



Home Roast Coffee ^{and} Fair Trade

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*Did he say **roast** coffee at home? Seem impossible? Crazy?
And anyway, just when did **coffee** become interesting?*

Little more than a century ago in the US, coffee roasting was a common household activity frequently done even by children as one of their regular chores. Green (raw dried) coffee beans can be roasted in fry pans, popcorn poppers and hand-turned drums over wood fires or gas stoves or grills with excellent results. As in any cooking, a little skill is required to accommodate the unique properties of the coffee beans. Today many people are relearning those old skills and rediscovering the wonderful flavor possibilities of coffee done fresh and just the way you like it.



A growing number of coffee lovers are not only reviving old ways to roast coffee, they are successfully using modern hot air popcorn poppers, hot air guns, standard home ovens and counter-top toaster ovens. Some brave souls convert and improve standard appliances such as bread machines and rotisserie toaster ovens. Many others, true individualists, build their own roasters from raw materials and parts. It may also surprise you to know that there are many inexpensive commercial home coffee roasters available.



The best news is that high-grade green coffee beans are available from hundreds if not thousands of importers, re-sellers and roasters in the US. Beans from coffee farms all over the world are in US store rooms waiting to be shipped. And purchasing is as easy as buying a book from Amazon.com. Instead of being limited to what local food stores allow on their shelves, green beans open up the entire world of coffee production to the average consumer.



Admit it, you're surprised. I certainly was. Coffee beans have a lot of secrets. Unfortunately not all of them are pleasant.

Unfair Trade?

Coffee farming and harvesting are still primarily done by hand labor. Worldwide, the number of families dependent on coffee agriculture is estimated at a staggering 25 million, far more than any other industry such as toys, electronics, clothing or shoe production. And in terms of dollars, coffee is the #2 traded commodity worldwide. This distinction is partly due to the vast quantities of coffee that are floating every day, but mostly due to the volatile price of green coffee which changes rapidly minute by minute. The coffee industry has been a playground for day traders and boardrooms for at least 600 years.

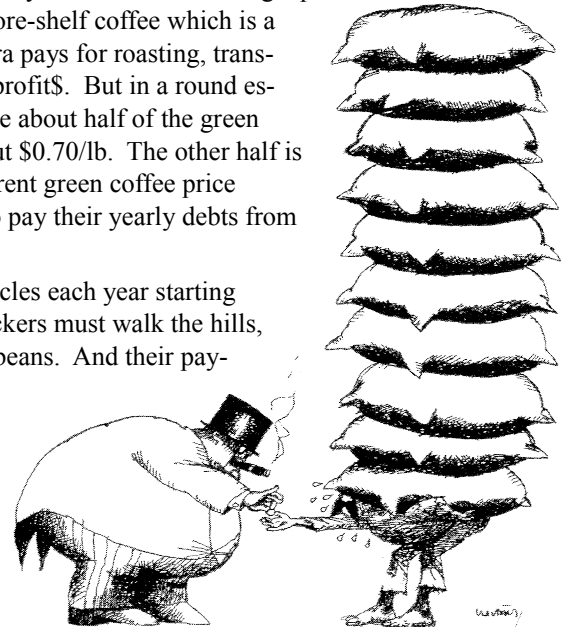


The worldwide reference price (Intercontinental Exchange C-market) for green coffee beans is currently about \$1.43/lb in large quantities. We're all familiar with the prices of store-shelf coffee which is a few dollars more. The extra pays for roasting, transportation, shelf space and profit\$. But in a round estimate, farmers only receive about half of the green coffee purchase price, about \$0.70/lb. The other half is

lost paying for bean processing, transportation, fees and bribes. Still, the current green coffee price (\$1.43) is good, at or a little above historic averages. And farmers are able to pay their yearly debts from coffee tree care, machine maintenance and labor costs.

The primary effort is the hand labor required during several harvesting cycles each year starting when the coffee cherries ripen. During the 3-5 harvest months, the coffee pickers must walk the hills, collecting five pounds of coffee cherries for each pound of processed coffee beans. And their payment is perhaps \$0.10/lb of the processed beans.

There are two reasons why this is unfair trade. First, worldwide, the millions of coffee pickers are barely surviving far below the poverty line. Living with no health care, little or no education, no electricity or running water, and scarce opportunities for additional work between coffee harvests. They do most of the work and take most of the risks required to produce our morning coffee. Yet they are paid only 1-2% of the consumer price for



their product. The smaller end of the coffee industry benefits from the work of an impoverished and isolated workforce spread all around the equator. Each isolated country, co-op, and farm is actually competing with all the others to survive on the lowest standard of living.

Second, the selling price for green coffee can change dramatically every day for any of a thousand reasons, most of which have nothing to do with the farmer. Yet price fluctuations are hardest on the farmers and pickers, not on the roasters and consumers. As green prices drop to about \$1.00, farmers worldwide no longer receive enough crop income to pay their expenses. As recently as 2002 the C-market green coffee price dropped to around \$0.50. Many small farms were abandoned or swallowed up by larger conglomerates and many coffee harvesting families starved in the transition months and years.

How does fair trade help?



Transfair USA is a non-profit fair trade certifier, one of 20 members worldwide of Fair Trade Labeling Organizations International (FLO). They own the copyright on the "FAIRTRADE" mark and the label pictured at left. They inspect coffee sellers on farms and farm co-ops worldwide. They allow the use of their label on coffee bags and consumer packaging only if certain requirements are met. They include a minimum price per pound which now rides \$0.10/lb above the C-market price. So currently the fair trade price will be about \$1.53/lb. Should the C-market price fall, the FLO price will never fall below a preset



minimum which I believe is now set at \$1.26/lb. This arrangement includes a \$0.05/lb label fee that pays for FLO operations and inspections. In addition, farmers are also required to organize themselves into a democratically led co-op so that as a group they can have a greater effect on their community and their local government. The co-op is also the forum for re-investing the fair trade premiums in community projects. The requirements include many other details which enable and insure fairness, safety and financial transparency for all involved.

Fair trade is not a welfare system. It only seeks to ensure people get paid for their work. Fair trade does not prevent a farmer from getting more for his crops based on quality or market demands. Fair trade is not a quality or flavor certification.

There are many other organizations also working hard on fair trade, each with different viewpoints and priorities, but none with quite the structure and focus of the FLO. There are many faith-based organizations and other charitable non-profits providing direct support to coffee families. They make a difference in people's lives and raise awareness the problems, limited of course by their donations. Some fair trade groups also enable direct sales of fair trade coffee, bypassing the rest of the industry. But these efforts invariably offer a somewhat unpredictable range of coffee quality and yet their price is a few dollars higher than average store-shelf coffee. They are in effect another charity. Not fairly pricing their product for consumers, but raising healthy donations.

Many for-profit commercial roasting companies also sell fair trade roasted coffee, both mail-order and store-shelf. But their pricing is, again, several dollars above normal store-shelf coffee. Yet their fair trade products, in my experience, also tend to be unpredictable and average. Since fair trade coffee is usually just \$0.10 above non-fair trade beans, it leaves me to wonder why the large jump in price?

My comparisons with "ordinary" coffee flavor and prices are not meant to say that all fair trade coffee is mediocre and average. As with all farm products, most of the year's crop will be (by definition) average. And all crop products vary from year to year. There are very definitely some excellent fair trade beans every year that can justify a high price above the FLO minimum, but not all of them. Fair trade coffee is no different than any other coffee. Fair trade programs frequently help farmers improve their crops and processing techniques which can certainly improve flavor, but fair trade certification says nothing about the quality of the beans. Consumer friendly, average store-shelf coffee is 80% of the world market. Where are all the packages of average priced, average quality fair trade coffee?

The strange marketing situation described above is that, **while buying fair trade coffee is helpful and beneficial, there is no roasted fair trade coffee sold at a fair price for consumers!** To contradict myself, I'm happy to say there is one retailer who does sell "FAIRTRADE" coffee at something like a fair consumer price: Costco. It's worth a try. If there are any other retailers selling fair trade for the price of ordinary store-shelf coffee, I'd certainly like to hear about them. The fair trade movement desperately needs access to the huge consumer-priced market. It is currently marginalized in the \$7.50-\$15.00/lb specialty coffee market.

Home Roasting Finds a Way...

While 80% of the world coffee market still seems to be closed to fair trade, most if not all sources of fair trade beans are available unroasted to consumers through mail-order sales. Buying green coffee beans and roasting at home may be the only way to enjoy fair trade coffee at a fair consumer price. I enjoy my coffee twice as much. And it makes a great hobby!

For more information - Please see my supplemental coffee info sheet *Coffee, the Bean and the People* for internet websites, or e-mail me at **Sparky240** [at] **verizon** [dot] **net** or check my website **<http://www.ReeferDoor.com>**.