



Drying parchment in tent

Fecal Coffee: Worth a Shot?

Many selling kopi luwak are telling centuries-old tall tales

By Jenny Neill

Despite the gross-out factor, the attraction for a certain segment of consumers is obvious. Kopi luwak, jacú bird, and elephant dung coffee all promise a unique flavor experience. With each, a higher price is justified by tales of the extra effort involved in using animals to remove the pulp and mucilage from cherries.

The fact that producers keep looking for new ways to differentiate is no surprise as the International Coffee Organization composite indicator for the price of coffee continued a 2.5-year decline as of November 2012. Increased production overall, including a projected 10-year high in the last year for Brazil, is likely to prevent prices from jumping much higher in spite of a modest rebound in early 2013 trading. An age-old tactic for increasing revenue when facing price stagnation involves spinning a better story to make one's product stand out from the crowd.

A soiled reputation

Many selling kopi luwak are telling centuries-old tall tales. Two legends about its discovery by the Dutch in Indonesia persist. In one, the colonial rulers are cast as tyrannical plantation owners who prohibit their workers from having the product they have been enslaved to harvest and process, which forces them to use what they can find on the forest floor. In the other, Indonesian tribesmen play a trick when given the chance to sell wild coffee cherries to slave owners by bringing them beans harvested from civet excrement. Neither version is verifiable.

Other fictions tarnished kopi luwak's reputation. One source claims that a North American importer admitted to making up a production figure and other details like the romantic notion that civets only eat the ripest, most complex-smelling fruit. While scientific reports validate that toddy cats are primarily frugivores, they are also scavengers that seek food in garbage or compost piles.

The artful spin of demand-side marketing is only half the problem. Producers have been and are likely to continue selling fakes. Blake Dinkin, creator of Black Ivory Coffee, ran into this issue in his first attempt at a coffee venture. He consulted with Dr. Massimo Marcone, a professor of Food Science at the University of Guelph, to verify quality of his sources. Dinkin discovered that some of the Ethiopian civet farmers he intended to establish trade relations with were rubbing dung on beans and trying to pass them off as having been animal-refined. He observes, "If you are going to offer a farmer the option of selling coffee cherries for US\$.75 per kilo or the exact same cherries for US\$30 if they are civet coffee, I think a lot of farmers are going to be tempted to lie."



Civets confined for kopi luwak production

According to animal rights activists, a worse problem than fraud is that these tree-cats are confined. David Byer, senior corporate liaison for PETA, describes how they live in captivity, "Their lives revolve around nothing but eating coffee berries, and these animals are listless, bored. They don't get to engage in behaviors that are important and natural to them." A small set of producers have responded to this concern by collecting beans from wild civets only, a plausible proposition given how this species makes use of territorial latrines.

The artful spin of demand-side marketing is only half the problem



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Andrew Hetzel, Founder of Cafemakers LLC and Coffee Quality Institute licensed Q Grader and Assistant Instructor

The addition of elephants to the list of animals used in processing coffee has drawn mixed reactions



Mario Fernandez-Alduenda, coffee consultant pursuing a PhD in food science



Coffees drying on a sun deck. The darkest are dried natural cherry pods. The medium brown on raised beds are pulped natural coffees

Ethical improvements still leave one challenge in meeting demand. According to Rocky Rhodes, formerly a roaster who now teaches Q-grade certification courses, “You have to take what you get—big, small, if some shows slight insect damage.” The problem with that is simple to understand: Less uniformity in collected beans increases the likelihood of flavor flaws once roasted. Despite the possibility of quality problems, some free-range kopi luwak has been earning high ratings from popular coffee critics. But, is it worthy of the obsessive attention that Jack Nicholson’s character in the 2007 film “The Bucket List” gave it?

Civets, jacú, and elephants... Oh my!

In the 21st century, those wanting to explore the novelty of fecal coffee have choices. Birds in Brazil, barking deer in Indonesia, coatimundi in Peru, and elephants in Thailand are all giving civets competition for dollars from the rich and curious. When the roast comes from beans that were legitimately refined by animal, digestion does shift the flavor profile.

How fermentation affects aroma precursors in general is still not well understood. Amino acids differ for washed-versus dry-processed coffees. But is it because of when and how germination happens? Or is it the result of whether fermentation is aerobic or anaerobic? One line of inquiry has looked at how the onset of germination may determine flavors later. Another hypothesis being tested is that fermentation matters most. Both occur at different times depending on the method being considered. For example, washed techniques result in a faster onset of germination that shuts down quickly, whereas with natural this happens more slowly and takes longer to begin.

Fermentation with natural processing can take up to three weeks. After an initial bacterial phase, yeast populations take over with molds being most active as cherries are dried. “All these microbial populations each have an effect and change the flavor profile depending on how much you allow them to work on the pulp,” explains Mario Fernandez-Alduenda, a coffee consultant pursuing a doctorate in food science.

Analytical reports by Q-rated tasters of beans processed conventionally

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Rocky Rhodes, principal consultant and trainer at International Coffee Consulting Group

“As long as there are deep pockets in the world, there will be a market for this coffee”



Blake Dinkin, creator of Black Ivory Coffee

and by animal from the same estate are relatively rare. In 2008, Rhodes cupped both washed and luwak coffees from a single estate in East Java. The civet coffee scored high enough to be considered specialty quality; however he reports it “had a smoother, rounder body but the acidity was lower and less interesting.” This finding seems consistent with non-comparative cuppings of kopi luwak.

But, how do the other fecal coffees compare? Most experts believe the specific gut flora and fauna matter too. Founder of Cafemakers LLC Andrew Hetzel quips, “At least the Jacú bird is vegetarian, the civet cat is not.” Indeed, the digestion of Indonesian tree-cats has little in common with that of Brazilian dusky-legged guans and Thai elephants. Luwak, like Peruvian coatis and Asian muntjacs, are omnivores that need more acidity to break down proteins. Birds tend to pass seeds much more quickly than elephants would, so even with herbivores, it is unlikely a typical fecal coffee flavor profile will emerge. Hetzel recalls tasting a Jacú bird coffee “as being extremely wild, with an intense fruit flavor. It had a high content of acetic acid which is vinegar essentially.”

Marcone compares what happens with Black Ivory Coffee as having similarities to another type of Indonesian coffee, Sumatran Mandehling, because “the elephant requires more fermentation to break down cellulose. Further, the stomach of an elephant is basically a sack where the coffee gets stored before digestion.”

Butt, what future?

The addition of elephants to the list of animals used in processing coffee has drawn mixed reactions. Some worry the arrival of Black Ivory Coffee will only encourage more fraud or animal abuses. But John Roberts, director at the Golden Triangle Asian Elephant Foundation, believes partnering with Dinkin will be a boon overall: “Welfare for captive elephants is far from perfect under any method but by working with, rather than against, the traditional mahouts we can be part of the debate about improving welfare and, perhaps, weaning them off captive elephants altogether.”

Dinkin is serious about running an ethical venture: “Tourism (elephant rides, painting, etc) provides much needed income, but so many elephants are not fit for these activities. So who is going to pay to care for them? By donating 8% of sales, I hope to do my part to address this.” Those funds pay for two veterinarians to care for these threatened pachyderms.

PETA, however, takes a dim view of using animals to make a commercial product. Byer’s organization encourages the curious to try coffees made using an enzymatic process that results in a flavor profile similar to that of kopi luwak.

Fernandez-Alduenda predicts that in spite of the availability of such techniques, producers will keep using animals: “Right now it’s easier for people to produce this way than to make scientifically inoculated fermented coffee. We just don’t know what to expect in terms of price. However, for many producers who make fecal coffees, for the right or the wrong reasons, it can be very profitable.”

Coffee insiders agree that, despite their wishes, consumer interest will continue. Rhodes likens it to what happens in the premium wine market. “Some people will pay an enormous amount for a bottle of wine and they don’t even get to take the cork out before they buy it. They are basing it on the idea that it’s going to be wonderful. The same is true with these coffees. There is a lot of ego involved in the purchase. As long as there are deep pockets in the world, there will be a market for this coffee.”

Creating a pleasurable and memorable experience for drinking Black Ivory Coffee is also important to its creator. Defending his beans against industry naysayers, Dinkin asserts “If I just wanted to get a product out and cash in on a novelty, I would have launched years ago but the taste at first was nothing to be proud of. What I’m trying to do is take a great bean, use a very unique digestive process that actually has some science behind it, and combine it with a great experience—that’s why I hand-grind it and brew it at the table.

“I would hope that people be open minded enough to try it first or at least find out about the process before they pass judgment.”

None of the Q-rated tasters reached for comment have tried elephant dung coffee yet. But Hetzel, a Coffee Quality Institute licensed Q Grader and Assistant Instructor, summed up the majority opinion on fecal coffees. “In the world of legitimate coffee,” he says, “it just doesn’t have a place.” ☺

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