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Coffees of India

By Steve Smith

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India produces two fine coffees, but even among coffee devotees - at least in America - they remain relatively unknown and un-drunk. That's too bad. They deserve to be extolled for the romance attached to them, if nothing else; happily, they also taste pretty good as well.

According to legend, coffee was discovered in Ethiopia. The first big coffee craze, though, occurred in Arabia, where by the 13th century Muslims were brewing and drinking huge quantities of it. Travelers from Arabia took the beans with them wherever they went - beans deliberately made infertile, allegedly, by parching or boiling. Because of this strict export control policy, it is claimed that no coffee seed sprouted outside Africa or Arabia until the 17th century.

Enter (or exit, as the case may be) one Baba Budan - one of the great heroes in the history of coffee, in my opinion. Wrapping up a pilgrimage to Arabia from his native land of India, Budan left Mecca with several fertile coffee beans strapped to his belly. From those beans sprouted the first coffee trees to be grown in India, as well as an agricultural industry that could no longer be contained to one small part of the world.

For romance, though, nothing in the world of coffee, to my mind, beats the story of Monsooned Malabar, one of the two coffees for which India is known today.

The British began the modern commercial cultivation of coffee on the hills of southern India, along the Malabar coast, a century-and-a-half ago. The coffee grown there was packed raw into the holds of wooden ships and sent on a six-month trip, around the Cape of Good Hope, to the coffee houses and shops of Europe. On such a long journey, and in such vessels, the beans inevitably became exposed to almost constant humidity. That humidity turned the beans pale gold and leached them of their acidity. When the coffee finally reached its destination it had been considerably mellowed - and Europeans loved it.

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Progress eventually intervened, though, to temporarily deny the coffee drinkers of Europe their beloved aged Indian bean. The opening of the Suez Canal made the trip from the Malabar Coast much shorter. And, the coffee began to be shipped in modern steel vessels. These developments conspired to deprive the coffee beans of the prolonged exposure to humidity which had been responsible for their distinctive flavor.

To meet the demand for the old style of coffee from Malabar, some growers hit on a simple but ingenious solution. They would duplicate the moist conditions of the old sea voyage by exposing their beans to the Indian monsoon. Thus, Monsooned Malabar.

The monsooning process is a long one - and actually fairly labor intensive. First, the coffee to be monsooned is stored in a special warehouse to await the monsoon season. When the time comes, the sides of the warehouse are opened, allowing the wet monsoon winds to circulate around the beans. The beans may also be raked or hand-turned on the floor of the warehouse to assist in the process.

Monsooning takes 12 to 16 weeks. During this time the beans swell to twice their picked size and turn that signature pale golden color.

The taste of Monsooned Malabar coffee is usually described in terms such as musty, earthy, corky and woody. Some writers have called it "mellow" yet "aggressive" at the same time! All agree that it has a polarizing quality - you'll either adore it or detest it. Maybe I just haven't had enough cups yet to really judge, but in my opinion the taste is not as idiosyncratic as all that. Musty, maybe, but not off-puttingly so. I think that many people would enjoy it, not just those of us who enjoy seeking out the more unusual offerings of the coffee world. And again, for my part, the fascinating story behind this particular coffee makes up for any deficiency in the cup.

Unfortunately, you still can't find Monsooned Malabar just anywhere. Ordering it by mail is still the best bet for most of us. Oddly enough, until very recently it was easier to acquire green (unroasted) Malabar coffee beans than roasted ones. My first cup came from beans that I roasted at home, myself, in a popcorn popper. There are many resources on the Web for anyone interested in getting into home coffee roasting, an enjoyable hobby in its own right.

There are a few coffee sellers on the Web now who offer roasted Monsooned Malabar and similarly exotic or hard-to-find beans. In the case of Malabar (as opposed, say, to genuine Kona or Jamaican Blue Mountain), the price actually compares quite favorably with more mundane or "normal" coffees. If you like traveling the world in a coffee cup - and especially if you'd like to drink something with a bit of romance to it - you owe it to yourself to get your hands on some Monsooned Malabar. By the way, if you drink a lot of espresso, you might have had some Malabar coffee without knowing; some espresso producers include it in their so-called exotic blends.

India's other major coffee variety comes from the Mysore region (now the state of Karnataka). Called Indian Mysore, Mysore Nuggets, Mysore Straight, or simply Mysore, it makes a rich and spicy cup of coffee that at its best may be termed "sweet" — a word you would never hear applied to Monsooned Malabar. Interestingly enough, though, Mysore coffee also gets its unique taste from being exposed to the monsoon wind and rain, which pump up the beans with moisture and smooth out their flavor. The

difference may be simply that in the case of the Malabar, the monsoon exposure is purposely carried to an extreme.

Mysore coffee is also becoming easier to find in the United States, although most people will still have to seek out a reliable seller on the Web. It's definitely worth finding and trying some. According to some connoisseurs, Indian Mysore at its best is among the finest coffees produced anywhere.

-- Steve Smith

Steve Smith is a writer and editor living near Chapel Hill, North Carolina. He serves as webmaster for his daughter's Web site, Send Me to India (

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