



Reading: Coffee

You may know that around the world more people drink coffee than tea. And that, after oil, it is the second biggest traded commodity. You may also know that the drink comes from beans which are first roasted and then ground. But what else do you know about this popular stimulant?

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It is said that the story of coffee started with an Ethiopian goatherd named Kaldi. One day Kaldi was surprised to see that his goats were behaving very strangely: instead of grazing quietly as normal they were jumping around, almost dancing. He also noticed the red cherries from a plant that the goats were eating. He tried some himself and was surprised by the feeling of extreme happiness and excitement - he felt like dancing too!

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But it wasn't used as a drink at first, but as a food. The coffee berries, mixed with animal fat, were used by monks to stay awake during long hours of prayer. From Ethiopia coffee was later cultivated in Yemen and the first hot drink was developed there around AD 1000. Three centuries later Muslims were keen coffee drinkers and as Islam spread, so did coffee. Coffee houses appeared in Cairo and Mecca.

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For hundreds of years the plants were guarded safely. But some beans were smuggled out of Arabia and taken to India. In the 17th century coffee was soon growing in a new continent. From India to Indonesia and then a century later beans were smuggled once again to Brazil-which is now the largest coffee producer in the world.

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It is the caffeine, an addictive stimulant drug, which made the goats dance and kept the monks awake. Although it is found in other soft drinks, including tea, coffee has the most caffeine. 150 milligrams is the minimum dose needed to stimulate the nervous system and this can be found in a single strong cup of coffee. In the short-term a couple of cups can prevent fatigue and delay sleep. But several cups a day, every day, can cause anxiety and restlessness.

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This is the band around the middle of the world between the tropics of Capricorn and Cancer. A coffee plant likes lots of rain and shaded sun with rich soil, and the climate in the bean belt is ideal. 70 - 75% of the world production is the milder, higher quality *Arabica* that originated in Ethiopia. It grows best in higher altitudes where it is not so hot. The remaining 25% is the stronger *Robusta* which can survive in higher temperatures and lower altitudes.

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Before becoming beans the fruit of the coffee trees, known as a cherry, is harvested. The most common method is for the cherries to be picked by hand and then dried in the sun on tables or on the ground. Once they are dried all the outer layers are removed. The red cherries have become green beans. Known now as green coffee the beans are put in 60kg bags and shipped abroad.

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Although the coffee is grown and harvested in the tropics 70% of the total coffee production is imported by countries in the North who control the market. How long the coffee is roasted for depends on the market: only 7 minutes for the North Americans who prefer a light roast, but double that time for espresso coffee favoured by the Italians. Nestle and Kraft account for almost 80% of all the instant-coffee sales worldwide.