

A Lesson In Simplicity and Waiting

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I remember the first time I tasted Bali coffee (or Bali *kopi*, as locals know it).

I had just landed on the island after a 26-hour journey from Chicago. After the hour-plus drive to my villa hotel, nestled in a highland village lined with rice patties called Ubud, I was ready for a caffeine fix. After ordering a coffee, I padded down to soak my tired feet in my private pool.

Sitting there, the sweet breeze perfumed by the overhanging frangipani trees, I took my first sip of this nectar of the gods.

And, immediately I spit it out—my mouth full of coffee grounds.

Apparently, it’s a common mistake that Bali newbies make. When you’re offered coffee, unless you specify drip coffee or an espresso-based coffee (like an Americano or latte) you’re usually offered Bali coffee. It’s a local type of instant coffee, often made with both finely ground coffee and coffee powder, that’s either boiled with water, or spooned into a mug of hot water and stirred together. Traditional shops that are popular with the locals, like Kedai Kopi Aboe Thalib in central Bali, still brew Bali coffee with a pan of boiling water on the stove.

In a way, it’s reminiscent of Turkish or Greek coffee, as the result is a strongly brewed, boiled coffee. Just without the fancy coffee pot (*cezve* or *briki*).

As I would learn, you have to wait for the coffee grounds to settle to the bottom.

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Although Indonesia has been well-known for its coffee, it has only been in the last century that its cultivation has moved to Bali. Other Indonesian islands, like Sumatra, produce most of the coffee crop, which is exported to other countries. This is usually arabica beans.

While Bali does have a blossoming organic arabica trade—and among coffee roasters, coffee regions like Kintamani (the northern part of the island) have growing acclaim—the traditional Bali coffee is made from robusta beans. As such, Bali coffee has an earthier, more bitter taste and is widely consumed by locals due to its affordable price. Robusta also has almost twice the amount of caffeine as arabica. While locals have adjusted to the higher caffeine content, it causes noticeable jitters among unacquainted visitors.

Asher Yaron, who founded F.R.E.A.K. Coffee, a boutique coffee roastery and cafe in Ubud, shared a similar initial reaction to Bali coffee as I had.

“On my first visit to Bali in 1997, I thought the coffee was so bad that I couldn’t drink it,” said Yaron. “For the duration of my stay in Bali I stopped drinking coffee completely and drank tea instead. When I permanently moved here in 2010, not much had changed regarding the quality of the coffee available.”

In an effort to bring better coffee to the masses, he began buying arabica beans (which was uncommon for that time) from coffee farmers in Kintamani, and roasting himself. Today, craft coffee shops with artsy lattes dot the streets of Bali’s larger cities, buying and roasting arabica beans, while locals continue to drink their Bali coffee made with robusta beans. In many ways, it’s the tale of two islands—just a further example of difference between living in Bali and visiting.

While I love the morning ritual of grinding beans and brewing my pour over, there’s a simplicity in Bali coffee. Waiting for the grounds to sink to the bottom is a reminder to slow down—a morning meditation that’s part of the island life.

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