

A PEOPLE'S HISTORY
OF
COFFEE AND CAFÉS

OTHER BOOKS BY BOB BIDERMAN

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OF
COFFEE AND CAFÉS

BOB BIDERMAN

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A website has been set up as a companion to this book containing an extensive coffee bibliography along with images, charts, maps, statistics and discussions. It can be accessed at: www.blackapollopress.com/coffee.html.

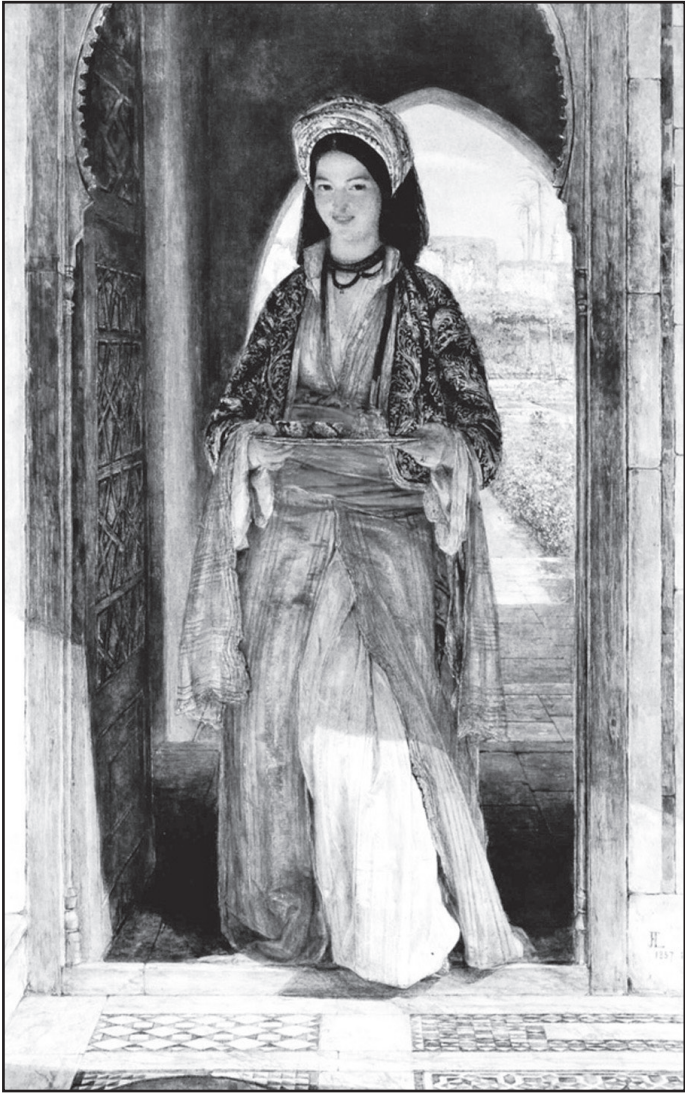
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The Coffee Bearer, John Frederick Lewis, 1857.
City of Manchester Art Galleries

PREFACE

IT WAS AS a student at the University of California in Berkeley during the early 1960s that I first succumbed to coffee's special allure and its portal into a more adult world of exotic pleasures. Up till then coffee had simply been a drink that one bolted down in the morning in order to wake up. Taken from a vacuum-sealed can, boiled in a percolator pot, consumed with lots of milk and sugar to moderate the bitterness, it tasted awful but its effect was necessary in order to approach lucidity after a series of endless nights and groggy dawns. Back then, coffee was java. The image was of a Hollywood Western where a lonesome cowboy stirred a spoonful of grounds into a dented pan of water boiling over a smoky campfire, then pouring the steaming brew into a tin cup and drinking it in the chilly mist under the rising sun. It wasn't supposed to taste good; it did its job and that was enough. But now, in this brand new decade when I had finally reached the age of maturity, coffee had become something else altogether. It wasn't only the drink – which suddenly did taste good – it was also the place where I drank it.

In the late 1950s and early 60s the San Francisco Bay Area was bubbling up espresso, even though 99.9% of Americans didn't yet know how to spell it. First and foremost in spreading this new café culture (to me, anyway) was the Café Trieste in North

Beach. There the ex-pat Italian community, nurtured on coffee and Puccini, met the new bohemia that coupled the re-discovery of this formerly prosaic drink with an angst-driven homage. Walking down Columbus Avenue in those days you couldn't help but be immersed in and consumed by the deeply rich and caramelized fragrance that came belching forth from the North Beach coffee roaster, Graffeo's. It all mixed so well with the chilly turquoise waters blending into the cadmium skies – viewed from the heights of the city's bohemian village and mirrored in a pastel mural painted lovingly on the inside wall at the Trieste by a beat artist trying to merge his fantasy of an Italian fishing village with an even more fantastic notion of a primordial San Francisco.

The two cafés I was most familiar with back then were the Café Med in Berkeley and the Café Trieste. Even though they both were run by people who came from the Italian café tradition, they had a very different clientele and ambience. Whereas the Café Trieste was based in the Italian community of North Beach (the 'Little City'), the Med was of and for the independent students and resident bohemia who made Berkeley's Telegraph Avenue their universal font providing everything from books to bagels. The Med was their home from home either in the morning, afternoon or evening (often merging into one) and within its walls, competing with the constant hiss and steam of the two magnificently polished espresso machines that sat like triumphant sculptures before

some Delphic temple, infinite discussions, debates, discourses, rants, confessions and manifestoes which would (perhaps) change the world for all time to come, took place amongst the innumerable sips, gurgles, and gulps of rich black espresso alone in a small porcelain cup or in a fluted glass mixed with a frothy white substance.

At the Trieste the drink was the same but the ambiance different. Here the immigrant Italians shared their space with the new wave of beatniks who ventured forth from places like City Lights Books, attracted by the ambrosia that somehow was made from the same plant that provided the beans for the grotty stuff that came from their percolator pots and allowed them to write another hour's worth of verbiage before either finding the Muse or drifting off into their own special Neverland. Unlike the Med, the Trieste of the early 60s was very much of and for the Italian community that had settled in North Beach some years before, but it was also a place that respected other people's art and culture (even if it came with long hair and a certain amount of grunge) as long as those who shared their space had a mutual respect and realised that the Trieste was primarily for the village residents.

The movement of the espresso culture outside the purview of the Italian community was slow in coming but followed the seismic cultural shift taking place in America and the consequent movement of bohemia to peripheral neighbourhoods. Based on models

like the Trieste and the Café Med, these new cafés emphasised frothy drinks for those young Americans who found pure espresso too hard to handle.

It wasn't until later that I realised how much these two cafés – the Trieste and the Med – fit into the historical pattern of the coffeehouse that separated them from the bars, pubs and bistros immersed in the culture of alcohol. By then I had already been living in Europe for over a decade and had become interested in following the trail of this curious plant that provided the mental fuel for a new generation of google-eyed explorers now using it to brew up fantastic dreams inside magic boxes.

In 1983, I left San Francisco for England. At the time, getting a good cup of coffee in London meant either paying a fortune at a classy West End restaurant or hanging out with the continental Europeans in Soho. And yet if one went back only a few hundred years, the situation would have been quite different. London, in the 18th century, was probably the coffeehouse capital of the world with over 2,000 throughout the city. They flourished during a time of rapid economic transformation, becoming the focal point for new ideas that were sparking London's emergence as one of the most exciting places to be in the Western world. These coffeehouses were well stocked with books, newspapers and magazines, were buzzing with energy from morning till night and

were open to all upon payment of a penny – and so they became known as ‘Penny Universities’.

I began *Café Magazine* in the early 90s as a homage to a culture I found missing in contemporary Britain – out of a sense of nostalgia for things past but also as an attempt to recreate the idea of the café community and show how important it had been to the development of a vital, cutting-edge culture and politic; how the coffeehouse served as a cauldron in the synthesis of ideas that drew from many sources outside the mainstream institutions and how it served as a refuge for those artists, writers, musicians, philosophers and dreamers who existed at the tipping point of social convention – some of whom ended up creating brilliant works of art, some not so brilliant, and some helping to invent crazy things like the Internet.

At its height, *Café Magazine* became an international forum connecting people from all walks of life who, in one way or another, were captivated by the plant, the commodity, the drink and the places it was consumed. Over the years the magazine put me in touch with a fascinating group of people who had devoted a good part of their life exploring coffee in its various guises – researchers from coffee trade organisations, small coffee producers, independent café owners, artisan coffee roasters, commodity historians and museum curators. What I found especially intriguing was how many different people, from different countries and different cultures had

become engrossed in some aspect of the coffee story – either through occupation, taste or intellect.

Things have changed enormously in England over the years I've been here. It's now more likely to find an excellent cup of coffee on the streets of London where artisan brews have become something of an obsession, than in Paris. England is no longer a nation of tea drinkers (if it ever was) and fine, independent coffeehouse cafés have sprung up in even the smallest towns.

Coffee in the 21st century has become truly globalised in a way that would have been inconceivable when I was a young man. But the story of coffee has always been an epic saga of desire and greed, sagacity and speed, sanctity and sin. It mirrors our world, the creation of which it helped to fuel. It's a story of plants and people – of how people affect plants and how plants affect people. And its effect is remarkable – which is why certain 18th century poets called it the 'Black Apollo'.



INTRODUCTION

THE STORY OF coffee is set in an age when there was a dramatic shift in temporal visions. So the coffeehouse, coffee's unique place of consumption, is an intriguing window through which to view the amazing transformation of life that took place over a very short period of time and helped to construct our contemporary world. But to delve into the story of coffee and cafés in any meaningful way requires a willingness to enter into another domain where we put aside our natural inclination to view history as a linear sequence of events and, instead, weave together narratives from many different strands and many different sources; combining the knowledge of botanist, shaman, merchant, gardener, economist, artist, entrepreneur and consumer.

Unlike a chronicle of nations or societies, the history of a commodity is more open ended. A plant can be looked at organically or commercially. What people do with it and how it comes to affect people's lives is something else again. Therefore, a people's history of a plant must relate to the way it's been used and how it has come to influence social relationships in the human world as well as the botanical one. For coffee is a commodity, like sugar and tobacco, which was the basis of the plantation system, the most brutal exploiter of human labour the world had ever known, and, at the same time, an elixir

which fuelled revolutionary thought in Paris, created emporia which momentarily levelled the class divide in London and set the stage for a new economic order in Amsterdam. Yet coffee had only been known in Europe (by the masses, at least) since the 18th century and only used widely as a drink anywhere in the world barely two hundred years before that.

But where did coffee really come from? And how did it get to us? For in the course of a single generation, coffee burst onto the European scene like an Arabian Sirocco. Or did it? And if so, how did that happen in a pre-capitalist world without the trumpeting of the media, as we know it, paving the way for a new and wonderful product?

Certainly, there was a remarkable social restructuring taking place in Europe around the time coffee made its entry. The demise of feudalism, the flowering of mercantilism, the preliminary shoots of an early capitalism – the economic forces of great and dramatic change were tearing Europe asunder and constructing something yet unknown on the ashes of the old. And wherever you looked, there was coffee, the Black Apollo, empowering the new and consigning the moribund to a medieval stupor.

Even more, in the contemporary world where Africa and the Middle East are currently viewed by those in the West as underdeveloped and fanatical, the story of coffee's beginnings had it just the reverse. Neither the commodity of coffee nor the culture of consumption was discovered, invented or

recognized by the West until it had been established in the East for over 150 years. Coffee was a drink that promoted diversity and discourse, even if the production of coffee didn't. The most cursory reading of the 16th and 17th century shows us that while European tolerance was in short supply back then, the Ottoman world was a piquant mix of everything on offer.

And so this book is an exploration of how a certain plant became a global commodity, creating fortunes and despair, bringing people together and tearing them apart, playing a starring role in the remarkable awakening of our modern world. The theme is coffee; the venue is the coffeehouse – a place where prince and pauper might meet on equal footing. Where else on earth could we find that?



Photo by Kevin Biderman

DELVING INTO ORIGINS

IT WAS PARIS in the summer of 1714 – a breezy Sunday afternoon. Jean de la Roque hurried down Quai St. Bernard bound for the Jardin des Plants. He'd been invited by Monsieur de Jussien, the head gardener, to witness something that few Europeans had ever seen. Something, indeed, so special that his hands trembled with anticipation and his heart pounded as he strode quickly along the quay.

What could it be that induced such a powerful response in an 18th century Parisian gentleman? The answer might seem a bit prosaic to us looking back more than a quarter of a millennium on. In our mind's eye we see a Paris quite different than the one we know – a Paris with a leg still in the medieval world. Rather than the grand, symmetrical boulevards, this was a city with narrow winding streets and rickety, ancient houses yet to be demolished by great urban planners set loose by future Napoleons. Yet this was a city seething with anticipation. For if one foot was in the old world, the other was firmly planted in the new.

Such a distance tends to blur one's vision, especially when gazing back from an age like ours. Having seen everything there is to see and eaten everything there is eat, our senses have been

shattered to a point that there are few surprises left – or so we are led to think.

But back then, two and a half centuries ago, what Jean de la Roque was going to witness was as fantastic to him as the marvels and horrors of biotechnology are to us. Only in one other place, at the famed Hortus Medicus in Amsterdam, had anyone accomplished such a feat – coaxing a coffee tree to bear fruit in European soil.

For Jean de la Roque, seeing this horticultural slight-of-hand was a culmination of an obsession which had plagued him since childhood. He had long been fascinated by the stories of his father who had travelled to Constantinople in 1644 and then to the Levant, bringing back to his home in Marseille not only some of the first coffee ever seen there, but also the enticingly exotic service used in Turkey when entertaining guests – the tiny Fujian cups of ancient China, the little silk napkins embroidered in gold, the delicate silver spoons and the lacquered serving tray.

Coffee was little more than a curiosity when la Roque's father had returned to France, brewed sparingly in drawing rooms of the wealthy or those who had, through travel or trade, contracted the habits of the Levant. But in 1669 something happened which made this substance very much in vogue and launched the epoch of coffee that so fascinated la Roque.

It was in July of that year when the emissaries of Sultan Mohammed IV came to Paris bringing with them sacks upon sacks of a curious bean.

Paris, at the time, was already in the throws of Turkomania as the Empire of the Ottomans pressed ever onward into Europe, till it was knocking at the gates of Vienna itself. Stories of eunuchs dressed in robes of silver and mauve, overseeing their master's erotic needs and courtiers with organs of hearing and speech removed so as to assure their trustworthiness, vied with tales of the Janissaries, the Sultan's elite infantry corps, made up of children torn from their mother's breast as a periodic levy on Christian youth. But it was Constantinople, the ancient seat of Byzantium, which fired the Gallic imagination with shimmering images of silks and spices and all the exotic loot of an empire which stretched from Yemen to Persia to Hungary.

When the Sultan's Ambassador left in May the following year, the coffee habit he introduced into Parisian society had already become the newest fad. People of means were beginning to bring it in from Marseille, or making private arrangements with ship's captains who sailed to the Levant. Yet it wasn't until 1672 that an enterprising Armenian, known simply as 'Pascal', took to selling it publicly, first at the grand fair of Saint Germain and then in a little shop located at the Quai de l'École where he sold coffee for two sols, six deniers (or about 2 English pennies) a dish.

La Roque was later to write about a little lame man who, in those years, went through the streets of Paris touting this strange new drink. 'He had a napkin tied about him very neat carrying in one hand a chafing dish made for the purpose, upon which he would set his coffee-pot. In the other hand he carried a kind of fountain full of water, and before him a tin-basket, where he kept all his utensils.'

He was known as 'Candiot'. It seems he just appeared on the scene one day with his companion, a young man named Joseph, who came from the Levant to seek his fortune in Paris.

But that was a generation before. By the time la Roque hurried down the boulevard that summer day in 1714 toward the Jardin des Plants, there was scarcely a town of any size that hadn't one or more coffeehouses. Within a brief period they had sprung up almost magically from one end of the kingdom to another. Coffee had gone from an exotic luxury to a necessary commodity with shiploads of raw beans in rough, muslin sacks coming into harbour almost every day.

Coffee had come of age. What had been small-scale bartering forty years before, had emerged into full-fledged commerce. And the Ottomans, who till now controlled the trade through their Red Sea ports, were quick to realise a good thing when they saw one – as they had been searching for an alternative to the spice monopoly the swaggering Dutch had lifted from them.

‘The potentates of Egypt,’ la Roque complained, ‘have become more difficult in letting that commodity be transported, which has caused a scarcity and raised the price to six and seven haucks per pound.’ The hauck was equivalent to about three English pence, and though that seems incredibly small in our inflated age, back then it was certainly enough to make the new entrepreneurs think seriously about alternative sources of supply.

The problem was, however, that alternatives didn’t exist to the Red Sea ports – except for one. Which is why the fruiting of that plant la Roque had rushed to witness was so vitally important.

‘We went there to see it and observed it a good while with pleasure; it was set in its case and placed in the glass-machine, with the Taper of Peru beside it,’ he wrote. ‘The Hollander who had that tree under his care came from Marly to the Royal Garden. He told us that there was a great tree of this species in the Hortus Botanicus of Amsterdam whose height was equal to the second story of a house and proportionally as large. That great tree came originally from Arabia, brought from there very young and transported to Java. After some stay, it came at last to Holland where it grew to perfection. The fruit of this same tree, planted in he Garden of Amsterdam, have produced diverse young plants, some of which have born fruit from the age of three years. The shrub sent to our King was of that number, according to the Dutchman.’

It was the scourge of the Ottomans – the Dutch – who first got that bean to grow outside its homeland. Now it had been handed over to the French. What la Roque had witnessed at the Jardin des Plants on that very special Sunday was the Mama tree. It was her progeny that travelled the perilous seas to Dominica. And from there, her grandchildren moved on, jumping from the Caribbean to French Guyana and becoming the founding nurseries of the great coffee empires of South and Central America.

Perhaps this marvel of growing coffee in a European garden can hardly be appreciated now, in our age when human life is nurtured in laboratory test tubes. But it takes more than a green thumb to force a coffee tree to bear fruit outside its native habitat, especially without the technical understanding of soil and nutrients based on sophisticated chemical analysis that we have at our disposal. The critical factors these incredible Dutch gardeners had to contend with in perfecting their Super-tree were, quite simply, astronomical.

To understand what was behind these astounding achievements, however, we need to consider the relationship of humans and plants in the 17th and 18th centuries – a relationship much different than the one we have with vegetables today.

Before the industrial revolution and the dubious marvels of chemistry, plants were the main basis of drugs and tonics which doctors and herbalists prescribed for their patients' health and well-being.

European theologies of the day still accepted the notion that all plants originated in the Garden of Eden and were placed there by God specifically to serve (or tempt) the human race. This belief formed the basis of the ancient theory of 'signatures' which said that each plant gave forth a sign, both in colour and shape, as to its effect. Many herbalists believed that plants could be 'read', and, if interpreted correctly, could be used to cure any known disease.

It was a widely held belief during the Middle Ages that the Garden of Eden had somehow survived the flood, and during the 15th and 16th centuries, the great journeys of exploration kept this item on their agenda along with the search for the Holy Grail and the Fountain of Youth. But by the 17th century, opinion had shifted as the world became more and more charted and pragmatic philosophies of mercantilism became the force to be reckoned with rather than the vague mythologies of the Church which could produce fascinating dreams but very little hard, convertible cash.

The idea of the Garden of Eden, however, persisted even though its current existence was doubted. And, in line with the magnificent arrogance of the time, men began thinking of starting it anew by bringing together all the bits and pieces of creation into one place.

This resurrection of Paradise became a virtual obsession among the new breed of merchant adventurers, perhaps as a rationale for their pillage

and looting of the world or, more probably, because they understood that in the new economies being forged, knowledge was power and commodities, wealth.

Most merchant ships, therefore, carried with them a trained botanist whose business it was to discover new vegetation, describe and codify and, hopefully, bring back living specimens for the proliferating botanical gardens which had sprung up in nearly every university town in Britain, Italy and France – though the best gardens, the most brilliant displays of flowering diversity, were owned by the Dutch.

In Leyden, for example, practically every plant known to European naturalists was on display. The garden there was like a botanical encyclopaedia containing examples from the far reaches of the world. Academics, herbalists and medical practitioners awaited each discovery with the anticipation of a physicist learning about another building block of matter. And each new plant would be nurseried and brought to the marvellous Hortus Medicus in Amsterdam, where it would be duly noted in their vast and ever-expanding pharmacopoeia.

The skill of the chief gardeners, like Dutchman Hendrick Gerritsz and Cornelis Vos, in keeping such a monumental collection in bloom, was quite extraordinary. The difficulty, for example, in growing coffee from seed exemplifies the prodigious amount of information necessary in keeping one, let alone

thousands of exotic plants, through succeeding generations.

Viability of coffee seeds is comparatively short and germination is a chancy operation at best. Soil warmth is a critical factor, with the optimum temperature hovering at 27.7 degrees Celsius. Propagating the plant through cuttings is equally difficult and requires the maximum of light plus a humidity reading of close to 90%. Rooting can easily take three or four months.

Keeping these things in mind, it's not difficult to understand why the fruition of a coffee tree in a Paris garden might have been such a great event. What is less clear is why it was so important to people who were not in the business of rushing out every time an exotic flower bloomed.

The fascination that Sunday, was, of course, coffee itself – at least for la Roque. His obsession was so great that he ended up writing a book on the subject; the most definitive one to that date.

What interested la Roque was its origins, most likely because of his childhood memories and his father's ritualised use of the ornate paraphernalia he had brought back from Turkey. He had witness coffee emerge from a surreptitious drink, known only to those familiar with the ways of the Levant, to something which burst onto the urban scene, abruptly transforming the course of social life.

Yet the coming of this drink, which Montague said quickened the mind and let the spirit fly, coincided

with a period of intense turmoil and change. The noted French historian, Roland Mousnier, even went so far as to call it the 'century of crisis which affected all mankind causing new uncertainties in thought and faith.'

One contemporary observer wrote 'the whole world is shaking'. And, certainly, few people who were around at the time would have denied it. France witnessed well over 1000 revolts during the course of the 17th century and historians have discovered a similar pattern of popular unrest almost anywhere else they cared to look.

Numerous theories have been expounded as to why this century was so extraordinary. Puritans saw the turbulence as a sign from God, warning humankind to mind their wicked ways. Others suggested that malign forces were being influenced by the stars. Modern astronomers now think they might have been right.

Between 1645 and 1715, the skies, according to the records of the time, had a curious absence of sun-spots. And observers from Scandinavia to Scotland noticed another mysterious disappearance – that of the Northern Lights, the Aurora Borealis.

Both these phenomena are indicators of solar energy. The Northern Lights are caused by particles from the sun entering the earth's atmosphere, and sun-spots, themselves, are an indicator of changes in the sun's magnetic fields.

Considering that a decrease of one percent in the total solar radiation can cause a fall of one degree centigrade in mean summer temperature, which in turn restricts the growing season by three to four weeks as well as the maximum altitude at which vegetation will ripen, it's not surprising that a world in which 90% of the total population was dependent on agriculture for food and employment would be thrown seriously out of whack. As a consequence, the population of Europe, between the years 1625 and 1650, fell by twenty percent.

Curiously, this is the very time that coffee first entered Europe. Could it be that laRoque's fascination had something to do with this coincidence? Or perhaps he thought it wasn't a coincidence at all.

In 1714, la Roque stood on a pinnacle. Behind him was a world laid waste by famine, plague and insurrection. Before him was the grand new age of Europe illustrated by the growth of commodity markets and the stock exchange, the empires built on plantation-based trade, and the flowering of the continental cafés.

For the great emerging powers – Holland, England and France – true wealth now came in the form of plants: sugar cane, cotton and tobacco. And, added to the list now was coffee, the new drink that oiled the economic machine and kept it going – the drink that so fascinated the likes of la Roque and seemed to epitomise this new age.

No wonder la Roque tried so hard to delve into its origins, as if its story could shed some light on those extraordinary times. But the history of coffee lay in a past so murky and vague that la Roque, like most of his contemporaries had to resort to third-hand tales in order to trace its way. What he found out was how amazingly little was known – at least in the West. And what was known in the East was shrouded in mystery.



COFFEE'S GARDEN OF EDEN

BEGINNINGS ARE USUALLY where history and myth collide, so the process of seeking out time lines can often be convoluted. But the origin of coffee is even more complicated as there is both the plant and the commodity to consider – or, to be more precise, the various plants and commodities which are loosely bound together in the grab-bag we call 'coffee'.

Ordinarily, when we want to find a beginning, we locate an end point and work our way backwards. For coffee this process depends on when and where we decide to work our way back from. If, for instance, we started our trek homeward along the coffee trail from the Santos region of Brazil in the 1900s, we would be led to a different place (or different places) than if our point of departure was Constantinople in the 1500s.

But if we consider coffee as a commodity, then we also have to determine what form we're talking about. Was coffee used as a food, a medicine, an infusion or a brew? And if the answer is all of the above, then is there a straight line that connects these uses? Was coffee first used as a food, then a medicine, then an infusion, then a brew? Or was it used as all of those at any one time, in many different ways and in many different places?

Coffea Arabica, the type of coffee we in the West

are most familiar with, does have a definite origin, however, and can be traced to the same general area where bones of the earliest hominids were discovered – though, whether *Coffea Arabica* actually goes back quite as far as *Australopithecus afarensis* is open to question.

Even if our primeval Lucy and friends hadn't experienced the pleasures of *Coffea Arabica* in whatever form their collective curiosity allowed, we'd be hard pressed to find a more suitable Garden of Eden than the Hareenna Forest in the majestic Bale Mountains, a hundred kilometers or so southeast of Ethiopia's capital city, Addis Ababa. Many eons ago, it seemed to provide the perfect eco-system for both people and plants – and it still does. Though the region is semi-arid, because of the altitude the monsoon winds blowing from the Indian Ocean leave a trail of wetness over the land. The ancient Greeks knew of this forest as did the Romans; so did Solomon and the Queen of Sheba. It is isolated and strikingly beautiful, and the ecology is unique. And it's here in the Hareenna forest that botanical historians believe the *Coffea arabica* plant first grew wild.

In fact, wild coffee plants still populate the Hareenna and continue to be harvested by indigenous baboons who seem hopelessly addicted to the bright red berries and their subsequent effect after a brief period of ingestion. And why not? Animals enjoy foods for pleasure as well as sustenance, just

like humans. So it's not at all surprising that one of the most enduring legends of coffee's beginnings revolves around the story of a goat.

The tale of Kaldi goes back many centuries and has become incorporated into the folklore of coffee's beginnings in Egypt, Turkey, Syria, Iran, Iraq and Yemen, as well as in its Ethiopian homeland. However, the actual source of this story has never been traced and may, in fact, be one of those parables cobbled together by early European writers that were re-transmitted into Arabic in a curious circularity. Regardless of its origins, each particular country has now put its own take on this charming story, with imagery that connects to their own culture. But essentially the legend is the same: a young shepherd, named Kaldi, is tending his flock in a verdant pasture somewhere in a distant time and distant land where fantasy merges into the ordinary life of shepherds and goats. And it's here that the eponymous Kaldi observes something that will change the lives of millions and will allow this simple shepherd to live forever in story and in verse. For one day, or one night, under a brilliant sky or silvery moon, Kaldi notices something quite strange. A goat which had been quietly munching on some ripe red berries from a nearby shrub has suddenly stood up on its hind legs and started to dance.

In the various illustrations of the Kaldi legend that have been passed down over the years, we usually see the young shepherd dancing blissfully with his

flock, holding aloft a sprig of leaves and red berries from a nearby bush. He is often dressed in a tunic, turban, waist sash and breeches – not particularly the clothing an Ethiopian shepherd would have worn in antiquity. But by the time Kaldi became part of coffee mythology, the drink had long been accepted as an Arab invention.

What I think is lovely about the Kaldi story is its universality. A simple shepherd and his goats, in a distant place in a distant time, discover something pleasurable. Man and animal celebrate together. Coffee becomes a gift of nature that is there for everyone, ripe for the picking.

Yet over the years a more secular story of coffee's beginnings slowly emerged through tales of merchants and travellers, readings of ship's logs, factor's reports and especially the writings of those cultural intermediaries who by dint of their special position could function equally well within the Christian and Moslem worlds – namely the Greeks, Armenians, Jews and Banyans.

It is very likely that coffee was used in Ethiopia, its ancestral homeland, for many thousands of years before the invention of the coffee drink. The story of Kaldi and his goats is not so outlandish. People who are dependent on the land for survival have an integral relationship with the earth, its plants and animals – all things that grow. Shepherds, especially, were keen observers regarding what was good to

eat and what wasn't. Not everything that animals ate was good for humans, of course. But over the centuries things were tried. Shamans, healers, native herbalists, all had an interest in exotic plants and closely observed their powers as either soporific or stimulant.

The nomadic life was difficult. A shift in weather cycles causing a shortage of resources often forced communities to find new grazing land for their flock. Plants that energized and empowered people to travel long distances without sleep, were highly prized. That the coffee berry was used for these purposes is well known and substantiated both through early travellers' reports and contemporary anthropological research. Even today we find isolated incidents of the coffee plant being used in this manner where the berry – sometimes roasted, sometimes not – is pounded into pulp and mixed with fat into a kind of zingy butter which is spread onto some sort of bread-like substance and then eaten. It might not taste like a good cup of espresso but the effect is the same.

Coffea Arabica existed for thousands of years in the Ethiopian highlands. But coffee as a drink and the coffee culture that surrounds it came from someplace else. And the story of how it got from here to there, how the first emergence of coffee as we have come to know it evolved seemingly out of nowhere, is a fascinating look into a conjunction of possibilities that allow what always existed in one

form to become viable in another. In other words, when situations are right, things become manifest. In the case of coffee, several factors came together at a particular time causing a transformation that over the years have taken a curious plant from the isolated wilds and turned it into one of the most successful commodities the world has ever known.



Kaldi and his goats. Anon