Once Upon A Coffee Bean

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One warm and sunny day somewhere in time prior to the 15th century, an observant goat herder, whose name has been lost to history, experienced an interesting synaptic epiphany. As he suffered in the undoubtedly shimmering heat, he noticed that a number of his goats had gotten a little frisky. He soon found the explanation for this interesting state of affairs: his goats, probably Edward the great and his girl, Helga the lesser, were munching on some bright red berries hanging tantalizingly from some plants. These plants were too small to be called trees, but too large to be called shrubs.

The shepherd found himself bitten by the curiosity bug and with some trepidation, decided to try them for himself. The ripened outer flesh, fruit-like and red in color, had a taste similar to red chili peppers. The pith, that is the seed-like core, was indigestible and seemingly useless. Useless, that is, until he left an iron vessel full of them too close to the camp fire; a camp fire set to a temperature between 435° and 475° Fahrenheit until the beans had roasted to the desired degree. He then quickly removed the beans from the heat and cooled them rapidly to keep the beans from moving from roasting to baking and put them in an airtight jar so that the nitrogen envelope surrounding each bean would be afforded maximum preservation due to the limited time the nitrogen remained effective. Next, he decided to grind them using a burr-grinder because the burrs do not add heat to the beans the way a blade grinder would, which would adversely affect the flavor characteristics of the ground coffee.

In time, the newly discovered culinary curiosity began to migrate, first to the peninsular lands of the family Saud. Then to the imperial courts of the Ottoman Empire where it made an extended appearance. It was declared an offense to remove any of the cultivars, that is, plants from the courts. Although it almost didn't make it to the party, fate, and a larcenous heart, intervened and a precious few cultivars made their escape into the night. The rest, as they say, is history!

Soon, the magical elixir takes Europe by storm, followed by endless sea voyages to faraway lands favorable to its successful cultivation: 1600 to 2000 meters above sea level for the Arabica, and between 200 and 800 above sea level meters for the lesser quality Robusta beans. These lands included such idyllic locations as Hawai‘i, Sumatra, Indonesia and who can forget the land of Juan Valdez, Colombia? It has found its way to many other nifty places, but that is the subject of a future article.

It is interesting to note that the world's most expensive example of the revered bean is exported from Indonesia. Called Kopi Luwak, the coffee beans are processed in a manner that can only be described as "different." You see, farmers harvest the finished product from the litter boxes of the Asian Palm Civet cat which is raised expressly for the purpose. Indigenous to Indonesia, this mammal is among the fussiest of eaters, and will only eat the best of the coffee fruit. The alchemy begins in the cat's digestive tract where
stomach acids react chemically with the compounds in the bean. The partially digested beans are then recovered and, I hope, rinsed.

In photographs, the beans have an appearance that resembles a confectionary treat made with peanuts without chocolate. The result is a cup of coffee said to be ambrosia; you know, the nectar of the gods. Frequently I get asked how the connection between civet cat, coffee bean, payday bar, litter box and cup of morning joe was made. I don't know. I may not want to know. Ever. The stuff goes for about US$200.00 per pound. The buyers must not have any idea where it comes from and I'm not about to tell them and spoil someone's good thing.

On that note, we find ourselves in a little shop, lit by candles, and somewhat smoky atmosphere due to the fires used to heat both the water and the shop. Let it also be known that in this golden age, long before the concept of bathing, at all, was advanced that there would be more than a little insult to the olfactory nerve upon entry. However, in a world where personal hygiene was acceptably optional, few if any were offended. For the penny one would spend for admission, you could hear learned discourse on such subjects as Copernicus and his heresies or mathematics or, gasp, the strange idea that common men might have the same rights as the aristocracy! Common men?!? What nerve! What will they think of next?

Well, as quick as you can say "George Washington's your uncle," these dangerous little ideas zipped across the newly discovered Atlantic Ocean and inoculated the minds of those pesky American colonists. Next thing you know, they've broken off diplomatic ties and had the temerity to start a war! With us! Us! Can you believe it?

As we heard in his spirited video, Tom Standage—stealer of other people's thunder by the way—mentioned Lloyd's of London. Tom Standage mentions Lloyd's of London. Lloyd's began life as one such coffee shop, but over time business men in need of a nip whilst conducting their business, got into the habit of kipping off to Lloyd's to conduct a little horse trading. Most of these guys were insurance salesmen and their business was insuring ventures to lands far, far away to hunt up spices. It was just such a hunt that brought Christopher Columbus westward to find India. He did, but he just found the wrong India. It is the reason Native Americans were originally known as "Indians."

When you stop and take a look at how the world fits together like some cosmically enormous 3-D puzzle, it does not seem that all of these seemingly random threads bring themselves together to weave that endless tapestry that makes up the world we live in. In the words of a general on the confederate side of the American Civil War, "He who fails to see the hand of God in this is blind sir, blind!"

Now you know a little more about coffee than you thought possible just a short time ago. There is much more to know; it is a science unto itself and well worthy of your attention.

Tom Standage's Ancient Social Media [15:59] begins a discussion of coffee houses at 7:40. The reference to Standage being a stealer of other people's thunder is actually a reference to Murphy's professor who showed Standage's TED talk which made a significant section of Murphy's already prepared class presentation redundant; a presentation he then modified.