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SEPTEMBER | OCTOBER 2005

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Navigating Origins

AUSTRALIA

Coffee

If there's one long-standing rule in the coffee industry, it's the one that dictates where specialty coffee can and cannot be grown.

Between the Tropic of Capricorn and the Tropic of Cancer? Yes. Outside the tropics? Absolutely not.

But Australia, well south of the Bean Belt, as it is commonly called, is doing everything it can to break that long-standing rule.

"The tropics are an arbitrary set of boundaries that make it easier for the masses to understand why coffee is grown," says Andrew Ford, general manager for Mountain Top Coffee, a coffee farm located on Australia's east coast. "But, really, it is a range of conditions that makes it favorable to grow coffee. Here, specialty coffee is not better because of the altitude—it's better because of the conditions."

Australia's growers and exporters are determined to prove that Australia has the conditions necessary to grow great specialty coffee. For example, the southern latitude of the country means that the coffee trees receive the necessary warmth and sunshine even though they're only 200–400 meters above sea level. The long ripening period—12 months or more in some regions—increases the level of sweetness and adds to specialty levels.




AUSTRALIA FACTS

Name Commonwealth of Australia

Location The continent of Australia lies southeast of Asia and is bordered by the Pacific Ocean to the east, the Coral Sea to the northeast, the Timor Sea to the northwest, the Indian Ocean to the west and the Tasman Sea to the southeast.

Area The smallest continent in the world, at 2,967,893 sq. miles.

Still, some are skeptical. In fact, some are so skeptical that Ford won't start giving a presentation on the coffee until everyone in the room has tasted it. "I think people are not prepared to listen because in many respects they've been pre-molded to believe that Australian coffee is good," he says. "So now I say, 'Let's cup the coffee first.' Then they're more likely to listen."

Tim Wendelboe, the 2004 World Barista Champion, did a similar thing in the 2004 World Barista Championship, creating his signature drink with Australian coffee. "[Wendelboe] said, 'I'm using a coffee from Australia grown at 400 meters in altitude, and it's a single-estate espresso,'" says Ford. "He broke three of the major rules in coffee, and then went on to win. It's a good lesson for the industry to look outside the box."

Not surprisingly, misconceptions about Australia's coffee still abound. "People believe that it is poor quality, that it is grown too low in altitude, that kangaroos eat all the cherries..." says Ford. "But when Australian coffee is managed well, I believe it is as good as the best coffee in the world."

Still, Ford cautions, as with any coffee, buyer beware. "Make sure you, the roaster, know what you're buying," he says. "Just like in every other producing country in the



world, a majority of growers do not focus on quality and produce average-quality coffee. However, some focus on quality and the results are truly amazing and well worth looking for and trying.”

Flavor

Although each region produces its own unique flavor, quality Australian coffees are known for their sweetness, as well as their mid to high acidity levels.

“Australian coffees commonly are attributed with nutty, caramelly and chocolaty aromas,” says M^r Ryan, director of Eureka Coffee Pty. Ltd, a roaster, grower and distributor in Australia. “Australian coffee becoming highly regarded for its ability to stand up on its own as a single-origin coffee in everything from medium roasts to espresso blends. Its big advantage is that it does not need to be blended with imported coffees, but can be offered as a blended single-origin coffee or single-estate coffee in most instances.”

History

Despite what might appear to be new interest in Australia’s coffee, the country has actually grown coffee more than 200 years. Since its introduction to the country in 1788, coffee has gone through several periods of growth and decline.

“Australia was a specialty coffee growing country more than 100 years ago, but the industry collapsed when the tariff was removed from overseas coffees,” says Joy Phelps, co-owner of Wombah Coffee Plantation. “This occurred around the time of World War I. Generally speaking, the industry was revived in the 1980s.”

Ryan agrees, adding that “Although coffee has been grown in Australia for more than a century, over the past 20 years has the industry had a resurgence. This has mainly been due to the availability of mechanical harvesting, as well as increased attention to cooperation amongst growers to promote the industry and raise awareness and support for quality standards.”

In addition, many growers, enticed by the growing in-country coffee marketplace, have switched from other crops, such as tobacco, bananas and avocados. State and federal governmental agricultural agencies are also generating new interest in coffee through workshops, market studies and grants for producers.

Cultivation

Depending on whom you ask, Australia either has three or four main growing regions. The three large regions are Far North Queensland, Central and Southeast Queensland and Northern New South Wales; if you prefer the four-region system: Northern New South Wales, the Atherton Tablelands (or Cairns Highlands), the central Queensland coast and Southeast Queensland. Coffee is also grown on Norfolk Island, a small island east of Australia that is administered by Australia. Norfolk Island’s balmy, subtropical climate makes it suitable for growing specialty coffee.

Typically, coffee farms are either very old and very small (one to 10 acres) or quite new and quite large (20 to 200 acres). The traditional small farms—totally about 10 to 20 percent of the total production—employ about 80 percent of the growers—harvest and process by hand. The larger farms are mechanically harvested, wet-processed and mechanically dried.

The majority of Australia’s coffee is produced naturally, without the use of pesticides or fungicides. This isn’t a marketing choice so much as it is a lucky one—Australian coffee doesn’t struggle with pests and diseases, such as coffee rust, which are so prevalent in other coffee-growing origins. “We’re a long way from every other producer in the world,” Ford says of the lack of problems. “And we have tough quarantine restrictions on everything, including coffee.”

Hurdles

At this point, the country faces a few obstacles. Of course, overcoming the stereotype of low-altitude coffee grown out of the Bean Belt is a big one. “Awareness levels of Australia as a coffee-growing nation are relatively low, as is the perception and knowledge of Australian coffee being of a high standard,” says Ryan.

But there are other barriers that growers are finding just as daunting. Price competitiveness is one many growers and exporters worry about. “Due to the Australian green bean being amongst the most expensive in the world, price competitiveness will always be a challenge,” says Ryan.

Future

Despite the country’s low altitude, Australia’s coffee future is on the rise, especially thanks to new interest and increased production. “The production of coffee is forecasted to increase ten-fold from 1998 to 2008,” says Ford. “The challenge will come over the next five years as the volume of coffee that will be produced every year has to find a market. Most of the new entrants have planted coffee without an understanding of the price fluctuations and low



relative price of coffee, plus the enormous amount of knowledge you need to produce truly specialty coffee.”

In addition, many producers are now going on to tackle larger markets, such as the U.S., Germany Japan. “It’s an interesting scenario,” muses Ford. “But in Australia you have to have success offshore. you’re a success offshore, it means you’re automatically a success at home.” Think of Russell Crowe, he says, and you have an idea of what’s he’s talking about.

And in a market where two-thirds of the 600 tons of coffee produced annually are consumed inside the country, gaining the support of the local market is a necessary step for securing the future. “So right now we’re focusing on absolute quality and trying to position ourselves as a single-origin brand offshore,” says Ford. “For our business right now, the quality is already there, so it’s 100 percent about building consumer demand for the product.”



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