



Indonesians from across the country savour *kawa daun* when visiting the West Sumatra province. At the Kiniko Home Industry, the beverage is served with snacks made from banana and tapioca.

Colonial Cuppa

WHAT'S COFFEE WITHOUT THE BEAN? FIND OUT IN WEST SUMATRA BY RATHINA SANKARI

There must be a hundred ways to prepare coffee, but it all begins with the bean. Or so I assumed, until I found myself craving a cup of the brew while exploring Indonesia's Western Sumatra province with my local Minangkabau guide, Budiman, or Buddy. Palpably excited at showing me one more local speciality, Buddy suggested I try *kawa daun*, a drink prepared by boiling coffee leaves.

I was incredulous, but followed Buddy to Kiniko Home Industry, a coffee processing plant in Tanah Datar, one of West Sumatra's regencies. On the way, Buddy revealed the origins of *kawa daun*. The Dutch introduced coffee from their territory in Malabar to Indonesia in the late 17th century. The plantations—powered by local labourers who cleared forests, planted, and harvested—flourished in the archipelago's tropical conditions. Despite their drudgery, however, the Minang were not privy to the yield. All of it went to Europe,

which was abuzz with the new coffee culture that had begun displacing common breakfast beverages like ale and wine. Lavish coffee shops mushroomed and access to every single coffee bean was restricted to the colonizers, Buddy told me.

But the Minang, not to be outdone, developed an indigenous technique of using the plants. "If not the beans, then the leaves," explained Buddy. The leaves were plucked, dried and then boiled in water to prepare an aromatic drink. The locals named the drink for *qahwah*, which means coffee in Arabic, and *daun*, the local word for leaves. Since the drink is brewed like tea, it is also called *teh kawa daun*, or coffee leaf tea.

The beverage is easily available at roadside stalls around the towns of Padang Panjang and Kota Baru. It is always served in a coconut shell (coconut plantations are widespread in Sumatra) placed on a bamboo pedestal. Sometimes milk is added to the drink.

The best accompaniments are the glutinous rice snack *lamang* and a few pieces of durian. The drink is said to help treat hypertension, cholesterol, and diabetes.

When we arrived at Kiniko it was lunchtime and most workers were on a break. The factory looked desolate, but the smell of coffee hung heavily in the air. A lady in hijab sat alone in front of a huge tray of coffee powder, packing auburn dust into transparent envelopes. We moved past her to an outdoor patio with short tree trunks for stools. Endless views of verdant rice steppes and swaying coconut trees stretched ahead of us.

Buddy handed me a steaming cup of the bitter decoction. I brooded over the jet-black liquid, and took a sip. It hinted at the dark history surrounding West Sumatran coffee. But it also spoke to me about the genius of the local alchemists, who refused to be denied their daily cuppa. ●