



Bread, Wine, Chocolate: The Slow Loss of Foods We Love

Named one of the Best Food Books of 2016 by Smithsonian

AN EXCERPT OF THE COFFEE CHAPTER:

The most popular birth story of coffee culture [beyond the crop] starts with the rise of the drink in European cafés: milky Viennese coffees sprinkled with chocolate flakes and Italian cappuccini topped with creamy tan peaks that approximated Capuchin monks' brown, hooded robes. But the roots of coffee consumption also belong to its birthplace: Ethiopia is the center of origin for the cultivation and consumption practices that gave rise to our contemporary coffee culture.

Despite the worldwide popularity of coffee, Ethiopia remains its past, present—and future. When I landed in Addis Ababa, I already knew it was like no other place I had visited. The country has a calendar with 13 months and marks the start of a new day at sunrise, not midnight. [This resulted in a moment of extreme panic when I realized I hadn't clarified if my meetings with farmers and scientists were in East Africa Time or local time.] Ethiopia has never been colonized and twice drove out Italy, the only country that ever tried to occupy it. The only remnants of the failed occupations seem

to be terrific Italian food and the prolific use of the word “ciao.” Ethiopia belongs to no one but itself.

And, like coffee—like everything—the country isn’t one thing, but many. It’s lush and arid; the sun is bright and shadows are long; people are thin and wide—and generous beyond measure, in ways they don’t have to be. The opening question everywhere, with everyone, is one of interconnection: not just “How are you?” but “How is your family?”

Family is the thread that ties everyone together. This constant query, from every person I met, reminded me that I was connected to others. But what charmed me most was the way people register agreement. In Ethiopia, the equivalent of a quick head nod or a verbal “uh-huh” is a sharp but soft intake of breath—a light but audible gasp.

The country took my breath away.

Ethiopia is one of the world’s largest coffee producers, with sales of *bunna* [coffee] accounting for more than 10 percent of government revenue and 25 percent of the country’s earnings from exports. It is the only African country that prefers coffee to tea. So, as delicious as a brew from Kenya or Rwanda might be, for those nations, coffee is just a cash crop. For Ethiopia, it’s lifeblood: fuel of the culture and economy. Over half of the coffee grown in the country stays there, and because everyone knows someone involved in coffee, expertise and exposure are democratized. This is in stark contrast to the West, where coffee is consumed most widely, yet knowledge about coffee stays in the hands of an expert few. No matter where you go in Ethiopia—no matter whom you meet—everyone has something to say about coffee: the driver, the waitress, the man who issues your visa at the airport. One in four Ethiopians is directly or indirectly connected to coffee as a source of income.

“Coffee is everything,” explains Frehiwot Getahun, manager of the Kafa Forest Coffee Farmers Cooperative Union. “It is identity. It is employment—not just for the farmers but for the managers, laborers, administrators, truck drivers, cuppers, traders. And it is like food. You have it in the morning, the afternoon, the evening. People live on, and through, coffee.”

Ethiopia taught me that the greatest coffee experts don’t only hail from Seven Seeds or live in Portland or Oslo. The most experienced people in coffee—ones who have grown up with an understanding of our favorite brew from soil to cup—are the girls and women I watched repeatedly pound pestle into mortar.

“A daily dose of *bunna*,” ethnographer Metasebia Yoseph explained in her book *A Culture of Coffee*, “is more than just a caffeine fix; it is a cultural fixture.” Every household is a coffeehouse, and the head roaster and master barista is a woman who starts her training at age 10. Hana, a 13-year-old girl from Addis Ababa, worked in the home of the family with whom I stayed when I first arrived. She was slightly less knowledgeable than her compatriots in rural parts of the country where coffee is grown, but far more expert than I would ever be with my hand mill and Aeropress. Under the watchful eye of Alemitu Tilahun, the matriarch of the family, Hana

performed the traditional coffee ceremony, a ritual that has been passed down for generations.

The coffee ceremony is the opposite of my solitary morning ritual of coffee and an occasional cigarette; it's an opportunity for connection. Neighbors are called, frankincense is burned and green beans the color of sea foam are passed around for everyone to inspect before they are placed on a cast-iron griddle. Together, we sit, we wait—and we engage.

Hana's setup was a flat pan resting on coals, tended carefully as her single-origin coffee made its transition from living seed to roasted bean. The air was fragrant with incense, the conversation punctuated by the scraping of a metal hook that moved the beans across the skillet. The beans crackled as they toasted to a deep, shiny brown, taking me back to my days at Seven Seeds roastery in Melbourne. Pop, pop, pop: The smell of coffee filled the room.

After the beans cooled slightly, Hana pulverized them with her mukecha and zenezena [mortar and pestle]. I crouched down beside her and watched her pudgy hands lift the pestle chest high and thump, thump, thump up and down in rhythmic repetition. Although I tried repeatedly to catch her eye, she was absorbed in her task. One hand grasped the metal vessel, the other pounded the roasted beans into a coarse brown powder akin to the soil in which they were grown.

Mama Tilahun then took the grounds from Hana and blended the coffee powder with boiling water in her jebena, a clay coffee pot that rested on burning coals. The pot was worn and the spout was broken; it had been used well and often.

From that pot, we were served three times. The first pour, known as abole, was dark and strong, a jolt of caffeine that animated our conversation. Hana refilled the jebena with water and set it back on the coals to boil as we waited for the slightly weaker second pour, called tona. The third and final pour—bereka—translates as “blessing.”

At home, I had pondered the merits of individual pour-overs—and the ecological demerits of individual K-cups—but that concept never arose in Ethiopia because the coffee break was dedicated to communion. Every time I tipped the cup to my mouth I thought, “Of course coffee evolved in the same place as the human species. Of course.” We were sent into our day with a blessing.

The beans Hana pounded into powder came from a roadside stand where local farmers sold coffee that had been grown on their small garden plots, as most coffee in Ethiopia is grown. The designation was simply bunna: coffee. The seeds may have been passed on from the local agricultural extension or another farmer, or saved from another harvest. Regardless of the source, the diversity within those seeds has progressively diminished as researchers and farmers have selected crops exhibiting the small number of traits needed to sustain production.

As Peter Giuliano explained, global production of arabica [and robusta] depends on just a handful of cultivated varieties, with little difference at the genetic

level or in their physical [phenotypic] characteristics. This is a problem for all the reasons we now know: Reduced diversity equals increased risk.

Coffee trees grow best between 19 and 25 degrees Celsius (66 and 77 degrees Fahrenheit). The productivity of arabica, as Tadesse Woldemariam Gole from the Ethiopian Coffee Forest Forum (ECFF) and Aaron Davis of Kew Royal Botanic Gardens explain in their study on coffee and climate change, is “tightly linked to climatic variability, and is thus strongly influenced by natural climatic oscillations.”

Since 1960, the average temperature in Ethiopia has increased by 1.3 degrees Celsius (2.3 degrees Fahrenheit). Drought and erratic rainfall have severely compromised coffee production in the southern part of the country. The climate modeling done by Kew Gardens and ECFF estimates that, as a result of a warming planet, the areas that contain the highest concentration of coffee diversity could be reduced by 65 to nearly 100 percent by 2080. Not only would the country that gave the world coffee no longer be able to produce it, but the diversity we need to be able to access it would also be lost.

Emerging data from World Coffee Research on the diversity of one of the most important ex situ collections of arabica coffee, housed at CATIE (Centro Agronómico Tropical de Investigación y Enseñanza) in Costa Rica, shows that Ethiopian coffee accessions collected in the 1950s and 1960s were shockingly similar. Scientist Tim Schilling explained, “We were extremely surprised that there was 98.8 percent similarity. We knew diversity would be low, but we didn’t expect it to be nearly absent.” The research teams that collected the samples were looking for traditional varieties, not necessarily all the diversity found in the forest—so this assessment might be a reflection of limited sampling or might indicate there’s a lot less diversity in the forest than expected.

“As scientists, we can’t say the forests of Ethiopia are equally or even close to equally constrained,” Tim said. “It’s possible that there is more diversity than was revealed. This study is not comprehensive enough to make a judgment.” While this hangs in the balance, what we do know is that the world is getting hotter and, if we are only to rely on backup collections of arabica coffee, we’re in trouble. Especially when we consider the fact that, globally, coffee plantations contain less than 1 percent of the genetic diversity found in Ethiopia’s coffee forests.

This is why the diversity found in the wild is so valuable. Without it, the entire crop could disappear.

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