



FIELD REPORT

INDIA

ARTICLE + PHOTOS BY MELIND JOHN





INDIA

MY ANNUAL SOURCING TRIP TO INDIA, the world’s sixth-largest producer of coffee and the only origin from which my family’s business, Josuma Coffee, imports beans, focuses not just on procuring coffee but also on reconnecting with our estate partners. Some we’ve known for only a few years, others for several decades. With so many people to see, the two-week trip is always busy. This year’s itinerary has me landing in Bangalore, traveling west to see 12 estates as I traverse the Western Ghats mountains, and finishing in Mangalore, on the coast.

When I meet with growers, many of whom have a long history with my family, conversations rarely start with discussions of coffee. Sometimes, a plantation owner will ask, “How did [name of roaster] like last year’s coffee?” More often, though, the first question is something more personal. “How are things in California?” or, “I heard about your trip to Hong Kong. How was it?” or, “How are Dr. John and Urmila doing?”

At a few estates—and I know from past trips which ones these will be—the first question from the family is always, “How come you’re not married yet? I hope you will get engaged soon.”

DAY 1 — BANGALORE

After reaching my hotel at 4 a.m. and managing a few hours of sleep, I’m out again and headed to my first scheduled appointment of the trip. What I didn’t expect was the hotel doorman saying, “It’s not safe.”

Traffic can be a nightmare in Bangalore. Most times of the day the roads have twice as many cars as they can accommodate and four times as much honking as any American is used to. From several trips here, I’ve learned that the best way to get from point A to point B is to take the small, three-wheeled auto-rickshaws. Their ability to navigate openings between vehicles can trim 15–20 minutes off a trip that would otherwise take an hour in a car. So imagine my frustration when the doorman suggests I call for an Ola or an Uber instead.

“What happened?” I ask. “[The rickshaws] were safe when I was

Opposite page, at top: The view from the porch at Kerehuckaloo Estate. Morning coffee tastes even better with this view. Below: The day at Harley Estate wraps up with the pulping of that day’s pickings. This page: Ripe Robusta cherry growing in the fields of Kerkeicoondah Estate.

here last year.”

Recognition washes over the doorman’s face, and he exclaims, “Oh, you’ve taken an auto-rickshaw before! Forget what I said. Come with me. I’ll get you one.”

DAY 3 — KALLEDEVARAPURA ESTATE

A four-hour drive west from Bangalore gets me into the coffee-growing regions of Karnataka state. After spending a day at Harley Estate (near Sakleshpur), I then visit D.M. Shankar at Kalledevarapura Estate.

On my first buying trip, I was surprised to hear other growers say this about Kalledevarapura: “Shankar has good shade.” All coffee in India is grown under shade, but it wasn’t until I saw Kalledevarapura in person that I grasped how extensive shade can be.

This is coffee grown in what feels like a forest, with one tree for every five to 10 coffee plants. The mix of trees—silver oak and *dadap*, along with native jungle trees—creates a two-tiered canopy that supports a diverse ecosystem which, in turn, reduces pesticide and fertilizer intensity. As I walk through the coffee blocks, I hear the chirps of the numerous species of birds that inhabit the fields. These, along with bats, feed off the insects. Their excrement, along with fallen leaves, restores organic matter to the soil.

Unusually cool weather has me wearing my morning hoodie well into the afternoon. Shankar, a fourth-generation coffee farmer, notes that the lower-than-normal temperatures are slowing the ripening of cherries. While he initially hoped he could complete picking in just two rounds, a third—and possibly a fourth—will be required this year. As an aside, Shankar also mentions some new varieties, including Selection 9, Chandragiri, and an organically farmed S795, that he recently



started harvesting. Hearing this, I jump on the opportunity to add three small lots to Josuma's 2018 imports.

DAY 5 — BETTADAKHAN ESTATE

Both Kalledevarapura and my next stop, Bettadakhn Estate, are located in the Baba Budangiri mountains. These are the hills, outside Chikmagalur, where India's coffee cultivation reputedly began back in the 1500s. According to legend, a saint named Baba Budan smuggled seven raw coffee beans out of Yemen on his way back from the Hajj pilgrimage. Upon returning to India, he planted these seven seeds in the mountains that now bear his name.

While coffee cultivation may have started on a tiny scale 500 years ago, my visits are to mid-sized plantations that range from 50 to 400 acres in size. These estates don't just grow and harvest coffee. They

We cupped the newest Kalledevarapura microlots at the family's Bangalore office.

also have wet mills and a drying yard on site. Some even have their own curing works (the Indian term for a dry mill) and export licenses. While farms of this size lack the romance of the smallholder toiling to produce 30 bags, I appreciate having full traceability for every coffee I buy.

At Bettadakhn, I spend the morning touring the estate with A. Sukumar, and the afternoon cupping beans from here and two related estates. Coffees on the table are a mix of what Josuma bought last year and some that we haven't purchased before. Two unusual beans pique my interest: an Ethiopian Agaro and a Yellow Caturra. Much as I did with Shankar at Kalledevarapura, I jump at the chance to secure a few bags. Unfortunately, I'm told a European roaster claimed them a few days earlier.



DAY 7 — YELEMADLU ESTATE

I'm in a Jeep accompanying Rohan Kuriyan on his morning rounds at Yelemadlu Estate. The fifth generation in the family that owns both Yelemadlu and nearby Merthi Subbangudigy Estate, Rohan offers a hypothesis as to why Yelemadlu produces consistently better washed Robusta than other estates. "We have a natural spring on this estate. We can use that water to process the cherries and don't have to rely on a shared water source."

Perhaps it's because I live in drought-prone California, but I fixate on the water issues that arise in cultivating and processing coffee. For Yelemadlu and other estates near Balehonnur, an untimely blossom shower—at least for the Robusta fields—was the start of a challenging year. While irrigation can typically offset a failed blossom shower, this was not an option last year. Low river levels prompted the government to bar farms from drawing water.

As I tour estates around Balehonnur, many Robusta blocks show the effects of drought, suggesting a poor Robusta harvest this year. The plants at Yelemadlu, however, look as strong as ever. While this bodes well for quality, yields may still be down versus last year. This throws a wrench in my preliminary 2018 buying plan, which assumes a larger purchase of high-quality Robusta from Yelemadlu.

Few origins produce higher-quality Robusta, with India growing the vast majority of it. How this comes about is simple: Indian growers apply the same care to washed Robusta as they do to washed Arabica. Beans grow at a similar altitude as Arabica and also under shade. Cherries are selectively picked, with unripes left for the next round of picking. Tremendous care is also taken in processing, with extended (24+ hours) fermentation and assiduous washing, using natural spring water in Yelemadlu's case. This is followed by meticulous drying, often starting on raised beds.



A team of workers hand garble—i.e., manually remove beans—from this lot of monsooned coffee.



While most European and Australian roasters recognize that a good Robusta can improve an espresso blend, the concept of high-quality Robusta is still something that few American roasters grasp. Even though newer roasters are quick to reject rules of thumb that guided previous generations, one rule many hesitate to break is, “Arabica good, Robusta bad.”

DAY 9 — KEREHUCKALOO ESTATE

The best coffee on every Josuma sourcing trip is at Kerehuckaloo—or to be more precise, this is where the best morning coffee is served.

One of the confounding things about traveling to origin is that the coffee available in-country is rarely as good as that country’s beans in the United States. Economics dictates much of this. Because consuming countries can pay more for beans, most countries will export their best beans. Locals get stuck with the remnants. You can see this in the way locals consume coffee. Typically, the local drink will include other ingredients, such as chicory, lots of milk, sugar, or condensed milk, to compensate for shortcomings in the beans available locally.

In South India, the local drink is something called “filter coffee,” which is a mix of coffee (often augmented with chicory), sugar, and milk. Imagine a sweet, frothy, café au lait. Getting a good South Indian filter coffee, however, requires surmounting another obstacle: Most people in India, including the kitchen help that make the coffee, are tea drinkers.

This isn’t a problem at Kerehuckaloo Estate, where the owner, H. B. Rajagopal, makes the morning coffee himself. Starting with beans grown on his estate and roasted for him at a local coffee works, he produces the coffee decoction (imagine cold-brew concentrate, but made with hot water) each day. To make the morning coffee, he heats up milk

At Badnekhan Estates raised beds are used extensively. This photo shows washed coffee in the first three rows, and honey process in the fourth row. Further back, unripes and floaters get dry processed.

(sometimes freshly drawn), combines it with sugar and decoction, and then aerates it by pouring it back and forth between the pan and a cup.

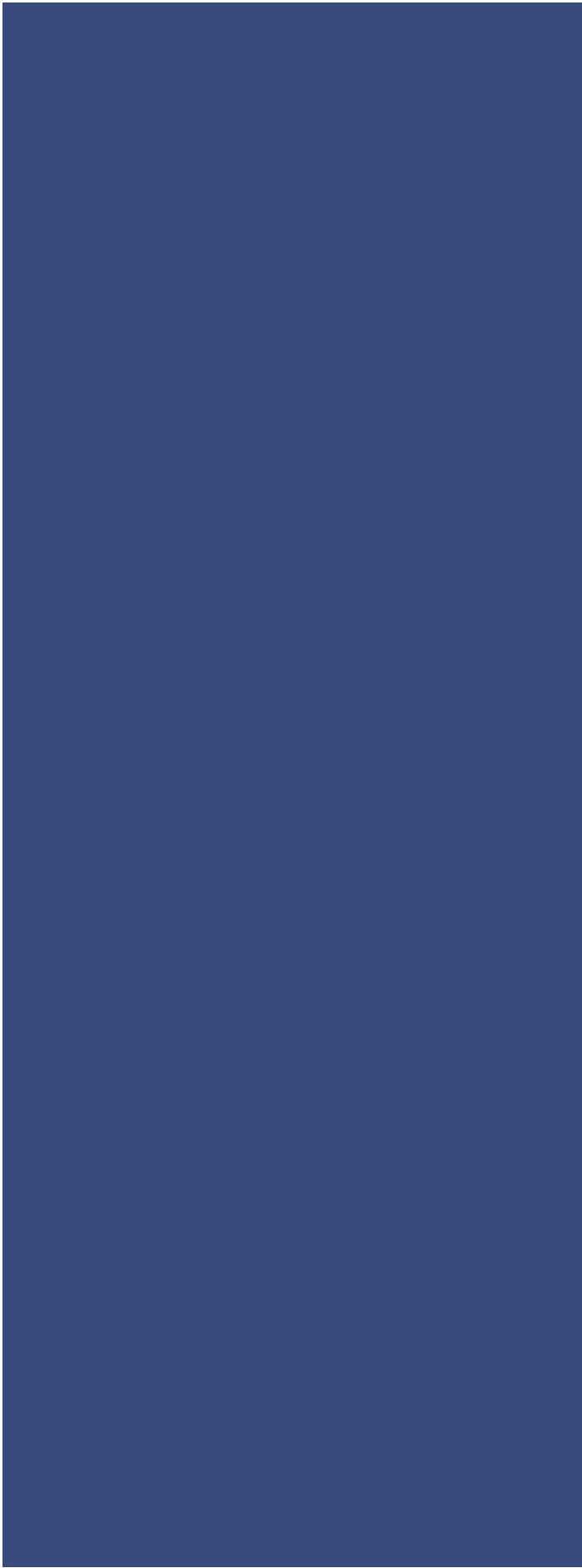
While the coffee is quite tasty in the kitchen, it becomes even more enjoyable when I pair it with the stunning view from the porch.

DAY 10 — BADNEKHAN ESTATE

The final plantation on my itinerary is Badnekhan Estate, located high up on Merthi Mountain. Although I start this day just five miles away at Kerehuckaloo, the drive takes an hour as the route requires us to circumnavigate the mountain before ascending. Badnekhan, an estate blessed with both heavy shade and elevation high enough to lose cell coverage, is worth the wait.

After touring the fields, pulp house, and drying yards with owner Roshin Varghese, we do a cupping of the estate’s beans. The table includes not just the Selection 9s that regularly win Flavour of India awards, but also a surprisingly fruity S795 and a juicy Caturra strain (dubbed “Avanthi”). Lunch *al fresco* follows, ending with a plate of Instagram-worthy rose apples, one of the many other crops grown here, for dessert.

Visitors to Indian coffee farms are often surprised to learn that polyculture is the norm. Although coffee is a plantation’s major crop, it is never the only crop. Peppercorns, timber, and/or areca nut are other common major crops. Coconut, vanilla, cacao, cardamom, rice, citrus fruit, or rubber may also be in the mix. Eschewing monoculture offers not just the environmental sustainability we read about in *The*



Top photo: At Merthi Subbangudigy Estate, areca nuts—shown drying here outside the pulp house—are one of several crops grown in addition to coffee. Below: The view of the drying yard at Bettadakhan Estate as we made our way down from the pump house was so lovely, it warranted a photo.



The author (right) is pictured with Sunalini Menon, known as the First Lady of Indian Coffee, and a friend at the Coffee Lab offices in Bangalore.

Omnivore's Dilemma, but also economic sustainability. As one estate owner acknowledged, reflecting on a year when the timber and pepper sales offset a down year for coffee, "I call myself a coffee farmer. But this year, I should say I'm a timber farmer."

DAY 11 — MANGALORE/ ASPINWALL

A three-hour drive—including a winding stretch through a protected forest and wildlife preserve—gets me to the coastal city of Mangalore. This is where Josuma's monsooning partner, Aspinwall, has its coffee headquarters.

Monsooning is a process unique to India that uses the moist winds from the summer rains to replicate what used to happen back when coffee travelled to Europe in wooden sailing ships. During those voyages, and today during monsooning, the beans absorb moisture, increase in size, and shed both acidity and density.

There's no monsooning to be seen on this trip, though. That happens during the summer, well after the coffee harvest ends in March.

What I see instead are the post-monsoon steps that Aspinwall takes to create a cleaner version of Monsooned Malabar (they call it "Super Grade") that is geared toward espresso blends. To get to the 270 bags that fill a container, Aspinwall starts with more than 500 bags of monsooned coffee. These get winnowed down by multiple rounds of electronic, mechanical, and manual sorting, steps that remove the funky-tasting beans that cause standard versions of Monsooned Malabar to be an "acquired taste" for some roasters.

From this year's experience, I already know a few things to expect on next year's sourcing trip. First, I'll need to act quicker to secure the Ethiopian Agaro or Yellow Caturra at Bettadakhan. Second, I'll go in knowing that the best way to navigate climate and water issues is to have a flexible buying plan. And third, having answered the, "When am I getting married?" question with news and photos of my wedding last August, every family will now be asking, "Is your wife with you? When are we going to meet her? You need to bring her with you." **b**