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The History of Colombian Coffee

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When you drink a cup of rich Colombian coffee, you might imagine a farmer with a straw hat meandering through rows of trees on a mountainside. Well, that image is actually pretty accurate, even today. Nevertheless, the Colombian coffee industry has come a long way in the past few centuries.



A Colombian coffee plantation- via Wikipedia

Many coffee connoisseurs regard Colombian coffee as the finest in the world. The country's unique climate and geography create a perfect environment for growing coffee beans that deliver rich taste.

Colombia's coffee producers have descended from generations of growers and the country goes to great lengths to protect its brand. While the nation's industry today faces fierce competition from other producer countries, consumers around the world still recognize Colombian-grown coffee for its unique quality and centuries-old tradition.

Cultivation

The Andes Mountains run through the center of Colombia, from north to south, while thick jungles cover eastern and western regions. The rich soil and mild climate in the Andes provide the perfect atmosphere for coffee cultivation.

Almost all Colombian coffee farms are owned and operated by families. While some of the richest families in the country run massive estates, most coffee farms are quite small.

Farmers plant trees in rows, often on steep mountain slopes, and use banana and plantain trees to mark property lines. Farmhouses often sit at the tops of properties, enabling farmers to keep a close eye on their crops.

The growing process requires very little machinery. Coffee beans are handpicked and often dried on the patios and terraces of farmhouses. Farmers transport their harvests by jeep or truck to local farming associations, which sell the beans to the national association for worldwide distribution.

Coffee farmers often produce other crops, such as bananas, pineapples, plantains and avocados, which they sell to local produce markets.

Origins

Dutch and French explorers discovered coffee in Africa. Colonists from France and Holland brought coffee seeds to South America in the early eighteenth century and Jesuit priests introduced coffee to Colombia in the 1720s.

Historians believe the first coffee seeds were planted at the mission of Saint Teresa of Tabaje, located in an eastern region of Colombia at the junction of the Meta and Orinoco Rivers. The indigenous people of Colombia were reluctant to cultivate coffee, primarily because trees can take five years or more to produce their first beans.

To encourage coffee cultivation, Francisco Romero, a Catholic priest, advised his parishioners to plant coffee trees as a form of penance for sins. The Archbishop of Colombia endorsed the priest's unorthodox tactics and ordered all of the nation's parishes to follow suit.

By the end of the eighteenth century, Colombian farmers were producing coffee commercially in five departments.

Export Trade

Today, the United States, Italy, Germany, Japan and France are the main importers of Colombian coffee. Most of these countries have enjoyed a long relationship with the Colombian coffee industry, some for nearly 200 years.

In 1835, Colombia shipped more than 2,500 bags of green coffee from its docks in Cucuta, marking the beginning of what is today a thriving export trade. Within 25 years, Colombian farmers were producing more than 150,000 bags for export. Tariffs levied on coffee exports quickly became the primary source of revenue for the Colombian government.

After Colombia achieved its independence from Spain in the nineteenth century, the coffee industry expanded. Coffee had become popular throughout the United States and Europe and international prices made the product extremely profitable.

By the early twentieth century, coffee accounted for 65 percent of Colombia's annual exports and by 1930 Colombian farmers produced more than 3 million bags for export. Incomes shot up throughout coffee-growing regions, impacting social and political institutions.

To accommodate the thriving coffee trade, railroads were built throughout Andean regions. The new infrastructure made it easier to transport products to Caribbean ports and paved the way for farmers in remote areas to enter the coffee business.

As export trade continued to grow, trouble brewed within the coffee growing regions. Wealthy property owners controlled most of the farmland, which often shut out poor farm families that were once part of the market.

Land reforms initiated in the 1930s helped balance the property ownership problem, but by the 1980s rich farmers once again gained control of the majority of farmland in coffee-growing regions.

Nacional de Cafeteros de Colombia

In the 1920s, coffee growers in the Antioquia Department formed the *Federacion Nacional de Cafeteros de Colombia* (FNC), an organization created to increase the income of its member farmers.

The FNC, along with the Colombian government, formed a stabilization fund designed to protect and advance the interests of coffee growers and the nation. The fund provides money for coffee industry objectives, such as public projects in coffee-growing regions and the stabilization of coffee prices to reduce market volatility.

The creation of the FNC led to further expansion of coffee production. By the 1960s, nearly 2.5 million acres of Colombian farmland were dedicated to coffee production. The organization also funded research efforts, which led to new varieties of coffee trees.

These new tree varieties enabled coffee growers to produce higher yields, which enabled them to meet the demands of new international coffee agreements. By the 1990s, Colombia was producing 14 million bags of coffee each year.

Colombian Coffee Industry Today

Today, more than 500,000 Colombian farmers produce coffee. In addition to the FNC, farmers operate dozens of independent farming cooperatives. Nearly 20 of Colombia's cooperatives have received certification by Fair Trade Labeling Organizations International, enabling their members to produce and sell certified fair-trade coffee.

In 1959, the FNC create the Juan Valdez character, a fictional coffee farmer. Juan Valdez has become synonymous with Colombian coffee and his image, which also includes his trusty mule, appears on the FNC's logo. Over the years, a number of actors have portrayed Juan and his image has become a symbol of national pride.

In the late 1980s, Colombia's coffee industry faced a number of setbacks. Several consumer countries reneged on their trade agreements, forcing farmers to sell their harvests at much lower prices. The reduction in farm income led to defaults on mortgages, which resulted in an economic crisis throughout the country.

While Colombian farmers rebounded from the crisis, other countries moved to the forefront of the industry. Today, Brazil produces the majority of the world's coffee, followed by Vietnam and Indonesia.

In recent years, the Colombian coffee industry has been hit hard by global climate changes. Relentless rains have caused floods throughout Colombian, wiping out crops and destroying homes. Diseases have struck many coffee fields, destroying entire harvests in some regions, and other farms have suffered from soil contamination caused by pesticides.

Throughout its long history, the Colombian coffee industry has proven its resilience. Its strength lies in farm families that have cultivated coffee for generations. As markets and climate conditions change, farmers have learned to adapt and Colombians continue to regard their coffee industry as a source of national pride.

So, the next time you enjoy a cup of delicious Colombian coffee, you can rest assured that thousands of Juan Valdezes are working hard to continue their nation's longstanding tradition.

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