



By: Janet Clarkson

# The Other Uses Of Coffee

Without starting off on a disappointing note - there are no secret, sinister, or suspicious uses of coffee revealed here, nothing that you could not discuss with your grandmother. A possible exception is the use of coffee enemas, which, if it not immoral or illegal, certainly should be in any country which calls itself civilised.

How did it all start? There is no doubt that the coffee plant originated in Ethiopia, and that by the thirteenth century the drink was being prepared in the Arab countries as we know it now - by infusing or boiling the roasted and ground beans in water. Although the exact details of the geographic and culinary transitions are lost in the mists of antiquity, some things seem fairly certain.

The original use of coffee was as a food, the berries with their sugary pulp being simply plucked from the trees and eaten. At some time a few thousand years ago, the coffee berries - or perhaps just the green beans - were mixed with animal fat and used as a sort of African pemmican to sustain hunters on long journeys. Today in Ethiopia a famous and favourite dish called bunakela is made by mixing and roasting coffee beans with cereal grains, spices, butter or onions. We don't seem to have a modern European version of edible coffee, unless the chocolate coated coffee beans we buy from the gourmet confectionary counter qualify as food.

From Ethiopia, coffee was taken to the Yemen, and from there its use spread gradually throughout the the Arabic world, where it became prized as a medicine. The green unroasted beans were made into a tea-like infusion called bunchum, and used to treat all sorts of problems by those rich enough to be able to afford it. The 10th century Persian physician Avicenna said that bunchum 'fortifies the

members, it cleans the skin, and dries up the humidities that are under it, and gives an excellent smell to all the body.' People are known to try all sorts of drastic remedies to 'fortify the member', but if coffee was a great success at this it would be spectacularly more popular than it already is. As for the skin, no doubt someone, sometime, somewhere, has made coffee scented soap for sale at the local market. It would at least give that excellent smell to the body.

In 1898, the author of a pharmacology text called King's American Dispensatory agreed with the health benefits of coffee, saying: 'An infusion of roasted coffee is an agreeable stimulant, anti-soporific, and anti-emetic. It produces a mild, stimulating influence upon the organs of digestion, facilitating digestion, augmenting the biliary flow, and increasing peristalsis, thus favoring a free action from the bowels'. Over a hundred years later there are a few sad, hopeless individuals who still believe that coffee is useful for the bowels - when applied directly, in the form of an enema. Quite enough said.

The particular use of coffee which was instrumental in its spread throughout the Arabic world was its use by the Sufi, who used it to stay awake during their religious rituals. This provoked the anxiety of the religious authorities of the day, who became concerned that the apparent intoxicant effects were a contravention of Islamic law. Part of their concern was also because by the late fifteenth century these intoxicant properties were becoming appreciated by the not-so-religious, who were beginning to congregate in the coffee houses rather than the mosques. To the less than democratic leaders of the day, this meeting of intellectuals was a threat, and they did what nervous rulers usually do, and tried to ban everything associated with it. The first documented attempt to ban coffee was in Mecca in 1511, but the lure of coffee was too powerful, and its converts too determined, and this and all subsequent attempts ultimately failed. In today's world, coffee is perhaps more often the object of an almost religious devotion, rather than an instrument for it. Readers of this magazine will probably understand.

Coffee shops are not just places to merely drink coffee of course. In Constantinople the word for coffee houses meant 'schools of wisdom', and in London the coffee shops were known as 'penny universities'. The famous clerical gourmand, Sydney Smith (b.1771) said 'If you want to improve your understanding, drink coffee; it is the intelligent beverage.' Coffee remains an important feature of university life today - but is more likely to be used as an aid to insomnia than to understanding.

Wherever coffee houses sprang up they were the gathering places for the intellectuals, politicians and literary people of the day. The French Revolution was planned in the cafes of Paris, and at the very same tables some of the great literature of the age was conceived and written. Serious business was transacted in the coffee houses of seventeenth century London where the arrival of coffee was simultaneous with the huge expansion of trade, each assisting the development of the other. Some of the great financial institutions of the world such as the Stock Exchange and Lloyds of London actually had their beginnings in those coffee houses. It is hard to imagine poetry being written and revolution fomented today at Starbucks. We still do do business over coffee, but only the preliminaries, which don't require a lot of unstained space to spread out the paperwork and park the lawyers.

Coffee has been a focus, one way or another, for social change and interchange around the world for five hundred years. There is no suggestion that this, surely its most enchanting and enduring function, is on the wane. Perhaps the final word on this should go to the inimitable Isabella Beeton '...It is a question whether, if we had no tea and no coffee, the popular instinct would not seek for and discover the means of replacing them....'

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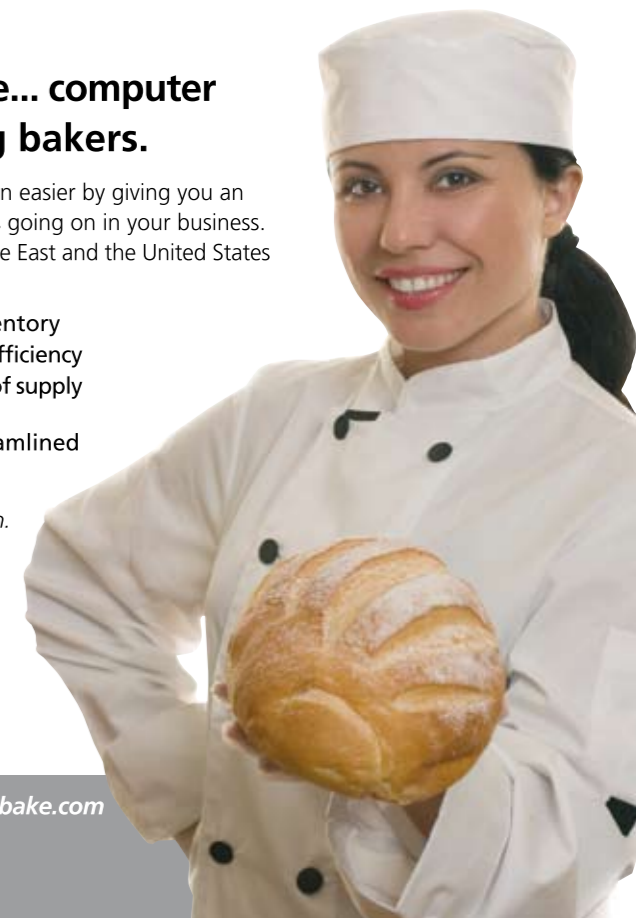
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