Coffee, a Story of Two Beans

By Chuck Dinerstein, MD, MBA — September 16, 2020

How about a little something not COVID-19? Coffee is, far and away, one of our most popular beverages, with an estimated 400 billion cups poured annually in the U.S. Despite that figure, powered by Starbucks, McDonald's and other big brands, we aren't even in the Top 10 consuming countries. So while sipping that cup of java or mocha, let's take a look at the history of coffee.

The Good Bean

The herdsmen noted that sheep eating the berries of the bush were perkier. When he ate them, he too perked up in a talkative, social kind of way. Or you might believe that the same berries sustained an outcast cleric after he roasted them and infused them in hot water. In either case, the berries, which are today's coffee, were found in Yemen.

Coffee had found a niche, the lift was medicinal, and it provided a way to be more attentive to one's prayers, especially in a land where alcohol, another drug that changed our cognition, was prohibited. Some might say that coffee provided the whirl for the Sufi Dervishes. Its use was spread about the general area of Arabia or the Levant by the religious pilgrims as they traveled to Mecca. Over time its use as an adjunctive aid to prayer was transformed as an aid to hospitality. The social enhancement afforded by coffee found a home in the world of traders; after all, it
heightened attention to business, not dulling the senses like alcohol. Coffee became a ritual of negotiations.

The traders carried coffee into Europe, making Mocha, a port in Yemen, the first of coffee's export centers. For those wishing to do business with the Levant Company in London, drinking coffee was a business necessity. Coffee preparation requires time and expertise; there is roasting the beans and then preparing the infusion. All that hospitality, even for business, takes a toll, so to unload the daily grind as it were, the first coffee house opened in 1652. House is probably too majestic; perhaps we might call it the first coffee cart?

Within a year, located in a neighborhood of traders, the cart did morph into a premise. Once again, a religious admonition against alcohol-fueled now by Cromwell's puritanical nature allowed a regulatory climate that saw the development of 83 more coffee houses over the next ten years. [1] Coffee's sociability made those coffee houses a place to meet and talk. The early version, like a previous design of Bell Labs, provided for serendipitous meetings, you bought coffee and found yourself seated randomly at a table talking to strangers. In an era where news was on a need to know basis, and you rarely needed to know, coffee houses now provided an earlier version of Starbuck's lounging area – a place to read the freely provided newspapers and pamphlets, a place to write, and most importantly a place to dish the dirt.

Over time individual coffee houses, like a Facebook group or a website, attracted their own audiences, some for lawyers, or printers, government officials, and perhaps the most famous of them all, Lloyd's Coffee House run by Edward Lloyds. He catered to sailors, merchants, and shipowners, and he provided them with Lloyd's list of shipping news. It was an ideal spot for the growing business of maritime insurance, and within a short time, its customers found a business advantage to the information and gossip Lloyds provided. It closed to the general public, became a membership club, and finally a company.

Other coffee houses found different paths, some becoming social clubs providing coffee and a place to gamble. Others featured conversation and debate; this was the early days of the Age of Enlightenment. Periodically, some of the coffee houses' membership would print essays or explainers, seeking to disseminate and elevate the discourse. The Tatler, which bills itself as the first social media, began publishing coffee house discussions in 1709.

Bad Beans

Coffee initially came from Ethiopia, through Yemen's port of Mocha, an area under the control of the Ottoman Empire. As the demand for coffee in Europe increased, so did the price levied by the Ottomans. The Dutch East India company saw a business opportunity, planting and then importing coffee from their holdings in Java, as well as Ceylon. Within a nine-year period, imports had shifted so that 90% of coffee now came from their holdings. And while coffee proved to be a lucrative import for them, it was not the case for the farmers who received little of the payment – a theme that continues to this day.

For the British, continuing to send money to the Dutch for coffee seems somehow not right. What was to become the first global corporation, the West Indies Company, instead concentrated on tea, a drink more easily prepared at home. By the mid-1700s, the greatest influencers of the time,
the Royal family, drank tea, elevating its importance and making it the drink of choice for the refined or wannabes.

As European imperialism spread, so did the quest for coffee, with the French beginning plantations in their Caribbean acquisitions, more specifically Saint Domingue, the island we now call Haiti. The labor for these plantations came as slaves from Africa. While we often think of slavery in terms of sugar plantations, by the time of the French Revolution, 60% of the world’s coffee came from Saint Domingue; it was France’s most profitable possession. In 1782, following the lead of their French “masters,” a slave revolt lead to a 23-year war involving many of the European countries, and ultimately to the formation of Haiti. Unfortunately, the war had decimated Haiti’s wealth, destroying the sugar and coffee plantations. The loss of their most important product, as well as racism against the first independent black nation, has left them perpetually impoverished.

Coffee, perhaps because of the British tax upon tea, had found a foothold in America, which became, in its turn, coffee’s first mass market. The increasing demand for coffee had its origins in our Civil War when heightened vigilance by soldiers was at a premium. Confederate soldiers were issued a ratio of 10 cups of coffee a day, and when they demobilized at the end of the war, they took that coffee habit with them to the West. The company that became Folgers began in Goldrush San Francisco. The demand grew along with a new social force, the Industrial revolution. Coffee could now be produced at scale, with the first branded coffee being made in 1873.

To this point, all the coffee came from the original Arabica beans of Ethiopia and Yemen; coffee production involved a monoculture. In the late 1800s, that coffee monoculture, now produced in Asia, was decimated by leaf rust, a disease caused by the parasitic fungus *H. vastatrix*. Exports were reduced by 90% in the next 20 years as the leaf rust spread throughout Asia and Africa, ultimately resulting in the replacement of Arabica beans with a more resilient and less tasteful, Robusta.

To meet the need for an increased coffee supply, the industry turned to a country separated from leaf rust by continents and airflow, Brazil. Plantations were created along Brazil’s Atlantic Coast, using the slash and burn deforestation that continues today in the Amazon. Once again, slaves provided a cheap labor source. Brazil was the last country to abolish slavery in the Western world, in 1888 and by then had “imported” 4 million individuals, 40% of the slaves brought to the Americas. The slaves were replaced first by indentured immigrants primarily from Italy and Japan [2] and then by steam mechanization. Up until the 1950s, Brazil became the supplier of 50% of the world’s coffee.

[1] Based on London’s population, that was one coffee house for every 4800 people; by contrast, in New York City today, that figure is one for every 2800. And this was in an era before “mass” coffee production or consumption.

[2] Brazilians of Italian descent represent 15% of Brazil’s current population, Japanese account for roughly 2%.