

# P U E R T O R I C O



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## PUERTO RICO FACTS

**Name** Commonwealth of Puerto Rico

**Capital City** San Juan

**Location** Northeastern Caribbean, east of the Dominican Republic and west of the Virgin Islands

**Area** 9,104 sq. km., or slightly smaller than the state of Connecticut

**Languages** Spanish and English, although English is spoken by half of the population

**Currency** US dollar (USD)

**Population** 3,994,259

**Climate** Tropical, rainy and warm. Hurricane season from June to November

**Terrain** Mostly mountains with a coastal plain belt in the North

EVERYONE KNOWS a Puerto Rican, they say; unfortunately, this is not true about our coffee, or at least it hasn't been true for the past 100 years. Among many other wonderful things that have come out of this tiny island, coffee earned its place in history. Two hundred years ago, Puerto Rico was known to produce one of the best coffees in the world, not only in quality but in quantity. Now things have changed. These days, Puerto Ricans know coffee, but not necessarily quality coffee. We drink it in the morning, after lunch and in the afternoon. Our coffee demand is so high that the government imports one-third of the coffee that is consumed in the country. Although, it might be difficult to make Puerto Ricans start to produce and consume large quantities of quality coffee, it is possible to start exporting quality coffee to the world again. This has been the task of few coffee states in the island for the past decade. Perhaps in the years to come, our coffee again will be named, "The Coffee of Popes and Kings."

### History

Coffee arrived on Puerto Rico in 1736. It is said that the first introduced Arabica seeds were brought by Corsicans who immigrated to the island in search of better opportunities. The sugar cane was already in the hands of the Spaniard inhabitants, so the Corsicans settled in the mountains and opted for coffee to make a living. After several years, coffee became one of the top three agricultural products of the island, second to sugar cane and tobacco. Around 1860, the coffee industry was at its peak and it was at this time that European exports started to grow. In 1890, Puerto Rico was the sixth-highest country to export-grade coffee production worldwide. During this century, Puerto Rico enjoyed a second-to-none prestige in the coffee world. Unfortunately, in 1898, after the Spanish-American War, all the progress made in the coffee business started to fade. Political, economical and industrial

changes almost made Puerto Rican coffee disappear.



### Being Different

Puerto Rico, is a semi-autonomous territory of the United States, making it one of the two American coffee-producing territories, along with Hawaii. Being a coffee-producing country in the northern hemisphere makes agriculture and production processes very different in comparison with other countries. High labor rates, lack of workers, extreme operational costs and bad weather (specifically hurricanes) are some of the challenges that a specialty coffee-producing state in Puerto Rico faces each year. These problems, along with low export-grade coffee volumes, make our coffees some of the most expensive coffees in the world.

Certifications programs such as Fair Trade or Rainforest Alliance are unheard of by farmers, as they simply do not apply here. When you need to pay farm workers federal minimum wage and pickers \$5 per *almud* (28 pound of cherries) collected (or around \$10 per hour) these certifications don't make much sense. Besides labor rates, education in Puerto Rico is socialized and workers' children must attend at least elementary school. Also, and different than in the U.S., health care in Puerto Rico is a constitutional right, so the government offers a social health plan, available for all of the indigent families and offers an estate insurance which pays incapacity time for labor-related conditions.

In addition, farm management in Puerto Rico is regulated by the Commonwealth's Department of Agriculture and the United States Department of Agriculture. All pesticides used are those approved by the Food and Drug Administration. They don't leave residues and are only used according to the

amounts suggested by the manufacturer. Unfortunately, production costs are so high that there are very few chances of producing organic coffee on the island.

Still, most farms on the island are environmentally oriented. Oxidation ponds are used to collect used waters. The waste from de-pulped coffee is collected, stored and later composted and used as fertilizer for the following year's crop. Some dry mills use the dry parchment and wood ovens as alternate fuel to the drying process to lower costs and reuse materials.

Following these regulations is required for all coffee growers and producers, so producing the highest-quality coffee possible relies on will rather than production costs. All the coffee produced on the island is considered specialty but most of the farmers prefer to sell coffee for local consumption than to wander into the specialty coffee world. Currently the price of exported green coffee reaches \$7.50 per pound. Perhaps Puerto Rican coffee prices resemble what all coffee around the globe should be. For now, we need to compete with high-quality coffees for less than half of the price.

### So How Can Coffee Be Made Then?

The coffee industry in Puerto Rico is protected by the government at different levels. The Puerto Rican consumer pays \$4.45 per pound of coffee at the retail level—a price set to a fixed blend of 40 percent green fruit and 60 percent red cherries to protect local farmers. The local Department of Agriculture is also a buyer of last resort, purchasing green beans at \$3.27 a pound when the island's coffee

farmers can't sell their coffee anywhere else.

Until 1999, when Hurricane George hit the island, Puerto Rico fulfilled its local coffee demand of around 315,000 *quintales* (100-pound bags) a year. Our current production is around 200,000 *quintales*, so we need to import more than 10 million pounds of coffee each year. All coffee imported to the island requires a duty to the government of \$2.50 per pound. This tax keeps the local industry competitive to less expensive coffees that may be imported. Local specialty coffee sells retail around \$9.60 per pound but is not regulated by the government.

### To the World, Again!

Only about one percent of the total production leaves the island, and there are very few farms dedicated to producing export-grade coffee. Most of them are private, family-owned states located in the Cordillera Central (the main mountain range in Puerto Rico), producing less than 1,000 pounds of green coffee a year.

Puerto Rican coffee is considered special for its limited availability and its cup qualities. There several factors that make this coffee so special, among them:

**Altitude**—Puerto Rican specialty coffee is grown between 2,500 and 2,800 feet.

**Variety**—Puerto Rico uses mostly old-style arabica varieties, such as bourbon and porto rico.

**Rain**—More than one hundred inches of rain per year make fertile ground.

**Location**—The geographical location of the island and the trade winds provide a perfect combination for high-quality coffee.

**Labor**—The health and working conditions of the farm workers are at the forefront. As American citizens, workers earn a fair wage and enjoy safe working conditions.

### Future

The future of Puerto Rican coffee is uncertain. Each year there are fewer pickers and higher operational costs. Also, free-trade agreements between

the U.S. and Latin American countries threaten to vanish the current protections and the whole industry with them.

Nevertheless, there is hope for specialty coffee in Puerto Rico. Since current taxes and regulations do not protect or affect special coffee, growers and producers could rely on this type of coffee to continue with the industry and, perhaps, compete in both volume and quality with the best coffees around the world.

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ETIENNE CARDONA worked for seven years as a quality specialist in the pharmaceutical industry, but now he is dedicated to the coffee industry. The husband and wife team are in the process of opening their own micro-roasting coffee shop.



## PUERTO RICAN COFFEE AT A GLANCE

**Coffee** Arabica, mainly bourbon, porto rico, pacas and caturra

**Cup Profile** Pleasant aroma, good balance between medium acidity and sweetness, a medium, slightly bitter-sweet finish and medium body

**Altitude** 2,500–2,800 feet (750–850 meters)

**Farms** One to 100 hectares

**Processing** Wet method

