The Ethiopian Coffee Ceremony

A 9th-century Ethiopian goat-herder, Kaldi, who, noticing the energizing effects when his flock nibbled on the bright red berries of a certain bush, chewed on the fruit himself. His exhilaration prompted him to bring the berries to a Monk in a nearby monastery. But the monk disapproved of their use and threw them into the fire, from which an enticing aroma billowed and the monks came out to investigate. The roasted beans were quickly raked from the embers, ground up and dissolved in hot water, yielding the world's first cup of coffee.

The coffee ceremony is considered to be the most important social occasion in many villages and it is a sign of respect and friendship to be invited to a coffee ceremony.

The lengthy Ethiopian coffee ceremony involves processing the raw, unwashed coffee beans into finished cups of coffee. It begins with the preparation of the room for the ritual.

First, the woman who is performing the ceremony spreads fresh, aromatic grasses and/or flowers across the floor. She begins burning incense to ward off evil spirits, and continues to burn incense throughout the ceremony. She fills a round-bottomed, black clay coffeepot (known as a jebena) with water and places it over hot coals.

Then, the hostess takes a handful of green coffee beans and carefully cleans them in a heated, long-handled, wok-like pan. Holding the pan over hot coals or a small fire, she stirs and shakes the husks and debris out of the beans until they are clean.

Once the beans are clean, she slowly roasts them in the pan she used to clean them. During the roasting, she keeps the roast as even as possible by shaking the beans (much like one would shake an old-fashioned popcorn popper) or stirring them constantly. The roasting may be stopped once the beans are a medium brown, or it may be continued until they are blackened and shimmering with essential oils. The aroma of the roasted coffee is powerful and is considered to be an important aspect of the ceremony.

After the hostess has roasted the beans, she will grind them. She uses a tool similar to a mortar and pestle. The “mortar” is a small, heavy wooden bowl called a mukecha (pronounced moo-key-cha) and the “pestle” is a wooden or metal cylinder with a blunt end, called a zenezena. With these tools, she crushes the beans into a coarse ground.

By the time the beans are ground, the water in the jebena is typically ready for the coffee. The performer removes a straw lid from the coffeepot and adds the just-ground coffee. The mixture is brought to a boil and removed from heat.

At this point, the coffee is ready to be served. A tray of very small, handle-less ceramic or glass cups is arranged with the cups very close together. The ceremony performer pours the coffee in a single stream from about a foot above the cups, ideally filling each cup equally without breaking the stream of coffee.