

The Dancing Goat Café

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MY NEW FAVORITE COFFEE SHOP has a delightful name and is just a couple of miles from my house. In the early afternoons it's dark and cool, and I dropped in today to escape the summer heat and write an article that was due yesterday. I took a double espresso and settled into the armchair in the corner. There was nobody else there and the large room was blissfully quiet. I added a little raw sugar to my cup and stirred, gazing into the inky black coffee, the swirling surface beaming up a kaleidoscopic reflection of my face. I took a sip and closed my eyes. That's when he appeared, saying "...and for that reason it is called *The Dancing Goat*."

I blinked. There was a man sitting in the chair next to me. He was old, very old, and wizened, with bright, piercing eyes that were as black as my coffee. He was wearing a sand-colored robe that had seen better days, and his sandals were dusty and worn. "Excuse me?" I said.

"Yes, yes, you drink the coffee and enjoy it, oh yes, but you know nothing of its story. I'm saying it so that you shall know. Look! Look at your scroll." And he pointed at my laptop. I Googled the history of coffee and started looking through some of the millions of sites listed. As I read, the old man perched on the chair next to me, nodding his head and smiling.

Coffee first appears in our human story in about 600 AD. It was found growing wild in the uplands of central Ethiopia, where the Blue Nile begins its long, meandering journey north through the Sudan and Egypt to the Mediterranean. The plant was the seminal *coffea arabica*, which was later transplanted on the far shore of the Red Sea in what is now Saudi Arabia. According to legend, a goat herder noticed that his flock became unusually frisky after eating the fruit of this particular shrub. One evening he tried some of the berries himself, and he and his goats were up all night, dancing in the moonlight and having a

wonderful time. As I read this the old man chuckled.

The coffee bean has traveled far and wide since then. In some places it was revered for its medicinal properties, in others it was damned as the devil's drink (at this, the old man guffawed), but its stimulating quality was what soon made it a popular drink everywhere. Arab traders introduced it to the entire Arabian Peninsula, where it was called *qahweh*, a shortened version of *qahwat al-bun*, or "wine of the bean." Ottoman Turks then took it home to Constantinople, where the first coffee shop is said to have opened in 1475. It is also said that, under Turkish law, a woman may legally divorce her husband if he fails to supply her with a daily ration of coffee. The Turkish name for it is *kahve*, which has given many other languages their word for the legendary brew. Of course, it goes by other names as well. Mocha, for example, became synonymous with coffee because much of it was exported through *Al-Mukha*, Yemen's historic port on the Red Sea. Towards the end of the seventeenth century, the Dutch smuggled a coffee plant out of that very harbor and carried it off to their colonies in the East Indies, where they established a plantation on the island of Java. *Aha!*

Once they'd been introduced to it by the Italians, Europeans embraced coffee with a passion. Coffee houses sprouted up everywhere, attracting people with many different interests and exerting a democratizing influence on the status quo. This unprecedented gathering of poets, artists, and philosophers contributed to the flowering of the Age of Reason in the mid-seventeenth century. Some say that coffee helped usher in the Industrial Revolution a century later by cranking people up out of their wine-induced listlessness and into a caffeine-fueled mood to *do something*.

The British, long known to be partial to a cuppa tea, were actually

among early converts to the noble bean. Like many others before and since, they believed it was good for them, as outlined in this tract from 1661: "Tis extolled for drying up the Crudities of the Stomack and expelling Fumes and Giddinesse out of the Head. Excellent Berry!"

In about 1730, J. S. Bach composed *Kaffee-Kantate*, one of his most humorous pieces, about a man who tries to convince his daughter to kick the coffee habit. It was first performed at Zimmerman's Coffee House in Leipzig, and the aria opened like this: "Mm! how sweet the coffee tastes / more delicious than a thousand kisses / mellower than muscatel wine."

Though we tend to think of coffee as indigenous to Latin America, it was actually brought over from Europe in the very early 1700s and originally planted on the Caribbean island of Martinique. From there it spread to other islands and the mainland, where plantations soon appeared in Mexico (which has given us the fragrant Oaxaca version) and many parts of Central and South America. At the dawn of the twentieth century the vast majority of the java on the world market was *café brasileiro*, which subsequently prompted Frank Sinatra to croon: "They've got an awful lot of coffee in Brazil." Captain John Smith, who helped found the colony of Virginia at Jamestown in 1607, is thought to have introduced coffee to North America. Apparently it was a huge success, and by the 1660s had replaced beer as New York City's favorite breakfast drink.

"Wow! Don't you just love the Internet?" I asked the little man beside me. He tapped his forehead with his index finger and nodded. On a sudden whim, I leaned over and said, "I think I'm going to write an article about coffee." He clapped his hands and grinned broadly. "Excellent Berry!" he cried, and all of a sudden he was gone. ★