the two up the other way. We had to wait about 10 minutes for the sediment to dry in the cup – into my special pattern that was to determine what I can expect to have happen in the near future. True or not, it was an entertaining experience and as the Turkish saying goes, 'You don't have to believe what is said, but it's best not to ignore it either.'

Naturally, Western traders were keen to cultivate coffee themselves. Traders of

the Dutch East India Company, with their strong interest in acquiring exotic goods were among the first, with a contingent visiting Yemen in 1614 to investigate the possibility of cultivation and trade in coffee. Well aware that a monopoly over the sale of coffee beans would be to their advantage, the Arabs cleverly attempted to ensure that any coffee beans leaving their shores were boiled or roasted and therefore not able to be propagated. They had been successful – until 1616 when a Dutch merchant, Pieter Van der Broeck managed to smuggle some coffee plants from Mocha in Yemen. Back in Holland they were propagated in hothouses in the Amsterdam Botanical Gardens, and eventually taken to Ceylon for commercial cultivation. Another story, fascinating to say the least, is told about how the Arab monopoly over coffee cultivation ended. Baba Budan, a 17th century sufi on return to India following a pilgrimage to Mecca, is

said to have strapped seven fertile seeds to his belly and smuggled them out on his way home. He went on to plant them near Mysore where cultivation in southern India quickly spread. A shrine immortalising the brave Baba Budan marks the spot in India today.

It was through the great trading ports of Europe that coffee eventually made its way to the West, arriving in the first decades of the 17th century. Not long after the first coffee houses in the West also started to appear. But that is another story (or two) in the fascinating history of coffee.



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