

"A focused and juicy history of our last  
legal and socially acceptable drug."

—*WALL STREET JOURNAL*



# UNCOMMON GROUNDS

*The* HISTORY *of* COFFEE *and* HOW  
IT TRANSFORMED *our* WORLD

REVISED EDITION



MARK  
PENDERGRAST





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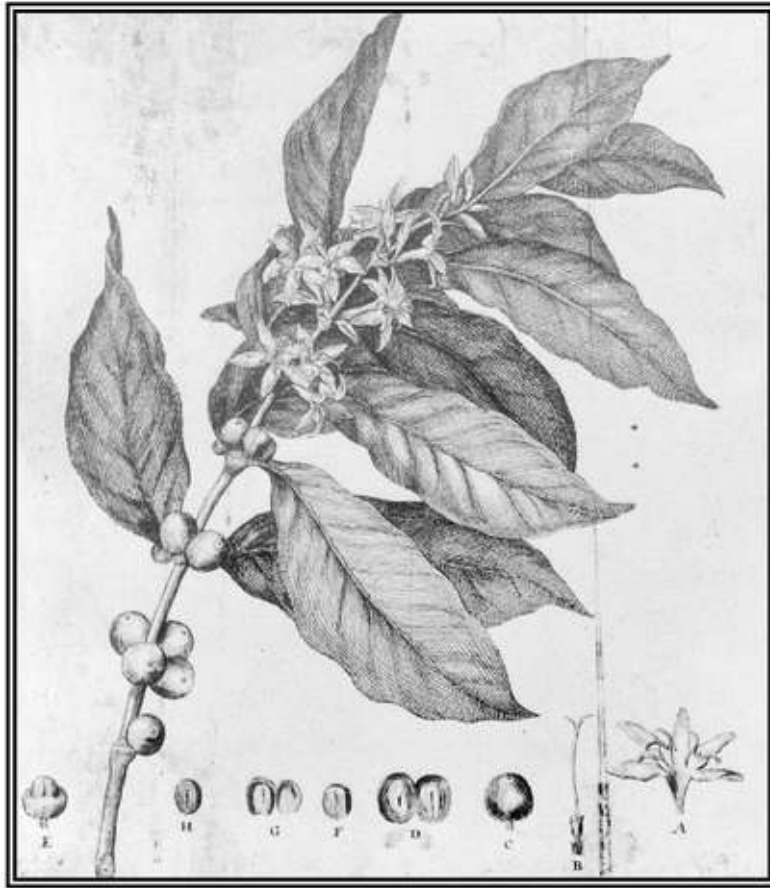
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*This detailed engraving was one of the first accurate portrayals of the exotic coffee plant, published 1716 in Voyage de l'Arabie Heureuse*

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REVISED EDITION

MARK  
PENDERGRAST

BASIC  
BOOKS

A Member of the Perseus Books Group

*New York*

*To the memories of Alfred Peet (1920-2007), coffee curmudgeon supreme, and Ernesto Illy (1925-2008), espresso master*

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*The voodoo priest and all his powders were as nothing compared to espresso, cappuccino, and mocha, which are stronger than all the religions of the world combined, and perhaps stronger than the human soul itself.*

—Mark Helprin, *Memoir from Antproof Case* (1995)

*The smell of roasting coffee hit me like a waft of spice. . . . It was a smell halfway between mouth-watering and eye-watering, a smell as dark as burning pitch; a bitter, black, beguiling perfume that caught at the back of the throat, filling the nostrils and the brain. A man could become addicted to that smell, as quick as any opium.*

—Anthony Capella, *The Various Flavors of Coffee* (2008)

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# PROLOGUE

## *The Oriflama Harvest*

*San Marcos region, Guatemala.* Picking coffee berries (known as *cherries*) for the first time, I struggle to keep my balance on the precipitous hillside. My basket, or *canasta*, is tied around my waist. As Herman, my *caporal* (supervisor), requested, I try to pick only the rich red cherries, but sometimes I accidentally knock loose a green one. I'll have to sort them later.

I pop the skin of a ripe coffee cherry open in my mouth and savor the sweet mucilage. It takes a bit of tongue work to get down to the tough-skinned parchment protecting each bean. Like peanuts, coffee beans usually grow in facing pairs. Spitting out the parchment, I finally get the two beans, which are covered by a diaphanous silver skin. In some cases where the soil lacks sufficient boron, I might have found only one bean, called a peaberry, considered by some to possess a slightly more concentrated taste. I spit out the seeds, too hard to chew.

I hear other harvesters—whole families of them—chatting and singing in Spanish. This is a happy time, when the year's hard work of pruning, fertilizing, weeding, tending, and repairing roads and water channels comes down to ripe coffee. I sing a song with a few Spanish phrases: *mi amor, mi corazón*.

When I stop, I hear giggles and applause. Unwittingly, I have attracted a group of kids, who now wander off to resume picking or pestering their parents. Children begin helping with the harvest when they are seven or eight. Though many *campesinos* keep their children out of school at other times for other reasons, it's no coincidence that school vacation in Guatemala coincides with the coffee harvest.

I am 4,500 feet above sea level on *Oriflama*, the coffee *finca* (plantation) owned by Betty Hannstein Adams. Betty's grandfather, Bernhard Hannstein ("Don Bernardo"), arrived in Guatemala over a hundred years ago, one of many German immigrants who pioneered the country's coffee production. *Oriflama*, which contains over four hundred acres, is half of the original farm, which was called *La Paz*.

Most of the coffee trees are *caturra* and *catuai*, hybrids that are easier to harvest because they are shorter and more compact than the older *bourbon* variety. Still, I have to bend some branches down to get at them. After half an hour I have picked half a *canasta*, about twelve pounds of cherries that, after processing to remove the pulp, mucilage, and parchment, will produce two pounds of green coffee beans. When roasted, they will lose as much as 20 percent more in weight. Still, I have picked enough to make several pots of fine coffee. I'm feeling pretty proud until Herman, who stands just over five feet and weighs a little over one hundred pounds, shows up with a full *canasta* and gently chides me for being so slow.

The farm is beautiful, covered with the green, glossy-leaved coffee trees, prehistoric tree ferns and Spanish daggers along the roadside (to prevent erosion), rolling hills, invisible harvesters calling, children laughing, birds chirruping, big shade trees dappling hillsides, springs and streams. As in other

high-altitude coffee-growing areas, the temperature never strays far from 75°F.

In the distance I can see the volcano, Santa María, and the smoke from the smaller cone, Santiago where in 1902 a side eruption exploded, burying *Oriflama* under a foot of ash and killing all the songbirds. “Oh God, what a sight,” wrote Betty’s grandmother, Ida Hannstein, soon after. “As far as the eye could see everything was blue and gray and dead, like a mammoth cemetery.”

It is difficult to imagine that scene now. The nitrogen-fixing shade trees—*inga*, *poro*, and others—along with the groves of cypresses and oaks and the macadamia trees grown to diversify output provide a much-needed habitat for migratory birds. At breakfast I had melon, cream, and honey that came from the plantation; also black beans, rice, and of course, coffee.

By 4:00 P.M. the harvest day is over, and everyone brings bulging bags of coffee cherries to the *beneficio* (processing plant) to be weighed. In other parts of Guatemala, the Mayan Indians are the primary harvesters, but here they are local *ladinos*, whose blood combines an Indian and Spanish heritage. They are all very small, probably owing to their ancestors’ chronic malnutrition. Many wear secondhand American T-shirts that appear incongruous here, one from the Kennedy Space Center.

Tiny women carry amazingly large bags, twice their eighty-pound weight. Some of the women carry babies in slings around front. A good adult picker can harvest over two hundred pounds of cherries and earn \$8 a day, more than twice the Guatemalan minimum daily wage.

In Guatemala, the contrast between poverty and wealth is stark. Land distribution is lopsided, and those who perform the most difficult labor do not reap the profits. Yet there is no quick fix to the inequities built into the economic system, nor any viable alternatives to coffee as a crop on the mountainsides. The workers are in many ways more content and fulfilled than their counterparts in the United States. They have a strong sense of tradition and family life.

As the workers bring in the harvest, I ponder the irony that, once processed, these beans will travel thousands of miles to give pleasure to people who enjoy a lifestyle beyond the imagination of the Guatemalan laborers. Yet it would be unfair to label one group “villains” and another “victims” in the drama. I realize that nothing about this story is going to be simple.

I donate my meager harvest to a kid and turn once again to look at the valley and volcano in the distance. Back in the United States, I have already begun to accumulate mounds of research material that threaten to swamp my small home office, where I will write this history of coffee. But now I am living it, and I can tell that this experience, this book, will challenge my preconceptions and, I hope, those of my readers.



---

# INTRODUCTION

## *Puddle Water or Panacea?*

*O Coffee! Thou dost dispel all care, thou are the object of desire to the scholar. This is the beverage of the friends of God.*

—“*In Praise of Coffee*,” Arabic poem (1511)

*[Why do our men] trifle away their time, scald their Chops, and spend their Money, all for a little base, black, thick, nasty bitter stinking, nauseous Puddle water?*

—*Women’s Petition Against Coffee* (1674)

It is only a berry, encasing a double-sided seed. It first grew on a shrub—or small tree, depending on your perspective or height—under the Ethiopian rain forest canopy, high on the mountainsides. The evergreen leaves form glossy ovals and, like the seeds, are laced with caffeine.

Yet coffee is big business, one of the world’s most valuable agricultural commodities, providing the largest jolt of the world’s most widely taken psychoactive drug. From its original African home, coffee propagation has spread in a girdle around the globe, taking over whole plains and mountainsides between the Tropics of Cancer and Capricorn. In the form of a hot infusion of its ground, roasted seeds, coffee is consumed for its bittersweet bouquet, its mind-racing jump start, and social bonding. At various times it has been prescribed as an aphrodisiac, enema, nerve tonic, and life extender.

Coffee provides a livelihood (of sorts) for some 125 million human beings. It is an incredibly labor-intensive crop. Calloused palms plant the seeds, nurse the seedlings under a shade canopy, transplant them to mountainside ranks, prune and fertilize, spray for pests, irrigate, harvest, and lug two hundred-pound bags of coffee cherries. Laborers regulate the complicated process of removing the precious bean from its covering of pulp and mucilage. Then the beans must be spread to dry for several days (or heated in drums), the parchment and silver skin removed, and the resulting green beans bagged for shipment, roasting, grinding, and brewing around the world.

The vast majority of those who perform these repetitive tasks work in beautiful places, yet the laborers earn an average of \$3 a day. Many live in poverty without plumbing, electricity, medical care, or nutritious foods. The coffee they prepare lands on breakfast tables, in offices and upscale coffee bars of the United States, Europe, Japan, and other developed countries, where cosmopolitan consumers often pay a day’s Third World wages for a cappuccino.

The list of those who make money from coffee doesn’t stop in the producing countries. There are the exporters, importers, and roasters. There are the frantic traders in the pits of the coffee exchange

who gesticulate, scream, and set the price of a commodity they rarely see in its raw form. There are the expert cuppers (equivalent to wine tasters) who spend their day slurping, savoring, and spitting coffee. There are the retailers, the vending machine suppliers, the marketers, the advertising copywriters, the consultants.

Coffee's quality is first determined by essentials such as type of plant, soil conditions, and growing altitude. It can be ruined at any step along the line. A coffee bean greedily absorbs odors and flavors. Too much moisture produces mold. A too-light roast produces undeveloped, bitter coffee, while over-roasted coffee resembles charcoal. After roasting, the bean stales quickly unless used within a week or so. Boiling or sitting on a hot plate quickly reduces the finest brew to a stale cup of black bile.

How do we judge coffee quality? Coffee experts talk about four basic components that blend to create the perfect cup: aroma, body, acidity, and flavor. The *aroma* is familiar and obvious enough—that fragrance that often promises more than the taste delivers. *Body* refers to the feel or “weight” of the coffee in the mouth, how it rolls around the tongue and fills the throat on the way down. *Acidity* refers to a sparkle, a brightness, a tang that adds zest to the cup. Finally, *flavor* is the evanescent, subtle taste that explodes in the mouth, then lingers as a gustatory memory. Coffee experts become downright poetic in describing these components. For example, Sulawesi coffee possesses “a seductive combination of butter-caramel sweetness and herbaceous, loamy tastes,” coffee aficionado Kevin Knox wrote.

Yet, poetic as its taste may be, coffee's history is rife with controversy and politics. It has been banned as a creator of revolutionary sedition in Arab countries and in Europe. It has been vilified as the worst health destroyer on earth and praised as the boon of mankind. Coffee lies at the heart of the Mayan Indian's continued subjugation in Guatemala, the democratic tradition in Costa Rica, and the taming of the Wild West in the United States. When Idi Amin was killing his Ugandan countrymen, coffee provided virtually all of his foreign exchange, and the Sandinistas launched their revolution by commandeering Somoza's coffee plantations.

Beginning as a medicinal drink for the elite, coffee became the favored modern stimulant of the blue-collar worker during his break, the gossip starter in middle-class kitchens, the romantic binder for wooing couples, and the sole, bitter companion of the lost soul. Coffeeshouses have provided places to plan revolutions, write poetry, do business, and meet friends. The drink became such an intrinsic part of Western culture that it has seeped into an incredible number of popular songs: “You're the cream in my coffee”; “Let's have another cup of coffee, let's have another piece of pie”; “I love coffee, I love tea, I love the java jive and it loves me”; “Black coffee, love's a hand-me-down brew.”

The modern coffee industry was spawned in late nineteenth-century America during the furious, capitalistic Gilded Age. At the end of the Civil War, Jabez Burns invented the first efficient industrial coffee roaster. The railroad, telegraph, and steamship revolutionized distribution and communication while newspapers, magazines, and lithography allowed massive advertising campaigns. Moguls tried to corner the coffee market, while Brazilians frantically planted thousands of acres of coffee trees only to see the price decline catastrophically. A pattern of worldwide boom and bust commenced.

By the early twentieth century, coffee had become a major consumer product, advertised widely throughout the country. In the 1920s and 1930s, national corporations such as Standard Brands and General Foods snapped up major brands and pushed them through radio programs. By the 1950s, coffee was the American middle-class beverage of choice.

Coffee's modern saga explores broader themes as well: the importance of advertising, development of assembly line mass production, urbanization, women's issues, concentration and consolidation of national markets, the rise of the supermarket, automobile, radio, television, "instant" gratification, technological innovation, multinational conglomerates, market segmentation, commodity control schemes, and just-in-time inventories. The bean's history also illustrates how an entire industry can lose focus, allowing upstart microroasters to reclaim quality and profits—and then how the cycle begins again, with bigger companies gobbling smaller ones in another round of concentration and merger.

The coffee industry has dominated and molded the economy, politics, and social structure of entire countries. On the one hand, its monocultural avatar has led to the oppression and land dispossession of indigenous peoples, the abandoning of subsistence agriculture in favor of exports, overreliance on foreign markets, destruction of the rain forest, and environmental degradation. On the other hand, coffee has provided an essential cash crop for struggling family farmers, the basis for national industrialization and modernization, a model of organic production and fair trade, and a valuable habitat for migratory birds.

The coffee saga encompasses a panoramic story of epic proportions involving the clash and blending of cultures, the cheap jazzing of the industrial laborer, the rise of the national brand, and the ultimate abandonment of quality in favor of price cutting and commodification of a fine product in the post-World War II era. It involves an eccentric cast of characters, all of them with a passion for the golden bean. Something about coffee seems to make many coffee men (and the increasing number of women who have made their way into their ranks) opinionated, contentious, and monomaniacal. They disagree over just about everything, from whether Ethiopian Harrar or Guatemalan Antigua is the best coffee, to the best roasting method, to whether a press pot or drip filter makes superior coffee.

Around the world we are currently witnessing a coffee revival, as microroasters revive the fine art of coffee blending and customers rediscover the joy of fresh-roasted, fresh-ground, fresh-brewed coffee and espresso, made from the best beans in the world. Many more people are buying Fair Trade and other certified beans in an attempt to address the inequities built into the world coffee economy.

The worldwide coffee culture is almost a cult. There are blogs and newsgroups on the subject, along with innumerable Web sites, and Starbucks outlets seem to populate every street corner, vying for space with other coffeehouses and chains.

And yet, it's just the pit of a berry from an Ethiopian shrub.

Coffee. May you enjoy its convoluted history over many cups.

---

# INTRODUCTION

## *to the Second Edition*

Since the first edition of *Uncommon Grounds* was published in 1999, my coffee travels have taken me (among other places) to Germany, Italy, Peru, Brazil, and Costa Rica, as well as annual Specialty Coffee Association of America conferences and speaking engagements around the United States, into specialty coffee roaster facilities, to Camp Coffee in Vermont (a gathering of coffee cognoscenti), and even into a Massachusetts deep freeze, where specialty pioneer George Howell stored his green coffee beans. I continued to write freelance articles for coffee magazines such as the *Tea & Coffee Trade Journal*, *Fresh Cup*, and *Barista*, as well as a semiregular column about coffee in the *Wine Spectator*.

I have met growers who shared their stories and love for the beans, along with their frustrations and fears. I have met passionate roasters and retailers who want to serve the best coffee in the world while they try to ensure that the farmers who grew their product are paid a living wage and receive good medical care. They are also concerned about environmental issues, such as shade-grown coffee that promotes biodiversity, proper processing to prevent water pollution, and the use of organic fertilizers.

I found little from the first edition that required correction, though I did take out the assertion that coffee was the “second most valuable exported legal commodity on earth (after oil).” Although this factoid has been incessantly repeated in the coffee world, it turns out not to be true. Wheat, flour, sugar, and soybeans beat out raw coffee, not to mention copper, aluminum, and yes, oil. Coffee is nonetheless, the fourth most valuable agricultural commodity, according to the United Nations Food and Agriculture Organization.

I have left another myth alone: the lovely story of Kaldi and the dancing goats. Who knows—*might* have happened that way. Then there are the stories of Georg Franz Kolschitzky founding the Blue Bottle, a Viennese coffeehouse (probably not the first one there); Gabriel de Clieu bringing the first coffee tree to Martinique, from which most of the trees in the Americas descended (well, the Dutch and French had already introduced coffee elsewhere in Latin America); and the Brazilian Francisco Palheta seducing the governor’s wife to bring the first coffee to Brazil (perhaps it wasn’t really the very first).

*Uncommon Grounds* seems to have spawned a mini-industry of coffee books, documentaries, and interest in coffee’s social, environmental, and economic impact. Too many books have come out to mention them all, but I have added some to the “Notes on Sources” section at the end of the book. Most notable are Majka Burhardt’s *Coffee: Authentic Ethiopia* (2010); Michael Weissman’s *God in a Cup* (2008); Daniel Jaffe’s *Brewing Justice* (2007); Antony Wild’s *Coffee: A Dark History* (2004); John Talbot’s *Grounds for Agreement* (2004); and Bennett Alan Weinberg and Bonnie K. Bealer’s *The World of Caffeine* (2001).

My book and others have been assigned in universities that have recognized that a course on coffee is a great way to engage students in cross-disciplinary, interconnected studies. These courses can also

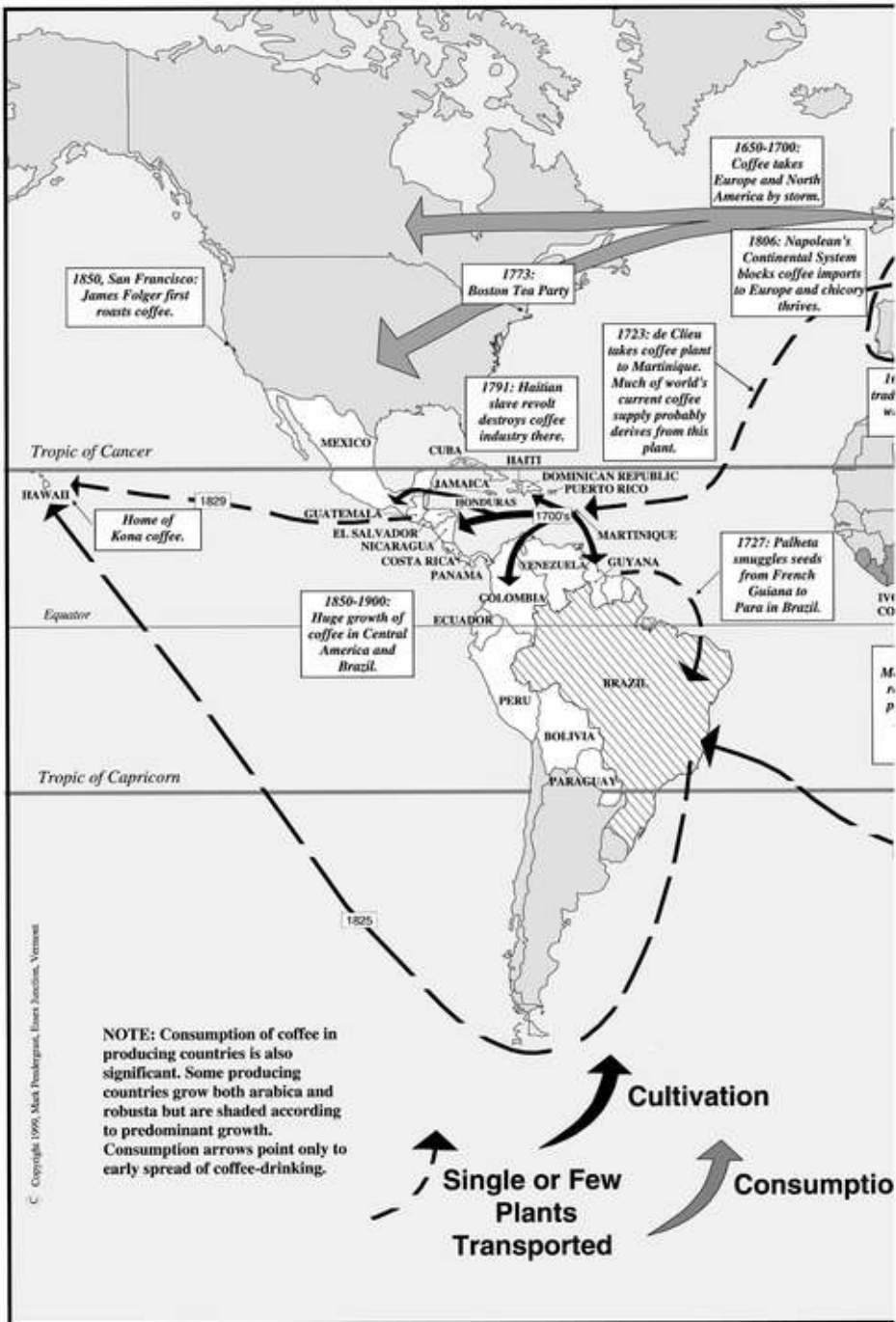
show several documentaries about coffee. Two are most notable. Irene Angelico's *Black Coffee* (2005), a three-hour Canadian documentary, offers the most comprehensive, balanced look at coffee—though I am perhaps somewhat prejudiced because I appear in it. It should not be confused with *Black Gold* (2006), directed by Nick and Marc Francis, a British documentary that raises important issues but presents a stereotyped black-and-white picture of evil roasters versus poor farmers.

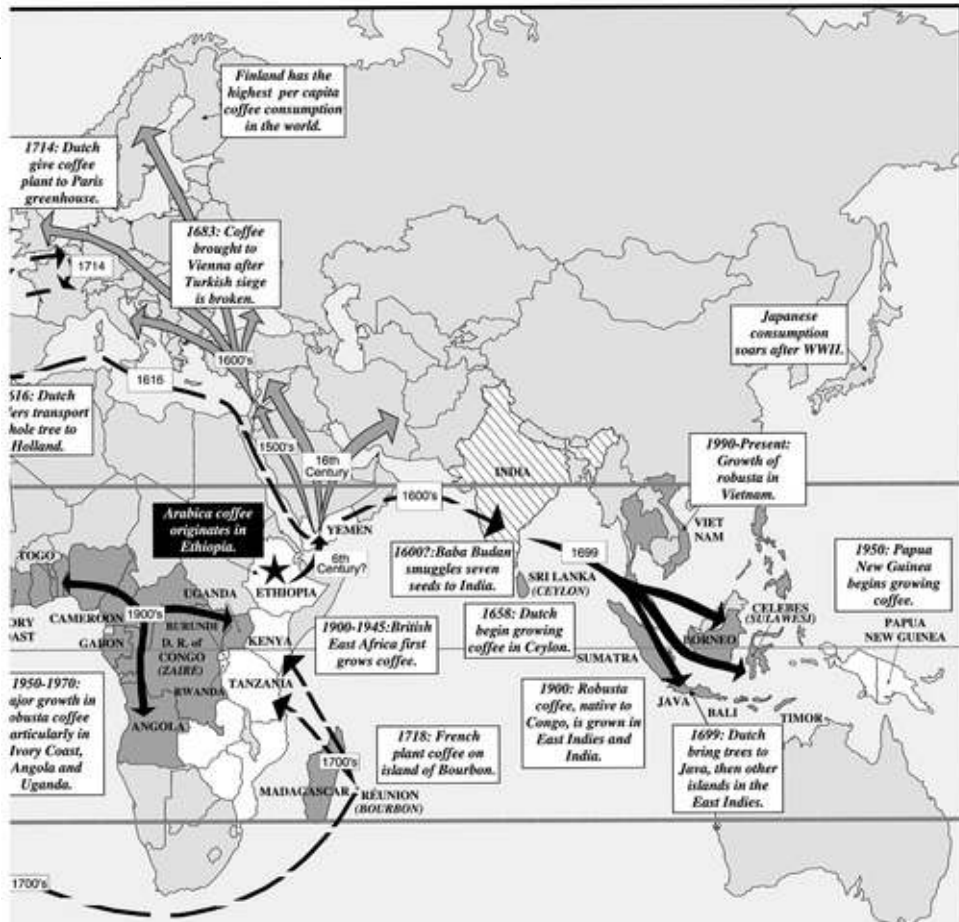
In order to keep the book at a reasonable length, I have judiciously pruned here and there for this edition. Rest assured that the fascinating story of coffee is all here.

Much has happened in the coffee world since 1999, when the first edition of this book was published—the disastrous coffee crisis (1999-2004) that further impoverished coffee growers worldwide, the increased sales and awareness of Fair Trade coffee, the creation of the Cup of Excellence, the Coffee Quality Institute and Q graders, the popularity of single-cup brewing systems, climate change's impact on coffee growers, a “third wave” of coffee fanatics scouring the world for the best beans, the beginnings of a flattened coffee playing field due to the cell phone and Internet. Many more people are aware of the issues raised by coffee's dramatic, troubled history and its ongoing saga.

So the good news is that coffee is in the public awareness more than ever before, with multitudinous blogs, Web sites, and print space devoted to the beverage. And there are many more efforts to address the inequities built into the global coffee economy. The bad news is that glaring disparities remain and will remain for the indefinite future. The coffee crisis was no surprise to anyone who read the first edition of *Uncommon Grounds*. Such a humanitarian disaster simply extended the boom-bust cycle that began in the late nineteenth century and will continue in the future, unless we somehow learn more from the distant and recent past.

Finally, let me address a question some readers raised about the book's subtitle. How did coffee transform the world? I never specifically summarized these impacts in the main text, though they are all there. Coffee invaded and transformed mountainsides in tropical areas, sometimes with devastating environmental results. It promoted the enslavement and persecution of indigenous peoples and Africans. It sobered European workers, while coffeehouses provided a social venue that spawned new art and business enterprises as well as revolutions. Along with other commodities, it gave birth to international trade and futures exchanges. In Latin America it created vast wealth next to dire poverty, leading to repressive military dictatorships, revolts, and bloodbaths. And it continues to transform the world today, as indicated by Fair Trade coffee and other well-intended efforts documented in chapter 19, “Final Grounds.”





# COFFEE MIGRATION



Coffee Producing Country (Primarily Arabica)



Coffee Producing Country (Primarily Robusta)



Coffee Producing Country (Arabica and Robusta)

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## PART ONE

### SEEDS OF CONQUEST



*According to folklore an Ethiopian goatherd named Kaldi discovered the joys of coffee when his goats ate the berries and became so frisky that they “danced.” Kaldi soon joined them.*



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