

## S U M A T R A (INDONESIA)

By Adam Kline

TO TELL THE HISTORY of Sumatra, an island located in Indonesia, is to tell the story of various religions, political changes, environmental upheavals and, of course, coffee. Coffee was planted in Sumatra by Dutch colonizers in the late 1600s, under the patronage of the East India Trading Company. As with early coffee propagation worldwide, the arabica varieties planted in Indonesia during this time were typica and bourbon.

### Coffee Cultivars

Typica is still the most common arabica variety found in Sumatra, although there are also a few others that have been planted over the years, including Linie-S, caturra, catimor and hybrids of Rue Rue 11. The first Linie-S plantings came about when the coffee research institute in Java began looking for strains that were both disease-resistant and consistent in production. In an attempt to alleviate the swing in production from crop to crop they began planting Linie-S, a variety prized for its heartiness and minimal dieback. Small percentages of catimor were planted in the late '80s and mid-'90s, but are no longer preferred due to both cup quality and a short life cycle lasting just eight years from production. Robusta is also often commonly grown.

The average farm size in Sumatra is small, just one to five hectares, and different varieties can often be found growing together. Over the last 50 to 100 years, this has led to hybridization. Natural crossbreeding has produced a variety referred to in the local vernacular as Berg en Daal.

### Growing & Processing

Sumatran coffees at large can be one of the most inconsistent coffees on the planet. In-country logistics have and continue to play a large part in the evolutionary techniques employed to process the beans in country.

Before the mid-'70s, a lack of infrastructure and access to water limited the

ability to not only wash but also to quickly transport coffee in Sumatra. The result was a full-natural processed coffee referred to as DP arabica, which oddly enough stands for Double Pick in this case and not dry process. While the market dictated that the DP quality coffee was to be sold at a discount to the New York C-market, growers and collectors were being offered premiums by Scandinavia, Holland, Japan, and Canada for "micro-lots" (under five tons) of semi-washed production. Today, DP arabica, under the old definition of the term, is no longer being prepared for export unless specially ordered.

A realization that premiums could be gained from better processed coffee led to an increased focus on preparation. However, a lack of available water supply meant that a fully washed coffee was not immediately feasible. At first, farmers began pulping using primitive methods, mainly a mortar and pestle system that was likely adapted from techniques used for hulling rice. Traditionally the coffee was dried for a day after pulping and then wet hulled in the same manner.

Today, the point in processing at which the coffee is wet hulled remains the same and is the reason for so many split or flat beans. Ideal moisture levels for wet hulling range from 20 to 35 percent and the process is key in producing the heavy body and low acidity prized in Sumatran coffees. Conversely, if the coffee is allowed to dry in parchment, the resulting cup is found to be higher in acidity and lower in body.

Green coffee is also sold between parties in-country and is called Asalan (defined as hulled, dried to approximately 18 percent moisture, and varying in levels of triage/defects). Some Asalan requires further preparation and some is sold as "ready export."

### The Sumatra Coffee Regions

#### Aceh

Aceh has seen much civil unrest throughout history but most recently due to guerrilla

activity organized under the Free Aceh Movement (Gerakan Aceh Merdeka a.k.a. GAM). As a result, many farms were abandoned as farmers migrated to escape the unrest. The 2004 Boxing Day earthquake/tsunami was somewhat of a blessing in disguise for this area, as it focused international attention on Banda Aceh. Subsequent aid spotlighted the region and served to bring relative peace to Aceh for a time. Now, farms are being revitalized via new planting and pruning as hope is returning. In December 2006, the Achenese people peacefully elected Irwandi Yusuf, a former GAM rebel leader as the governor of the province of Aceh.

With a history extending over centuries, farmers in Aceh are proud of their coffee heritage. There are 68,000 hectares of coffee cultivated by 65,000 farmers, making the average farm about 1 hectare. Aceh is a well-forested region, with as many as 300 trees per hectare.

Approximately 90 percent of the production in Aceh is organic. Typica from colonial lineage as well as Linie-S are the prevalent varieties. Altitude in the cultivated area of Aceh ranges from 800 to 1,600 meters, and coffee is harvested from November through May.

In terms of processing, the significant variable between Aceh and the Lintong region is that coffee in Aceh is washed the same day it is pulped, while that majority in Lintong is not washed at all. The coffee in Aceh can therefore be wet hulled earlier using a mechanized process. Because the pulped coffee in Lintong is not washed immediately after the process, it remains sticky, and must be dried longer in parchment.

#### Lintong

The area southeast of Lake Toba is referred to loosely as the production area for Lintong-type coffee. The majority of this type of coffee is grown near the region of Sidikalang but other towns nearby also supply the market. Relatively new to the stage of Sumatran coffee, in the mid-70s Lintong coffee production was yielding an estimated 2,000 tons. Through the 1980s production in this area was estimated near 6,000 tons. When the market spiked in 1994 and again in 1997 to highs of \$2.64 and \$3.18 per pound respectively, Lintong production exploded. Small holders planted catimor and Linie-S in force while the use of typica was marginal in the area. Today Lintong produces anywhere from 15,000 to 18,000 tons of exportable coffee annually and typica plantings have increased.

As mentioned above, it is commonplace

for coffee in Lintong to go "unwashed" after pulping, leaving sticky remnants of mucilage and making wet hulling difficult at higher moisture levels. Therefore, the coffee must be dried further in parchment, which can increase acidity. The length of time needed to dry Lintong coffees before wet hulling may also increase the potential for musty and/or earthy taints. Lintong harvest runs from September through April.

### The Present and Future

The open coffee market in Medan is a bastion of mixed lots, regions, and qualities, where collectors solicit sales at the doorsteps of Sumatran exporters. Though this has been going on since the main port of Sibolga was switched to Belawan/Medan on the opposite side of the island, this activity is a convoluted way to source specialty type generics. The coffee market in Medan makes it impossible to control quality and leaves farmers in the dark as to the needs of the international market.

Nevertheless, the coffee future in Sumatra is bright with low acidity. New plantings, better pruning and relatively peaceful times will raise volumes drastically over the next few years. With an increase in volume and market price, the obstacle will be in keeping focus on quality through education. Supporting supply channels that attempt to deliver superior quality through direct purchase can do this most effectively. The connection between direct premiums paid for quality and sustainability will help farmers to understand the needs of the specialty coffee marketplace.

ADAM KLINE has been in the coffee industry in one capacity or another since 1997. He got his start as a barista and began working with a green coffee importer shortly thereafter. He is currently a coffee trader at Holland Coffee California and can be reached via e-mail at adamk@hollandcoffee.com.



### SUMATRAN COFFEE AT A GLANCE

**Coffee** Sumatra produces mostly robusta. Arabica varieties are often local hybrids most closely tied to typica, Linie-S, caturra and catimor.

**Cup Profile** Heavy body, little to no acidity, wide variation of flavor ranging from earthy, leather, tobacco, spiced fruit, over ripe fruit, semi-sweet chocolate.

**Main Growing Regions** Aceh, Lintong, Sibolga, Bengkulu, Lampung, Padang

**Farms** Mostly small, one to five hectares

**Processing** Semi-washed, some washed



### SUMATRA FACTS

**Name** The ancient name for Sumatra is *Swarna Dwipa*, a Sanskrit phrase meaning "Isle of Gold."

**Location** Southeast Asia, Greater Sunda Islands, Indonesia.

**Area** The sixth largest island in the world, approximately 470,000 square kilometers, nearly three times the size of Texas

**Largest City** Medan

**Language** Indonesian is the national language, but more than 52 different languages are spoken, including Malay and Lampung.

**Monetary Unit** Rupiah

**Population** 45 million

**Terrain** The interior of the island is mainly mountains and swamp plains, while large rivers flow along the eastern side, creating vast lowland. The majority of the island was once covered by tropical rainforest, but that's changing due to logging.



Flag of Indonesia  
(Sumatra is a state in Indonesia)