

## Y E M E N

By Mark McKee

**I CAN STILL REMEMBER** my first contact with Yemen coffee. It was more than 20 years ago, when I was a young enthusiastic coffee person working at Starbucks. It was my first week and a customer came in requesting a coffee that had a chocolate flavor. Looking up at the coffee board I instantly saw the word “mocha” and blurted out, “how about the Arabian Mocha Sanani?”

Needless to say, the customer brought the coffee back a day later and said it didn’t taste like chocolate at all—thus began my journey into the world of Yemen coffee. To this day, there are still many who do not understand the meaning behind the term mocha and the importance that this small Yemen port played in the history of the coffee world.

### History of Coffee in Yemen

Yemen is located on the lower Arabian Peninsula just below Saudi Arabia and across the Arabian Sea from Ethiopia and Eritrea. The coffee is commonly listed on coffee menus as northern African coffee, but Yemen coffee has the right to stand alone as the only coffee grown on the Arabian Peninsula.

Not surprisingly, coffee found its way into Yemen long before it became the republic that we know today. It is believed that coffee came from Ethiopia thanks to Ali Ben Omar Al Shadili, who founded a mosque in the port city of Mocha. At the time, coffee was only consumed in the mosques, and Al Shadili brought the coffee not only to serve in his mosque but to aid in the cure of diseases, such as fatigue.

Yemen is believed to be the first country to actually commercially harvest coffee, which was then exported through the small fishing port of Mocha. For more than 200 years, Yemen retained its title as the only country exporting coffee, until trees were planted in the Colonies in the early 1700s.

Many of the coffee plants found in Brazil, Colombia and other parts of the world can be traced back to Yemen, even though different climates and soil have made an impact on the characteristics of the coffee over the years.

### Growing & Processing

In many parts of Yemen, wild coffee trees still grow. There are also five main cultivated coffee-growing regions in the Republic of Yemen, and agricultural practices remain the same as they were nearly 800 years ago. The two main varieties, typica and bourbon, are grown on rainfall- and spring-fed terraces at elevations ranging from 3,000 to 8,000 feet.

In some areas a plant called *quat* (also called *Qat* or *Khat*) is grown along with the coffee. Quat is extremely popular among the locals in Yemen, who chew it for its narcotic-type effects. It also creates a quick cash crop for many growers who are struggling to survive.

Coffee in Yemen is grown under mostly organic practices. Growers often use natural composting including stone mulching, a very common practice in dry climates that obtain limited amounts of rainfall. The stones are ground together by hand, and then placed in a thin layer around the tree.

Due to lack of rainfall, the coffees are dry-processed, with some coffee even being allowed to dry on the trees. After harvest, cherries are dried on rooftops. Millstones are used to crush the cherries and remove the skins. The dried skins are “recycled” in a very unique way. First, they are boiled in water. Then they are drained and then poured into small cups to create a beverage called Gishr. The drink can be a bit bitter at first but if a small amount of ginger is added, it creates a wonderful aroma and flavor.

After proper processing, the beans will be very clean with a light emerald green complexion. While Yemen coffee is considered specialty, there is some irregularity in size and many of the beans are small. As you might imagine, this does have an effect on the flavor, creating a very nice, but unusual cupping profile.

### Cupping Characteristics

Yemen coffee might look unusual, but the taste can be truly amazing. Although every

growing region creates a slightly different flavor, the basic characteristics are a medium body, bittersweet chocolate undertones, dried berries and winy acidity.

Because of their small size, Yemen beans need to be roasted carefully to bring out the best flavor. Darren Berry, a retail and wholesale roaster of Yemen coffee in Albuquerque, N.M., gives a detailed approach when roasting this coffee. “I think the trick to roasting this strange bean lies in the little guys, so my approach is to keep in mind the smallest of beans,” Berry says. To avoid shocking the beans, he drops them when the internal roast temperature is 250. In addition, he keeps the finishing temperature below 425 to avoid charring the beans, but he also finds that oil comes out nicely at 429. “To my taste, at our altitude, I like to drag the roast out to about 15 minutes using a lot of convection heat at first and more conduction after first crack to slow down and level that ramp on the profile.”

Berry says this system produces a nice full-city color for the most part, with some multi-colored beans due to the size differential. “It maintains a bit of herbalness, which I am usually not much of a fan of, but with Yemen it adds to its wild character. The real challenge here is to balance that with the sweetness you get when you go a little darker without burning those subtleties off. As the sugars caramelize, it gives you that fat lingering heavenly finish that Yemen coffee is famous for.”

Yemen coffee has unique characteristics that allow it to be roasted as a single-origin coffee for either use in a French press or served as a single origin espresso. This coffee also is excellent for blending with East Timor or Java to create a true Mocha Java.

### Current Hurdles

Mohammed A. Yahya, chairman of Yemen Coffee Processors in Yemen, explains some of the challenges of growing coffee in Yemen. “The number one challenge is the lack of water and the erosion of the terraces that Yemen is famous for,” he says. “In Yemen many of our people are struggling to survive on less than two dollars a day and crops such as quat provide a way to make easy money. The challenge of quat is that it consumes twice as much water as a coffee crop.”

Another challenge is the lack of a grading system for the coffee and wide-spread nursery practices that are in need of improvement. It is a tough challenge for a country where the average farmer is struggling to put food on his table and has had little or no education on proper farming techniques.

### Moving Forward

It is, however, exciting to see many things happening to address these issues. Universities, such as the University of Sana’a, and companies like Yemen Coffee Processing are taking the lead by



offering classes in agricultural training, land management, processing and quality control. New retail/roasters, such as The Coffee Trader, offer more than coffee: they offer education on roasting and partner with companies to promote Yemen coffee sales in other parts of the world.

Recently, I became one of those companies, which is pretty amazing considering my early experiences with Yemen coffee, when I still believed that “mocha” had something to do with flavor. So now it comes full circle. While many roasters still feel that Yemen and Ethiopia coffees are very similar, it is our desire to show the uniqueness of this coffee, and to help roasters gain a better understanding of this coffee. With its long coffee history and its unique processing system and flavor profile, Yemen is surely an origin to consider in the future.

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### YEMEN COFFEE AT A GLANCE

**Coffee** 100 percent arabica, mostly typica and bourbon. Some additional local heirloom varieties also exist.

**Cup Profile** Medium body, with bittersweet chocolate and dried berry undertones and a winy acidity.

**Main Growing Regions** Bani Matar (Mattari), San’a (San’ani), Hiraz (Hirazi), Dhamar (Dhamari) and Raimi (Rimy).

**Elevation** Up to 2,300 meters

**Farms** Mostly small, with low production (6 QQ per hectare)

**Flowering** Jan.-April

**Harvest** Oct.-Dec., again in April-May

**Shipping** Nov.-Sept.

**Processing** Sun-dried

**Main Buyers** Saudi Arabia, Japan, Russia



### YEMEN FACTS

**Name** Republic of Yemen

**Location** Middle East, bordering the Arabian Sea, Gulf of Aden and Red Sea, between Oman and Saudi Arabia

**Area** 527,970 square kilometers, slightly larger than twice the size of Wyoming

**Capital** Sana’a

**Language** Arabic

**Monetary Unit** Yemeni rial (YER)

**Population** 21,456,188

**Terrain** Flat-topped hills and rugged mountains back a narrow coastal plain.

**Climate** Mostly hot, dry desert, especially in the east. Hot and humid along the west coast and temperate in the western mountains.

**Agricultural Exports** Grain, fruits, vegetables, quat, coffee, cotton, dairy products, livestock, poultry and fish

