

T H A I L A N D

BY MARK McKEE



THAILAND FACTS

Name Kingdom of Thailand

Capital City Bangkok

Location Southeastern Asia, bordering the Andaman Sea and the Gulf of Thailand, southeast of Burma

Area 514,000 sq. km., or slightly more than twice the size of Wyoming

Languages Thai, English (secondary language of the elite), as well as ethnic and regional dialects

Currency Balboa (PAB); US dollar (USD)

Population 65,068,149

Climate Tropical, rainy, warm, monsoons nearly year-round

Terrain Central plain, with the Khorat Plateau in the east and mountains elsewhere

WHEN THAILAND is brought up in a conversation, many people think of the beautiful temples, floating markets in Bangkok and beach resorts such as the ones at Pattaya Beach and Phuket Thailand. However, few people hear “Thailand,” and think of awesome coffee; this is especially true when drinking the coffee that is available at many hotels and food establishments.

I certainly didn’t associate the country with coffee—much less great coffee—so I was surprised when someone brought it to my attention that coffee was being grown in the northern region of Thailand known as Chiang Rai and Chiang Mai. My first thought of course was, “Is this quality coffee?” When asking many of my friends in the specialty coffee circle about this coffee, they seemed surprised as well and no one really had an answer on the quality or had even cupped it. All of this perked my interest, especially for a region known for its soluble coffee and low-grown robusta. I arrived in Thailand with many questions, wanting to know if this was one of those undiscovered remarkable coffees, if individuals were growing coffee with sustainable practices and how this coffee cupped. Those questions were about to be answered by more than 1,000 coffee families, each committed to producing the highest quality arabica coffee while practicing sustainable land care practices.

History

Coffee is relatively new to Thailand and was first introduced in the 17th and 18th centuries by the French, who owned and operated coffee fields in nearby Burma. Initially, robusta was planted in the low-lying southern region to create a quick cash crop for struggling families. In 1969, the king of Thailand, Bhumibol Adulyadej,



officially discouraged opium from being grown in Thailand and replaced it with various other agricultural crops, including coffee.

Opium production thrived in the northern mountain regions due to their temperate climate, forested areas and elevation of 1,200–1,600 meters. In the early 1970s, arabica coffee was planted in this area in hopes of creating a quality coffee to export. The task was not an easy one for many years before this, as slash and burn agricultural practices were being used. Once the land was used up, they simply burned forested areas to clear more land.

Today

Thailand has made tremendous strides since those early days and now arabica coffee is grown in the following provinces: Chiang Mai, Chiang Rai, Lampang, Mae Hong Son and Tak. In the Chiang Rai province, Doi Chaang Coffee, a partnership of coffee farmers, has established an entire coffee growing community that covers more than 6,000 acres and is surrounded by lush old forest growth, fresh flowing spring water and incredible mountain views. The success of producing coffee in this region has shown measurable results for the 800 families and more than 8,000 people living and partnering together to cultivate this incredible arabica coffee. In the Doi Chaang village, there is now fresh running water, a sewage system, electricity, a small school and medical clinic, as well as a school for growing coffee that teaches sustainable agricultural practices to the next generation. This wasn’t established by an “outsider” but instead by the people in this community who had a desire not to just grow coffee but to grow the best arabica coffee available.

Over to the East you come upon Chiang Mai, where these same practices are beginning to take place by Silaa Farms. They have established a nursery in the Hod district, which is located 148 kilometers southwest of Chiang Mai at an elevation of 1,060 meters. In this

nursery the germination and growth of the seedlings are carefully monitored, weeded and sprayed with Need, a locally produced organic pesticide. During the year farmers are trained on how to prepare the ground, plant and take care of these coffee plants. After the seedlings have been in the nursery for approximately one year, they are given to the farmers to plant during the rainy season, May and June.

The main cultivars grown in these regions are caturra, catimor and catuai. Although this coffee is presently not certified-organic, sustainable and organic practices are definitely taking place. The fertilizer that is primarily used is recycled cherry pulp and manure and fallen leaves. This nutritious mulch is then combined with the fruit and nut trees to create the amazing aroma and flavor of the coffee in this region. As mentioned earlier, forests at one time were burned to clear land for more agricultural crops; this practice has obviously ceased and trees are being planted in the areas that once were destroyed. These trees not only provide shade for the coffee plants but also reduce the instances of pests that are prevalent within a plant monoculture. The fruit trees also provide an additional harvest of products such as plums, pears and macadamia nuts for the farmers. Doi



Chaang and Silaa Farms both use natural spring water to process their coffee after harvesting. Due to their remote location, they also mill all their own coffee, to ensure the quality of this coffee from start to finish.

Cup Profile

Shawn McDonald, a Calgary, Canada-based roaster focused on relationship coffee, has fallen in love with coffee from this region. McDonald finds when roasting this coffee, roasters must know what they are looking for in the bean and how to bring out those characteristics. One of the notes that he makes in regards to coffee from this region is the lack of defects which makes it possible to not only be consistent when roasting but also to create the profile roast you desire.

“When these coffees are roasted to a full medium, just at second crack, they produce a fruity, sweet cup with a pleasant flowery fragrance,” McDonald says. “The coffee becomes well balanced with a delicate body and deep rich undertones and finishes clean. When the coffees are roasted longer into the second crack, where the oil is just beginning to bead on the bean you bring out a unique flavor that you normally do not experience in a darker roast, the intense fruity, floral aroma is predominant and the coffee produces a spicy and very complexed coffee with full body and a bittersweet chocolate finish.”

Future

Although the farmers in this region are committed to producing exceptional coffee, they face many challenges. The leading challenge is to overcome the stereotype that coffees produced in this region are of low quality. Another challenge is that many coffee companies want to purchase coffee from this area but at lower prices so that they can include them in blends and not focus them as a single-origin coffee. With both Doi Chaang and Silaa Farms paying

farmers above fair-trade prices for their coffee and the exceptional work that is being produced, it is only a matter of time

until we in the specialty coffee industry fall in love with this coffee that is sustainable both in an agricultural and economical sense. What stands out to me in regards to this coffee is the incredible passion the people of Thailand have to produce a top-quality coffee—the result of this passion is found in the cup I am savoring right now.

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THAILAND COFFEE AT A GLANCE

Coffee Arabica, mainly caturra, catimor and catuai

Cup Profile Fruity, sweet, flowery fragrance with a medium body

Altitude 1,000–1,600 meters

Farms Most less than two hectares

Processing Wet method