



Navigating Origins

D O M I N I C A N R E P U B L I C



DOMINICAN REPUBLIC FACTS

Location On the eastern two-thirds of the Island of Hispaniola (Haiti covers the western third), which is located between the Atlantic Ocean and the Caribbean Sea. At nearly 18,700 square miles, the Dominican Republic is more than twice the size of New Hampshire.

Capital City Santo Domingo

Languages Spanish

Monetary Unit Dominican Peso

Population 8,833,634

Terrain Mountain ranges divide the country into northern, central and southwestern regions. Fertile valleys are tucked between the mountains ranges.

Climate Tropical and wet. Seasons are defined more by rainfall than by temperature; for most of the country, the rainy season is roughly May–November and the dry season is November–April.

Agricultural Exports Sugar cane, coffee, cocoa, cotton, tobacco, rice and beans.



COFFEE FLOURISHES in the island nation of the Dominican Republic due to a number of environmental factors, including altitude, latitude, rainfall and soil. Combine this with a strong tradition of coffee and you have near-perfect growing conditions.

“We have the right soil, the correct latitude, plenty of farms with good altitude, a strong labor force with a tradition in raising coffee, and the right balance of rain and sunshine,” says Bill Eichner, who co-owns Café Alta Gracia, a farm in the Dominican Republic, with author Julia Alvarez.

Despite all of the things the Dominican Republic has going for it, the country’s coffee, which is often sold under the name Santo Domingo, has a mixed reputation.

“The not-so-nice reputation is that of a low-grade bean with some body, good for mixing of common coffees,” Eichner says. “More complimentary or discerning folks mention [the coffee’s] medium acidity, great aroma and full body with rich earthy tones.”

Santo Domingo is categorized as Caribbean coffee along with Puerto Rican and Jamaican coffee. Typically, Puerto Rican and Jamaican coffees have a better reputation, but that may have more to do with processing than it does with coffee quality.

“It’s probably not due to the basic qualities of the coffees being different, but rather to the care given in processing for export,” says Eichner. “Without question, coffee has been badly handled in the Dominican Republic. Having a low spot on the market scale has perpetuated the lack of care in processing. A local monopoly for purchase of coffee in the country hasn’t helped the price for producers, and therefore also contributes to the vicious cycle of low quality yields low price.”

Yet, most people will agree that when Santo Domingo is properly processed, it is a rich, acidic coffee with classic Caribbean characteristics. The country’s high-grown coffees tend to be richer and more acidic, while lower-grown coffees tend toward the softer, less acidic side.

Cultivation

It is estimated that 100 percent of Dominican coffee is arabica, with nearly 90 percent of that

being of the typica varietal. Other varietals include caturra, bourbon, catuai and nuevo mundo.

Coffee farms in the Dominican Republic are mostly small—less than eight acres—and are spread throughout the country’s six growing regions. Dominican specialty coffee is almost exclusively organically grown. An increasing number of farms have received organic certification by international organizations. The majority of it is also shade-grown, often under a canopy of native pine, macadamia and guava trees.



Nearly every step, from growing to processing, is environmentally friendly. Wastes from the milling process are turned into compost to fertilize the plants, while pests and diseases are kept in check by careful pruning. In addition,

mulch is laid down around the trees to prevent soil erosion.

“Most coffee grown in the Dominican Republic comes from small holdings or somewhat larger agribusiness operations,” says Eichner. “In the past decade a few growers have made the commitment to produce sustainable coffee (organic and shade-grown) and strive for the quality that will open up new markets. They have already proven that Dominican coffee can compete with its Caribbean neighbors for quality. Now we just need to find our way in a new market level.”

Depending on the altitude, the harvest usually begins in October or November and runs through June. Typically, coffee is picked by hand, just a little bit at a time, through the long growing season. Then the coffees for the specialty market are most commonly wet processed within a day of being picked and patio-dried.

Climate

The Dominican Republic offers a climate that is unique to other coffee-growing regions throughout the Americas. First off, there is no rainy season. Instead, rain falls nearly year-round. This rain, along with warm ocean currents and gentle trade winds, creates a long growing season. Thus, cherries are able to ripen slowly, insuring consistent and high-quality beans. The range of high altitudes allows numerous series of flowerings, which means that coffee is produced nearly 12 months of the year.

Much of Santo Domingo’s taste characteristics come from the country’s lofty valleys and four mountain ranges, each of which produces its own microclimate. In addition, the soil of the mountains is unusual; three of the four ranges are primarily limestone, while the last is granite. Specialty coffee is grown in terraced slopes along the mountains, with the best beans growing at 3,500 feet and above.

“Dominican coffee is unique because it has a wide variety of microclimates producing seven flowerings per plant each year,” says Miguel Melo, an exporter with Americo Melo & Co. “This creates a well-balanced coffee.”



To better showcase those microclimates, several decades ago, the government established six official coffee-growing regions in the country: Cibao, Bani, Azua, Ocoa, Barahona and Juncalito. Each region creates beans with distinct physical and chemical characteristics.

One problem with this otherwise idyllic setting is the frequent hurricanes. The Dominican Republic lies in the middle of the hurricane belt, and so is subject to severe storms, occasional flooding and periodic droughts. In September of 1998, Hurricane Georges caused damage to nearly 70 percent of the country, including a number of growing regions. Los Dajaos, a farming community located in the central mountain range, was one of the areas most strongly hit.

To help combat this devastation, government and aid groups have stepped in. Still, Melo says, the aid has not been enough to combat “the economical woes of farmers from which they have not yet recovered and the lack of public investment in the rural areas where coffee is grown.”

Future

Despite the hardships, the future of Dominican coffee doesn’t look as dark as it did in years past. With the demand for organic, shade-grown coffees steadily increasing, the Dominican Republic has a commodity that is likely to sell, as long as the quality is there.

CODOCAFE, a Dominican organization that regulates and governs coffee politics,

is working hard to increase the quality of Dominican coffee and to promote it well. CODOCAFE also recently signed an agreement with AFD, a French Development Agency, to further promote Santo Domingo.

Farms such as Eichner’s are taking a personal interest in improving quality and are working to increase the knowledge levels of growers.

“We have to teach farmers how coffee should taste to compete in the specialty market, as well as the importance of reducing defects,” says Eichner. “We decided to start at ground zero, teaching the children, and adults who are willing, in our community to read and write. At the same time, our new partners in farm management are turning our farm into a “green center,” a demonstration farm to teach diversity and sustainability in the community.”

With the coffee quality rising, Santo Domingo’s mixed reputation may soon be a thing of the past.

“Dominican coffee was traditionally mismanaged internally and as a result penalized in the U.S.,” says Melo. “However with our membership in the Specialty Coffee Association of America and our participation in their events, the perception of Dominican coffee has been changing steadily for the best.”



DOMINICAN COFFEE AT A GLANCE

Coffee Mostly arabica. Varieties include typica, caturra, and nuevo mundo.

Flavor Has many typical Caribbean characteristics, including a full-body, rich earthy tones and light to medium acidity.

Farms Mostly small holdings or slightly larger agri-businesses.

Harvest September–May

Processing Wet method, sun- and drum-dried

Shipping November

Main Buyers United States, Japan, Puerto Rico

