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The Haitian Coffee Story

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Most people do not associate Haiti with coffee. This is not at all surprising considering the proliferation of coffees now available for the avid coffee drinker. It is also unfortunate fact that Haiti has pretty much fallen off the radar screen of many Americans. Given a map of the world, how quickly could you identify Haiti's location? I pose this question not as a conflated challenge, but as the sad reality faced by many of the third-world coffee producing countries in the world. Unfortunately, many coffee consumers suffer naiveté when it comes to the countries of origin of their favorite brew.

So, you may ask, what does Haiti have to do with coffee? I would say that in the present market, Haiti has very little impact; perhaps no impact at all. For many people, it is with surprise when they learn that Haiti once garnished half of the world's coffee production. The French first planted coffee in Haiti early in the 18th century. By 1791, Haiti ruled the world as the leading coffee producer, an enterprise that required approximately 30,000 African slaves every year to be "imported" to work on the plantations. When you finally find Haiti on that map of yours, you will marvel that a country so small could have produced so much coffee. Even though consumption in the 18th C. is hardly as it is today, it is still amazing that there was any land left in Haiti for any other crops or livestock.

The story behind the demise of Haiti's coffee industry reads like a summer blockbuster movie. The slaves, mistreated, abused and over-worked did the impossible in 1793; they collectively overthrew the French and successfully became

the only nation in the West where a slave revolt ended with the withdrawal of the landowners. A Haitian Priest friend of mine explained that because the slaves had little to no experience in running a country, Haiti soon fell into chaos. As in other cases where social unrest is the rule, most of the Haitian industries that had been managed by the French quickly became demised. Haitian coffee had been primarily funneled through France and now the victorious Haitians had no one to buy their precious beans. As the new leaders of the country focused their energies on establishing peace and starting along the hard road of independence, the coffee industry began to shrink. There are obviously many other factors associated with the depleted coffee industry but most of them are rooted in the circumstances following the revolution.

The correlation between the decimated forests and the slump in coffee production in Haiti is obvious. In the 18th Century when Haiti ruled the coffee world, thousands of acres were cleared to plant the precious coffee crop. The clearing did not completely take out all the trees, for the French used shade growing just like most of the other coffee producing countries in the world. In the post-revolution Haiti, these "shade" trees became objects for charcoal just as much as any other tree. The slow destruction of the forests led ultimately to the death of many coffee plantations. In place of coffee, farmers turned to "cash crops" like fruit, vegetables and sugar in order to raise money. Presently, coffee farmers are still turning to cash crops (e.g. soybeans) and more and more coffee farms disappear because of this. A Haitian coffee "speculator" (i.e. broker) recently told me that coffee production never fully recovered from the post-revolution slump. **But, since 1991, the country is focused on re-establishing its reputation on the coffee market in terms of quantity. The quality of the beans is still excellent. The Haitian Coffee Bean is among the ten best beans of the world.**

Fortunately, there are several nurseries that are beginning to grow coffee and then sell the seedlings to the farmers. At one nursery, we were able to buy a dozen healthy looking plants for \$1US! There is hope, but the road ahead is a rough one. Haitian coffee is making a come back. It might not be obvious that there is hope in the Haitian coffee industry. After all, there is much to look forward to from Haiti and its coffee. As the gourmet market for coffee increases throughout the US, Europe, Australia and many other countries around the world, there is a growing demand for coffees that are not stamped "Brazil", "Columbia" or "Kenya". Not that the quality of these coffee giants is decreasing, but rather, the demand for the unique, the unusual or the hard-to-find is increasing. This is good news for Haiti. The basic rule of "supply and demand" will foster the re-establishment of the Haitian coffee on the world market. This is not naïve rhetoric nor is it empty promises for the struggling Haitian Farmers, rather it is the direction the gourmet coffee market seems to be heading.

Most of Haiti's coffee is naturally processed (i.e. the majority of the processing is done with the use of drying either in the sun or less likely, dried mechanically. The coffee is then hulled with the use of a large wooden bowl and a pole that smashes the beans, thereby separating the parchment). Natural coffee is graded using one to five "X's"; XXXXX is the highest quality natural coffee that can be found in Haiti. Unfortunately, naturally processed Haitian coffee (known as Café Pilé) did not meet in the past the standards of gourmet coffee.

In 1991, the new government and the Association of Haitian Coffee Growers have provided some extensive training to almost all the coffee growers and their workers in Haiti and, by the end of 1992, the Haitian Arabica Coffee Bean has exceeded by far the standards of gourmet coffee. Unfortunately, due to some major political turmoil in the country, the US government has placed a very long embargo on Haiti that hurt very much the Haitian coffee export to the US. On June 2002, the embargo was finally lifted and the door of opportunity is wide open for the famous Haitian Coffee. The demand for the Haitian Coffee in the US increases everyday.

Most, if not all, of the natural coffee was consumed in Haiti during the American embargo from 1991 to June 2002. It can generally be bought on the open markets for about \$1US for 1 1/2 pounds and is then darkly roasted at home over the fire or in the oven with a sprinkling of sugar. This roasting practice of adding sugar makes for a strong brew that makes waking up in the morning a sudden reality. The coffee is ground to a very fine powder (hence the name Pilé) and then placed in a sock-like device. Heated water is repeatedly poured through a filter until the consistency is that of thin syrup. The taste however, is divine

Sometimes, the coffee beans are wet-processed (i.e. the process includes the use of water for separating, hulling and cleaning the beans). Wet-processed coffees (known as Café Lavé) generally are only further graded as being "high grown" (i.e. grown around 600 meters or 1800 feet) or "strictly high grown" (i.e. grown higher than 1800 feet). These are a superior bean to the natural coffee and are mainly tagged for export. As is the case for many coffee-growing countries, the best coffee is exported and is hard to find in its place of origin! The coffee beans used by **TWIDCO** and

in the production of all **MARABOU** brands are from a coffee plantation in Haiti that covers an area of about 1200 acres including support lands bearing larger trees providing the necessary shade that enhances the quality of the coffee beans. The maps below show the geographical location of Haiti and the location of our coffee plantation in the country.





Picture of the Arabica coffee taken directly from our plantation

In summary, I hope this brief overview of Haiti and its coffee was helpful. If there are questions or comments on any other aspects of the Haitian Coffee, please feel free to contact me at:

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