



Navigating Origins

P A P U A N E W G U I N E A



PAPUA NEW GUINEA FACTS

Location New Guinea, which occupies the eastern half of the island of New Guinea, is located between the Coral Sea and the South Pacific Ocean, east of Indonesia. Slightly larger than California, the country covers 178,704 square miles.

Capital City Port Moresby

Languages English and Pidgin English, with the majority of the population speaking one of the 715 indigenous languages. One-third of all the world's known languages are spoken in PNG.

Monetary Unit Kina

Population 5,295,816 in 2003, with an estimated population of 6.6 million by 2015.

Climate Tropical, with monsoons in the northwest from December–March and in the southwest from May–October.

Agricultural Exports Coffee, palm oil, cocoa, copra, coconut oil and spices.

Coffee Characteristics

About 95 percent of coffee grown in Papua New Guinea, or PNG, is high-grown washed Arabica from the highlands area of the country. The rest is Robusta, typically grown along the coastal regions and on the plains.

“Most of the Arabica coffee is grown at altitudes of 2,500–5,500 feet,” says Brian Stevenson, owner of Nuigini Coffee, Tea and Spice Company, Ltd. “Production ranges between 950,000 and 1.2 million bags annually with the main season’s flush being between May and September, although coffee is produced in the different areas nearly 12 months of the year.”

Contrary to popular belief, the majority of PNG coffee doesn’t come from estates or large farms. Instead, more than 90 percent of the coffee is grown on smallholder farms or small village coffee gardens that boast anywhere from 20 to 600 trees. Together, these family-owned farms produce about one million bags of exportable coffee each year. Typically, these small growers own the land that their farms sit on and do not use artificial fertilizer or chemical sprays.

The rest of the coffee is grown on commercial plantations that range from 20 to 200 hectares in size. There are nearly 80 registered plantations and estates in PNG, with some of the most well-known being Arona Valley and Tremearne.

Unlike other origin countries where the coffee is identified by the regions where it is grown, PNG has traditionally had an internal market

structure that allows buyers to purchase from any region and blend the coffees to their customer’s needs. But that is slowly changing. “Over the last couple of years, we have started to see some smallholder coffee sold according to the region in which it is grown,” says Mick Wheeler, overseas representative for Papua New Guinea Coffee Industry Corporation. “In particular, we have seen coffee from the Morobe province sold to buyers in Japan as this coffee has a more neutral acidity than coffee from other regions.”

Other up-and-coming areas include the Simbu and Western Highlands provinces, which are often sold under a specific name, such as Red Mountain.

History

New Guinea’s first coffee plants were recorded as early as the 1800s, when New Guinea and Papua were still separate countries controlled by separate entities; New Guinea by Germany and Papua by the British. However, these plantings weren’t on a commercial scale, says Wheeler. Instead, they “were just a few trees in someone’s backyard and in some agricultural research stations.”

Commercial plantings started in the 1950s, and by 1960, the country boasted more than 4,000 hectares of Arabica coffee. Soon after PNG became an independent, self-governing nation in the 1970s, Brazil experienced a disastrous frost that put large sections of the country’s coffee industry out of business for several years. This

was the opening that PNG needed—for more than three years, the country’s coffee sales were at record highs. Around the same time, the government sponsored a program to establish a number of small 20-hectare coffee plantations, owned cooperatively by groups of village landowners.

When coffee fell to new lows in the late-eighties, PNG’s plantations began to fall apart under the weight of their large debts and high operating costs. However, the smallholders, many of whom owned their land and had low operating costs, were able to survive.

Today’s low coffee prices are forcing a number of significant changes to PNG’s coffee industry. One of the biggest is the decline in the managed coffee sector and the rise of the smallholders. “If handled correctly these changes offer a fantastic opportunity for the small growers to become more involved in the industry, playing a bigger role not only in growing the crop but also its processing and exportation,” Wheeler says.

Quality

One of the biggest struggles in PNG is that of quality control and consistency. Much of the reason for this is the lack of infrastructure, which results in intermittent electricity, civil unrest, and the lack of an easy-to-use coffee-transportation system.

To help set the standards for quality PNG’s Coffee Industry Corporation (CIC) introduced a compulsory minimum standard for unprocessed coffee in 1994, making it an offense for a farmer to sell parchment coffee of Class 4 standard. In 2002, CIC changed the minimum from Class 3 to Class 2.

Taste Test

The coffee of PNG may not have reached as many mouths as coffees from other countries,

but many who have had the chance to taste it rave about the flavor. “It is a fine, sweet-tasting coffee with good body which leaves a pleasant aftertaste,” says Wheeler.

There are a number of distinct differences in flavor between estate coffees and smallholder coffees, although this has less to do with region and more to do with the way in which the beans are processed. “Each has different characteristics mainly due to the different methods of production and processing,” says Aarlle Hull, owner of New Guinea Traders.

Coffee that is processed on the small farms—typically Y grade or Premium Smallholder Coffee (PSC) grade—is picked by hand and often depulped with a small depulper or by hand, then placed in a porous bag and rinsed in the river. The majority of it is sun-dried. “Naturally, every village or every person will produce a different coffee,” Hull says. “Some will be well-washed and dried, some will be partially washed and dried, some will be processed by processing bright red and ripe cherry, while others will contain unripe cherry.” When the coffee is mixed at the central processing plant, it takes on the various qualities of all the coffees. This often causes the coffee to have a fruity or winey flavor which excites the palate and adds that something special to coffee blends. “Smallholder coffees are sometimes described as wild and fruity but tasting as coffee used to taste,” says Wheeler.

Estate coffees, typically A, X and PB grades, are weighed and pulped at a central facility on the farm, then are washed and fermented for 24 hours before being sun-dried for about ten days. This gives them a clean, mild flavor with a balanced acidity. Two of PNG’s most famous estate coffees are Sigri and Arona. These coffees are well-balanced with a fruity aroma.



PAPUA NEW GUINEA COFFEE AT A GLANCE

Coffee Ninety-five percent of PNG coffee is high-grown washed Arabica, which thrives in the favorable weather conditions of the country’s highland areas. The lower-priced Robusta is grown on the plains and coastal regions, where it is more tolerant than Arabica of the fungus diseases that abound in the steamy climate of those areas.

Export Coffee is PNG’s most valuable agricultural export, with an estimated one million bags per year being shipped to Germany, Australia, Japan, the United States and the UK. It is estimated that more than two million people in the country depend on coffee either directly or indirectly for their livelihood.

Growing Regions The majority of coffee, about 75 percent, is grown in the western and eastern highlands. Other areas include Chimbu, Morobe and Enga.

Farms 90 percent smallholders, 10 percent estate-grown.

Yield 1.2 tons per hectare

Harvest April–September

Shipments June–November

Classifications Nearly 60 percent is classified as Y, 20 percent as X, and just over 10 percent as A or AA.

Flavor Mostly mild Arabica coffee, although the terroir of the growing region and the type of processing greatly influences the flavor. Estate coffees are typically clean with balanced acidity, while smallholder coffees sometimes offer a fruitier flavor.

Photos courtesy of New Guinea Traders



The 4th annual PNG Coffee Festival and Trade Fair is scheduled to take place May 14–15, 2004, in Goroka, capital of PNG’s Eastern Highlands. The event, which started in 2001, works to improve prosperity for individuals and the business community through the promotion and development of coffee.