

NOV 9, 2020 AT 11:00 AM

Unlocked

Calibration Notes: Specialty Coffee Growing and Consumption in Thailand is Blooming

We're so excited to welcome [Katrina Yentch](#) to our *Calibration Notes* series! She's got a lovely article about coffee in Thailand for us today.



In the United States, greasy orange Pad Thai noodles are unanimously every urbanite's go-to takeout food, and the first thing they think of when Thailand comes to mind. However, when was the last time you saw a coffee roast from Thailand at your local café? Although coffee grown in this Southeast Asian country accounts for a small percentage of the world's supply, it is a young industry that is quickly growing for its production of Arabica coffee.

Coffee production has longstanding significance in Latin America and Africa, but its place in Thailand only begins in the 1970s. It was introduced by the government in the 1960s to discourage the production and trade of opium along the border of Myanmar and Laos. It has since taken off; according to the International Coffee Organization, Thailand produced 66,138,000 pounds of coffee last year—that's even more than Panama, Rwanda, and Burundi each—and it's only going to increase as the demand for specialty coffee grows in major cities like Bangkok and Chiang Mai.



Photo courtesy of Beanspire.

Although a majority of coffee is grown in Southern Thailand, much of the variety grown in this region is Robusta. This is not to be completely discredited, however, as many farmers are experimenting with different processing methods on this variety like honey and natural processing. Arabica coffee, on the other hand, is grown mostly in the northern regions of Chiang Mai and Chiang Rai, with elevations ranging 800 meters to 1200 meters. Common types of Arabica coffee found in these areas are Catuai and Typica, along with varieties that are specifically for Thailand like the Chiang Mai variety—a coffee that was [created in 2007 for then-King Bhumibol Adulyadej](#) on the 80th anniversary of his place on the throne. They are also typically roasted dark, as this style accommodates iced coffee culture better in the year-round hot climate of Thailand.

As described by WBC champ James Hoffmann in the *World Atlas of Coffee*, better Thai coffees taste "sweet, clean, and relatively low in acidity. Some spice and chocolate often accompany a relatively full mouthfeel." Thai-American barista competitor Peace Sakulclanuwat also used a Thai coffee for her competition routine this year at the U.S. Coffee Championships for the Brewers Cup competition. She described her coffee as having creamy, tangy, orange, and tamarind notes. Peace also explains that Thai coffees are "easy to dial in. They are not as astringent or dry but there is definitely a lack of acidity." Fuadi Pitsuwan is a cofounder of [Beanspire](#), a Thai coffee importing company based in Chiang Rai, who also explains that experimental Thai coffees have especially varied outcomes. "It would be tough to pin down a taste profile of Thai coffees these days because farmers have been experimenting with a lot of processing methods that influence the final flavors," he says. "But a typical good quality washed coffee would have a good body, chocolatey with sweetness like molasses, and some hint of citrus too. Honey and natural process coffees come in a whole range of possibility in terms of taste profile."



Founders of Beanspire, Jane Kittarattanapaiboon and Fuadi Pitsuwan. Photo courtesy of Beanspire.

A unique feature of coffee farms in Thailand is their level of economic and environmental sustainability in the region, which is supported by both the government and the producers. Unlike Latin America, in which the average farmer age is over 40, many in Thailand are on average 25-35 years old, with college degrees in business and economics. There is a stronger motivation and hope for young people to go into coffee production, as this generation sees opportunity and excitement in experimenting with different processing methods. The local governments also provide subsidies and assist in research on coffee, working on both preservation and areas for improvement alongside coffee producers themselves.

Many coffee farms in Thailand must also follow regulations that prevent deforestation and using machinery to harvest cherries. Because of this, coffee farmers have to hire help to pick the coffee beans, and they must pay them the minimum wage, which is higher than most other coffee producing countries. Therefore, coffee tends to be more expensive on the consumer end. According to the [Exotic Bean](#), the average price of a latte in Thailand is around \$1.75 USD, while a latte in Vietnam would be 66 cents. At a specialty café in Bangkok it would probably be \$5 USD. "Sure, we have ways to improve on farmers' quality of life, but relative to other origins our farmers are doing quite a bit better," says Pitsuwan. "This is because [of] the level of economic development over here."

So why don't we see Thai coffee around as much? Coffee in Thailand is structured in such a way that discourages both the exportation of Thai coffee and the importation of international coffees. By doing this, the government hopes to boost the consumption of local coffee to support producers in the country. [The Exotic Bean reports](#) that only 7% of coffee grown in Thailand gets exported, and that taxes on imported green beans can run as high as 90%! Additionally, the traceability is difficult. Coffees are not often sourced from single estates, and many get thrown into blends as well. A few places in the United States that work with Thai coffee include Joe Coffee Company, [Allegro Coffee Roasters](#), [Ally Coffee](#), and [Cafe Imports](#). As the demand for specialty coffee continues to grow in the country, this may result in less restrictions placed on import and export. For now, drinking coffee grown in Thailand is a unique experience to be held only in Thailand.

Despite Thai coffee's exclusivity in the international market, the specialty coffee culture within Thailand is booming. "I think the market dynamics in Thailand is very interesting, in a sense that we are not only a coffee growing country, but we also have a growing middle class that consumes specialty coffee locally," Pitsuwan says. His company Beanspire is currently one of the only companies in the country that focuses on exporting.

Another unique facet of specialty cafe culture in Thailand is that Chiang Mai has both production and retail, so many baristas and coffee company owners get to work directly with their sources. This has further encouraged the improvement of roasting for specialty coffee, along with strengthening the movement of local organizations like the Specialty Coffee Association of Thailand, who regularly hosts barista competitions within the country. Coffee shops are also opening—the country may be hot and humid year round, but that hasn't stopped cafe lovers from frequenting spots like [Factory Coffee](#), [Ink & Lion](#), [Roots](#), [Akha Ama](#), [Brew Fact](#), and many others in Bangkok and Chiang Mai. Local consumption fuels the coffee scene in Thailand, and while professionals still desire to explore beans from other regions, this model fuels a sustainable economy.

When travel becomes encouraged again, be sure to put Thailand on your list for coffee-fueled adventures ahead! In the meantime, you can find green Thai coffees from both Ally and Cafe Imports online, and updates on Beanspire's roasting partners [here](#).



Katrina Yentch is freelance writer with an emphasis on the F&B industry. She's also the online editor at Barista Magazine. When she isn't writing, she's either cooking or power napping.

Calibration Notes coffee around the world

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One of the best coffees I've ever had was in Bangkok in 2019 at Mother Roaster. Thailand's coffee culture and its shop scene is unlike any other. You can literally go coffee mad with the abundance of cafes and experiences there. I'm glad they can't massively export one of their prized possession and thus make a local economy more sustainable.

Katrina Yentch 1mo

I was so wonderfully overwhelmed by the amount of specialty cafes in BKK! <3

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