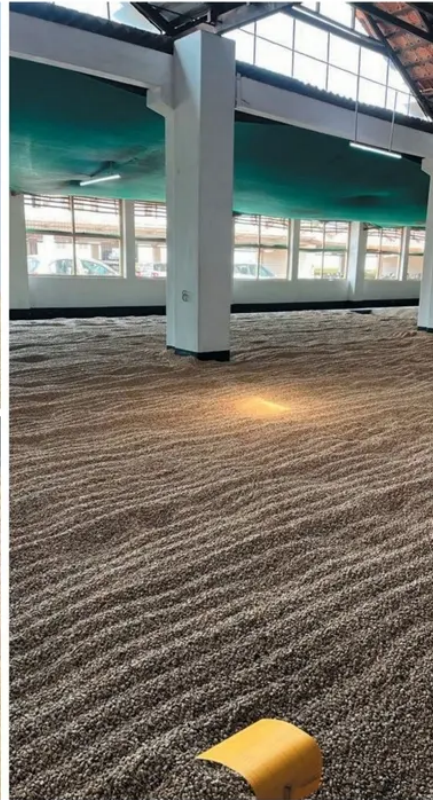


MEET INDIA'S MOST FAMOUS COFFEE BEAN

BY MELIND JOHN



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"TELL ME ABOUT MONSOONED MALABAR."

As the green buyer for Josuma Coffee, an importer of specialty-grade green coffee from India (including much of the Monsooned Malabar that comes to the U.S.), I expect to get that question from American roasters curious about the bean. What I don't expect is to get that question when I travel to India to visit coffee estates—you'd think that those closest to the bean would know a lot about it.

But here's the surprising thing: Although Monsooned Malabar is "India's most famous coffee bean," many growers and coffee professionals in India have never tasted it.

Almost all Monsooned Malabar gets exported.

MONSOONING: A UNIQUE WAY TO PROCESS GREEN COFFEE

Of the traditional ways to process coffee cherries, *Baris-*

Clockwise from top left: Workers turn the beans to ensure even monsooning.

Coffee spread along the floor of a warehouse during monsoon season. The open-sided walls allow the moist winds to enter and blow over the coffee.

Coffee spread across the warehouse floor under a roof that protects the coffee from rain.

ta Magazine readers are most familiar with the methods common to multiple origins. Pick any coffee-growing country, and a roaster (or importer) can likely source "washed" coffee, "natural" (or "dry-processed") coffee, and increasingly "pulped-natural" (or "honey") coffee from that origin.

The other traditional coffee-processing methods are less-known, usually because they are unique to certain origins. If a roaster (or barista) doesn't work with beans from Indonesia (the world's fourth-largest producer of coffee), they may not know about "wet-hulled" (or "semi-washed") coffee. Similarly, coffee professionals who don't work with beans from India (the

eighth-largest producer) will not be familiar with “monsooned” coffee.

Monsooning differs from other coffee-processing methods in that it doesn’t start with freshly picked cherries. Instead, it’s a secondary process that uses, as its input, dry-processed beans. In March or April, after India’s harvest wraps up, a farm will sell coffee—not to an exporter or roaster, but instead to one of the in-country entities such as Aspinwall (Josuma’s preferred monsooner) that specialize in monsooning coffee. The monsooner will then store beans until the start of the monsoons (i.e., the annual summer rains that last from June to September).

Once the summer rains start, the monsooner initiates the monsooning process. The first step is to spread coffee out on the floor of a ventilated warehouse. Beans will sit in a layer four-to-six inches high, with the warehouse roof protecting the coffee from rainwater. Open-sided walls, though, allow for the moist winds to blow over the beans. The monsooner will rake the coffee frequently to equalize moisture absorption, and also bulk and re-bag at regular intervals. The total process takes 12–16 weeks.

By the end, beans will undergo several dramatic changes:

- Color: Beans will turn pale gold.
- Size: Beans will swell to nearly twice their original size.
- Moisture: Will settle in around 14–15% (versus 10–11% for other Indian coffees).
- Density: Will be much lower than other coffees.
- Acidity/brightness: Will be much lower than other coffees.

Monsooners apply the process to both arabica and robusta beans, with the former sold as “Monsooned Malabar” and the latter as “Monsooned Robusta.” The word “Malabar” is a geographic term that refers to the southwestern coast of India, the region where most monsooning occurs.

Why process coffee this way? The goal, according to Monsooned Malabar’s origin myth, is to replicate what would happen to coffee back when it traveled on wooden sailing ships. As the (likely apocryphal) story goes, the humid conditions during the four-to-six month trip to Europe would transform the color, moisture, and density of the coffee. The green coffee that today’s roasters know is a modern creation: the result of shipping coffee in steel containers (and sometimes also hermetically sealed plastic bags).

THE MOST OFF-TREND BEAN IN SPECIALTY COFFEE

In almost every way, Monsooned Malabar swims upstream against the current trends in specialty coffee. For example:

- Fresh crop: Monsooned coffee doesn’t fit neatly in specialty coffee’s dichotomy of “fresh crop” and “past crop,” as beans don’t reach the U.S. and other consuming countries until 12–18 months after the cherries were picked. Accurately classifying monsooned coffee would require a third category, perhaps something like “intentionally aged” coffee.
- Farm-to-cup: While most processing methods can be done at the farm level, that’s not the case with monsooning. It requires

too much space, dedicated structures, and labor. As such, creating monsooned coffee invariably requires a dreaded “middle-man,” in this case Aspinwall and other monsooners. It is also rare to have farm-level traceability. For one thing, most farms cannot supply enough raw coffee to produce a container-size lot (250+ bags). But even when a farm can supply enough beans, farm labeling loses relevance given the way that monsooning treats terroir.

- Terroir: While specialty arabica is all about preserving terroir, the monsooning process typically erases it. Unlike with other arabicas, where a washed S-795 variety from Kalledevapur Estate is not supposed to taste the same as a washed S-795 from Kerkeicoondah Estate, monsooning aims for uniformity. The best monsooners try to minimize lot-to-lot (and year-to-year) flavor changes. The best monsooners will also eliminate partially monsooned beans, as these add “funky” or “musty” flavor notes if not removed before export.

- Flavor notes: Unlike newer experimental processing methods, monsooning aims to preserve traditional coffee flavors and attributes. Look for tasting notes such as sandalwood, nut, and chocolate, and marshmallow, almond, dark chocolate, and toast, to use two examples from roasters that source their Monsooned Malabar from Josuma. Beans will also display high body and low acidity in both drip and espresso preparations.

ESPRESSO: WHERE MONSOONED MALABAR REALLY SHINES

Espresso, though, is where Josuma finds that Monsooned Malabar truly excels, particularly for roasters seeking a sweeter, creamier style of espresso. Beans produce a huge amount of crema which, when combined with high body and low acidity, can make Monsooned Malabar the ideal starting point for this style of espresso blend. That’s a big reason why more than 80% of the Monsooned Malabar that Josuma supplies to roasters ends up in espresso.

While roasters traditionally use Monsooned Malabar in espresso blends, the 2018 Specialty Coffee Expo in Seattle prompted more roasters to offer it as a single-origin espresso. That year’s show coincided with the 25th anniversary of Espresso Vivace, the iconic roaster and espresso specialist. Many expo attendees made the pilgrimage to Vivace’s flagship café on the day that co-owner and espresso legend David Schomer was to be on bar. Visitors got to taste not just David’s Vivace Dolce blend, but also straight Monsooned Malabar pulled as espresso.

At the show the next day, our booth had a steady stream of roasters stopping by just to tell us that the Monsooned Malabar at Espresso Vivace was the sweetest espresso they’d ever tasted.

When I travel to India, I make sure never to visit anyone empty-handed. Typically, I bring Josuma Coffee paraphernalia or coffee gear that may be hard to find in India. On more recent trips, though, I travel with something more valuable to my friends in India: roasted Monsooned Malabar beans. **b**