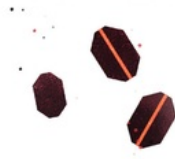




A TOUR THROUGH A FEW OF THE PLACES WHERE COFFEE IS SACRED (IN ADDITION TO EVERYWHERE)—PLANTATIONS IN COSTA RICA, BEDOUIN RITUALS IN JORDAN, COLD-PRESS CAFÉS IN JAPAN AND ESPRESSO BARS IN ITALY.

BY **Sunny Fitzgerald** | ILLUSTRATIONS BY **Dan Matutina**



What do you smell?” my guide asks. Eyes closed, I draw the warm air rising from the cup up into my nose. I immediately recognize two aromas—dirt and chocolate—but hesitate to reply. It’s my first “coffee cupping,” a guided introduction to the professional techniques used to identify aromas and flavors of coffee. I’m uncertain of the correct answer and assume that describing Finca Rosa Blanca’s coffee as “dirt” isn’t putting my best foot (or rather, nose) forward.

Ulises Zuñiga Valdez, one of the naturalist guides and coffee experts at this Costa Rican coffee plantation resort, is seated across the table from me. A set of porcelain cups containing an unfiltered brew of Finca Rosa Blanca’s organic coffee grounds and 190-degree water—“not boiling, or you’ll burn the coffee”—is arranged in front of him. He’s staring back at me, awaiting my answer.

“Chocolate . . .,” I pause, “. . . and dirt?” I laugh nervously and Valdez laughs, too. “OK, what else?” he probes. Unsure whether he’s laughing with me or at me, I take another breath through my nose and ask, “Maybe something . . . nutty?”

“Bien,” Valdez smiles. He points to a colorful poster on the wall. The circular graphic is an adapted version of the Coffee Taster’s Flavor Wheel, a guide for describing flavors and aromas you might discover while sniffing and slurping your way through a coffee cupping.

I scan the poster and see “chocolate” and “nut” among the array of descriptors, which also includes leathery, tobacco and citrus. Dirt is there, too, but in a more eloquent form: earthy. The flavor wheel is far from exhaus-

tive; these are just a handful of more than 800 aromatic compounds found in roasted coffee. The beloved beverage is much more complex than it appears on its smooth, molasses-colored surface. And the global culture around it—from the farming and roasting methods to the serving and sipping rituals—is equally eclectic.

A shepherd in Ethiopia discovered the beneficial beans after noticing the increased energy his goats had when eating from the plant—or so the story goes. Another legend instead credits a Moroccan mystic with first taste-testing the round red “berries” after observing some exceptionally animated birds while traveling in Ethiopia. And still another story says that a devout Muslim and healer discovered coffee while exiled in a cave in Yemen.

Though the exact origins are uncertain, coffee remains a staple in the Middle East and North Africa, where “coffee ceremonies”—roasting, grinding, brewing and serving rituals—and expressions such as *nu buna tetu* (literally meaning “come, let’s drink coffee” in Amharic but also used to mean socializing in general) are still common, and sitting down for coffee is not just about a



beverage; it's a social event.

If you want to get to know a place and people, try peering deeper into your coffee cup and the history behind it, the crop and the hands that harvested it, and the rituals and stories around it. In some coffee-producing countries such as Colombia and Brazil, coffee is a critical part of the economy and a mainstay of local culture. In other places, such as Finland, coffee is a necessity not produced locally, yet consumed multiple times per day. Coffee breaks are legally protected (two coffee breaks per work day are mandated by law in Finland) and the Finnish language has distinct words for “morning coffee,” “afternoon coffee,” “evening coffee” and, yes, “sauna

coffee.” In the United States, 400 million mugs of coffee are consumed every day, cafés are often the setting for TV and film scenes, and those ubiquitous cardboard-wrapped to-go cups have become somewhat of an accessory.

Globally, we guzzle 500 billion cups of coffee each year. The bean has come to mean so much to so many. It's a stimulant, a crop, a comfort, an addiction and an opportunity. Coffee inspires conversation. It creates connection. Almost anywhere we roam, if there's coffee on the table between us, there's a possibility of making memories together.

Here are a few of the many ways to experience coffee culture around the world.



GO WHERE THEY GROW

When you fly into San José, Costa Rica, you can practically step off the plane and onto a plantation. The airport is located in the Central Valley, one of the regions of this Bean Belt country with ideal coffee-growing conditions: high elevation, volcanic soil and a tropical climate with just enough—but not too much—sun and rain.

Costa Rica is neither the largest producer nor the largest consumer of coffee (those titles go to Brazil and Finland, respectively). Yet, Ticos, or native Costa Ricans, have a deep devotion to the local brew. “A Costa Rican cannot live without a morning cup of coffee,” says Valdez. Not just any coffee, but “Costa Rica-grown, served *negro* (black) or *con leche* (with milk).”

That morning cuppa provides more than caffeine; the quality is a point of pride and the aroma evokes fond memories. Like many Costa Ricans raised in the Central Valley, Valdez can't recall a time when coffee wasn't a part of his life. From an early age, he hand-harvested with his family.

“We were pickers in the past,” he says. “It was common to see big families picking coffee together. It was a way to survive and it's an important part of our identity. As we say,” he adds with a laugh, “coffee is in our veins.”

Now Valdez helps visitors at Finca Rosa Blanca understand the cultural significance and complexities of this crop—in and out of the cup—through guided plantation tours that touch on history and culture, harvesting and production, and biodiversity and sustainability before culminating in a coffee cupping.

Fortunately, you don't have to travel far to immerse yourself in the coffee culture of Costa Rica. Finca Rosa Blanca Coffee Plantation Resort is just a 20-minute drive from Juan Santamaria International Airport. Reserve the plantation tour or spend the night for an extended sip-and-stay experience at the artful ecoluxury resort. Savor an organic coffee prepared using the traditional *chorreador* (a cloth-style filtration device) in the open-air restaurant and indulge in the Coffee Connoisseurs Tasting Menu. Keep an eye out for the owners, Glenn and Teri Jampol, who generously share their knowledge, ecofriendly approach and history of the plantation.

A bit farther down the road, about an hour's drive from Finca Rosa Blanca through the Costa Rican countryside (and past La Paz Waterfall, perfect for a photo stop), you'll find Mi Cafecito, an interactive coffee tour run by rural coffee cooperative Coopesarapiqui. After you learn how workers plant, pick, roast and grind their certified Fair Trade coffee, take a seat in the restaurant and taste home-cooked *comida típica* (typical food) and fresh coffee poured through the *chorreador*. Mi Cafecito is not only an authentic seed-to-sip experience—“produced in harmony with nature,” as manager Ofelia Membreño says—but it's a nonprofit project that helps more than 130 local farms.

Most coffee experts insist that coffee grown at lower elevations leads to less “character” in the cup. While lower elevations usually do mean lower acidity, Coopesarapiqui's,

CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: A coffee berry in Costa Rica; Walking around the grounds of Finca Rosa Blanca Coffee Plantation Resort; A coffee cupping; A basket of coffee berries.

TEANE ZUIDEMA (COFFEE BERRY); SUNNY FITZGERALD (FINCA ROSA BLANCA)



grown at about 1,600 to 2,600 feet, is bursting with the Costa Rican character of multiple, family-run farms.

There's no lodging onsite, but there's a place to stay nearby with a unique connection to Mi Cafecito. Chilamate Rainforest Eco-Retreat, set on a private nature reserve next to the Sarapiquí River (ideal for whitewater rafting and wildlife lovers), is just 30 minutes away. Owners of the ecoretreat, Meghan Casey and Davis Azofeifa, have a special relationship with Coopesarapiquí: Almost 15 years ago, Meghan provided market research and encouragement to Coopesarapiquí when it was struggling in the volatile global coffee market and exploring the idea of a coffee tour to keep local farmers afloat. Now the retreat

exclusively serves Mi Cafecito. Wake early to find staff preparing coffee in the chorreador to the chorus of macaws and howler monkeys calling from the treetops. This is truly, as the Costa Ricans say, *pura vida*. fincarosablanca.com, micafecitocoffeetour.com, coopesarapiqui.com, chilamate-rainforest.com



☪ TAKE A SIP BACK IN TIME

If you hear the rhythmic beat of wood striking wood when you're trekking through the desert, you're in luck. "That's the sound of hospitality," says Suleiman al-Hasaseen, a local Bedouin guide at Feynan Ecolodge. It's produced when grinding roasted coffee beans in a wooden mortar with a pestle. "It means the coffee is going on the fire and you are welcome." This mortar-and-pestle music is familiar to al-Hasaseen: He grew up in a traditional Bedouin family, seminomadic and living in a goat-hair tent on the edge of

the Dana Biosphere Reserve. But you need not be a local to join them for coffee. "Everyone who hears that sound is welcome," he says. "We don't feel anyone is a stranger."

Jordan has a rich and rooted spirit of hospitality, and there's perhaps no better way to experience it than through *qahwa* (coffee). Traditionally, Arabic-style coffee is made by roasting green coffee beans over a fire, grinding them in a mortar with a pestle, adding the grounds to boiling water along with ground cardamom and then pouring the whole

CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: The Coffee Experience at Feynan Ecolodge in Jordan; Cooking beans over the fire; Feynan Ecolodge. BOTTOM: Ground cardamom.

brew into a *dallah*—the iconic Arab coffee pot with a long, crescent-shaped spout. Although the coffee is served in tiny, piping-hot shots, the preparation is mesmerizing and the rituals are hugely important.

A great deal is communicated through coffee without saying a word. First, the host tastes the coffee “to show it’s safe,” al-Hasaseen says. “That comes from the old days. Now, we do it for quality.” Guests are served from the right of the host. Accept the coffee with your right hand and don’t slouch. Drink it quickly, especially if there are other guests waiting. “We drink it as fast as we can,” al-Hasaseen says. If it’s too hot, don’t blow on it—move the cup around to create a swirl instead. If you want a second or third, lift the empty cup up toward the person serving. If one is enough for you, give the empty cup a little shake as you hand it back. Three is the limit: “The first one is for hospitality,” al-Hasaseen explains. “The second is for the sword—it’s like signing a contract with the host that if something happens, you will defend them. And the third is for your mood. Drinking the third one says, ‘I like this coffee and I’m enjoying it.’”

Here in Jordan, coffee also is used in negotiations and marriage propos-

als. If you have something to discuss, don’t take a single sip. Set the cup down when it’s served and you’ll immediately grab the host’s attention. Explain your issue or offer and he may respond with his. When the two of you come to an agreement—about an engagement, argument or otherwise—then you drink. But only after the host serves a fresh cup because even cold coffee sends a message: It’s a sign of disrespect. “It’s better to serve and drink no coffee than cold coffee,” al-Hasaseen says.

While you won’t usually see beans roasted over open flames in the cities, you still will find the same customs when it comes to Arabic coffee. It’s not a daily drink; it’s a ritual reserved for special occasions and guests. When you’re invited into a local home, whether it’s a Bedouin tent in the desert or a condo in the capital city of Amman, you’ll likely be offered Arabic coffee on arrival, a reflection of the tribal roots and tradition of hospitality.

“It’s a happy moment when a guest arrives. A guest for one tent is a guest for the community,” al-Hasaseen says. “We love the feeling of being a host even more than being a guest.” Travelers can experience a taste of traditional Arabic coffee rituals and Jordanian hospitality with a visit to some local Bedouin communities arranged by Feynan Ecolodge. ecohotels.me/feynan



ALI BARQAWI (COFFEE EXPERIENCE); SUNNY FITZGERALD (COOKING BEANS & GROUND COFFEE); © 2009 HAPPY MEDIUM STUDIOS/ BRIAN SCANNELL (FEYNAN ECOLODGE)



COLD AND KAWAI

Home to historic temples, geisha culture and numerous UNESCO World Heritage Sites, Kyoto attracts more than 50 million visitors each year. While the city’s traditional tea ceremonies are world-renowned, another popular beverage has long been brewing here.

Cold-brew coffee is made by immersing coarsely ground coffee in room-temperature or cooler water for several hours to create a concentrate that is then filtered and cut with water or milk. This method requires more time than coffee brewed with hot water, but there are advantages: No heat is needed, the shelf life is longer and cool water extracts more of the natural flavor from the beans—sans the acidity—for a potent yet smoother potion.

Some say Dutch traders introduced the cold-brew concept to Japan in the 1600s, and others believe the Japanese adopted it from the Dutch East Indies (modern-day Indonesia) during World War II. Whatever the case may be, the method wasn’t entirely foreign to the Japanese; they were already cold-brewing tea.

It’s not surprising that “Dutch coffee” caught on in Kyoto, the country’s capital of culture. Traditional Japanese tea ceremonies involve a



great deal of patience, preparation and presentation. Slow-drip cold-brew coffee demands the same. It takes a minimum of six hours to brew a batch using slow-drip towers: typically wooden and glass contraptions topped with a suspended glass sphere that drips water over a bed of coffee grounds rather than fully immersing them all at once. The towers themselves are natural conversation starters as seemingly scientific works of art, and watching the steady drip is hypnotically satisfying.

You'll find numerous cafés serving slow-drip cold brew in Kyoto and beyond. For an authentic and unpretentious *kissaten* (tea and coffee café) experience order the "Dutch coffee" at Cake to Akkun, located on Sanjokai Shopping Street.

Another form of art can be found in cafés across the country: intricate 2D and 3D anime-esque designs crafted with foam atop hot lattes. Some Japanese latte artists invite patrons to bring photos of everything from landscapes to loved ones, which the artists recreate in the foam. You may be sad to see the delicate designs fade as the foam dissipates, but keep in mind the Japanese cultural tenet *mono no aware* (the bittersweet transience or pathos of things)—most widely observed during cherry blossom season when white and pink-colored flowers bloom and float to the ground—that inspires one to simultaneously cherish and release the beauty of a moment.

Get off the tourist trail for a local latte at Café Honmachi (located near the JR Okayama Station in the Setouchi Region, a hidden gem of Japan made up of seven prefectures and 350 islands). Ask for seasonal latte art or request a personalized 2D design, then grab a seat in the second-floor window and watch the street scene below. If your itinerary includes a stay in Tokyo, head for Harajuku—the capital of *kawaii* (cute)—for some impressive and adorable 3D latte art creations at Cafe Reissue. caketoakkun.com, reissue.co.jp



☪ TAKE YOUR BEST SHOT

Italy's contributions to global coffee culture can be traced back as far as the 1600s, when Venice became one of the first European ports to import this "Arabic wine" from Yemen, initially for medicinal purposes. As cafés cropped up across the continent and demand for the buzzy beans increased, so, too, did the need for speed. In the 1800s, Italians invented the espresso machine to serve customers quickly without sacrificing quality. There's no question that coffee has been at the heart of Italian culture for centuries and remains so today.

"Espresso is an integral part of our identity," says Ottavia Mapelli, senior designer of experiential travel for Italy-based S-Cape Travel. "Every Italian has a coffee-related memory or family tradition: the sugared drops of coffee your parents allowed you to scrape

with a tiny spoon from the bottom of the cup; the smell of fresh coffee and the gurgling sound coming from your grandmother's *caffettiera* [moka pot] after Sunday lunch; the liquor your father would 'correct' his coffee with; the first time your mom let you put a bit of coffee in your morning milk, or the cappuccino you have with your best friend every Saturday morning."

Frederica Billi, team leader of Access Culinary Trips in Tuscany, believes espresso also "truly represents Italy and its essence. 'Let's meet for coffee' is the most common excuse to socialize, and a good espresso is the thing an Italian misses most when abroad."

When in Rome—or anywhere in Italy—do as the Italians do: Decide what you want before approaching the barista. If it's an espresso, Billi advises, "simply say, 'A coffee, please,' which implies you're ordering an espresso." If it's an espresso with steamed milk you're after, order a *caffé latte*. Latte alone means "milk," so if you request a latte here, you'll get exactly what you asked for: a glass of milk. When ordering an espresso, stand at the bar and drink your shot on the spot. If you'd like to sit at a table, expect an additional charge. Espresso is typically imbibed in the early hours, so don't be surprised if a café or bar refuses to serve espresso drinks later in the day.

Some visitors are baffled by coffee customs in Italy. You can learn a lot by observing locals, but don't get so wrapped up in the rules that you forget to savor the flavors, quality and culture. "It's true that we care about the intense taste of espresso," Mapelli says, "but Italian coffee culture is very much connected

OPPOSITE, TOP TO BOTTOM: 3D *kawaii* coffee art at Cafe Reissue in Tokyo; Pouring coffee at a Japanese café. BOTTOM, LEFT TO RIGHT: A coffee stop with Access Culinary Trips; Turin's Caffè Mulassano.

CONTINUED ON PAGE 166

CHRIS NUGHE (CAFFÈ REISSUE); GEN UMEKITA (GETTY/JAPANESE CAFÉ); PHOTOS FROM ACCESS CULINARY TRIPS; HORIZONS WFP/TRVL/ALAMY (CAFFÈ MULASSANO)



COFFEE

CONTINUED FROM PAGE 77

to our senses, tradition and the comfort of rituals rather than the mere concept of caffeine.”

Take a trip to Turin—the birthplace of espresso—and steep yourself in centuries-old coffee traditions. Located in the heart of the city, Caffè Mulassano serves up some of Turin’s best. The dark wood exterior, mirrored interior and coffered ceiling maintain the 19th-century café vibe beloved by locals. “For many Torinesi [Turin natives],” Mapelli says, “coming



Caffè Al Bicerin

here on Sunday morning to have a coffee is still a common tradition.”

For a sweet treat, head to Caffè Al Bicerin to try *bicerin*, an espresso drink topped with hot chocolate and cream, served in a glass that allows you to appreciate the rich colors as the layers meld together. Some say this 18th-century café invented the specialty beverage, while others believe it was created first at Caffè-Fiorio. Rumor has it Caffè Al Bicerin still serves the original recipe and baristas are forbidden to reveal it. Luckily, you don’t need to settle the debate or recite the recipe to know that bicerin was born in Turin and this is the place to taste it.

While in Italy, you also can partake in the charitable tradition of *caffè sospeso*, “suspended coffee.” It started in Naples when those experiencing good fortune would pay for an extra coffee to be given gratis to a future customer who couldn’t afford one. The anonymous act of kindness through coffee has spread to other areas of Italy, Europe, the Americas and beyond. caffemulassano.com/en, bicerin.it, caffefiorio.it/en ▾

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Page 41

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Pages 176-177

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