

Coffee: From Bean to Cup

A universally appreciated product, coffee is much more than a simple energising drink. Behind every cup lies a complex economic, agricultural, and commercial chain. From the red cherry to the roasted bean, coffee embodies one of the most dynamic and sensitive markets in the agricultural world.

1. The Origins of Coffee: History and Global Spread

The coffee plant, originally from East Africa, spread from the 15th century via the Arabian Peninsula, then was introduced to Europe. With the rise of colonial empires, coffee cultivation extended to tropical colonies, which helped make coffee a prestige product and a driver of global trade. Today, more than 80 countries produce coffee, concentrated in the "coffee belt" between the Tropics of Cancer and Capricorn. This geographical distribution gives coffee a great aromatic diversity, dependent on climate, altitude, terroir, and cultivated varieties.

2. From Fruit to Bean: The Transformation Process

After harvesting coffee cherries (each fruit containing two "green beans"), the transformation follows several key steps:

- Drying: either dry (natural) or wet processed.
- Pulping and sorting of beans.
- Roasting: a step that develops the characteristic aromas and colour of coffee.
- (Optional) Grinding, packaging, and distribution.

Each phase strongly influences the quality of the final product. So-called "high-end" or "speciality" coffees require strict traceability and particular care in harvesting and processing, while the "volume / commodity" segment prioritises yield and standardisation.

3. Varieties: Arabica vs Robusta: Two Markets, Two Realities

According to recent global data: for the 2023/2024 harvest, global coffee production amounts to approximately 171.4 million 60kg bags. Of this production, ~56.7% corresponds to the *Coffea arabica* species, and ~43.3% to the *Coffea canephora* species (Robusta / Conilon).

These two main varieties offer different profiles:

- Arabica: often associated with more aromatic, mild, fruity, "speciality" coffees, grown at high altitudes.
- Robusta: more resilient, more productive, bolder flavour, more caffeine, often used in blends or instant coffees.

4. Global Market: Production, Consumption, and 2024–2025 Dynamics

Production & Species Share

- For the 2023/2024 coffee year, global production is estimated at 171.4 million 60kg bags.
- Within this production, Arabica represents ~56.7%, Robusta/Conilon ~43.3%.
- Recent reports show that production can fluctuate according to climatic cycles, agricultural conditions, and global demand.

Demand & Consumption

Coffee remains one of the most consumed beverages in the world, with billions of cups drunk every day, making it an economic pillar for producing countries, logistics chains, processing, and distribution.

Volatility & Risks 2024–2025

- In 2024, unfavourable climatic conditions (droughts, weather disruptions) caused a significant increase in prices, according to the Food and Agriculture Organisation (FAO).
- This volatility particularly affects small-scale producers, whose incomes depend on global markets and fluctuating prices, making the economic model fragile.

5. Issues: Sustainability, Producers, Market & Challenges

Coffee is globally cultivated by millions of smallholder farmers, often in rural tropical areas. The sector is exposed to several challenges:

Climate & Environment

Climate change, adverse weather events, coffee plant sensitivity, yield variations.

Economy & Income

Price volatility, dependence on global markets, reduced margins for producers.

Sustainability & Equity

Traceability, fair trade, working conditions, producer support, "organic / fair / sustainable" certifications.

Pressure from Global Demand

Growing consumption, demanding both volume and quality, which puts pressure on standards and diversification of origins.

Fair trade initiatives, crop diversification projects, agroecological practices, and co-operatives exist to improve producer resilience, but the pressure remains strong.

Conclusion

From the red cherry of the tropics to the cup enjoyed in Europe or elsewhere, coffee embodies a complex chain combining agriculture, trade, finance, climate, and socio-economics. Arabica and Robusta alike, small-scale producer or speciality coffee, coffee remains a global pillar: strategic, fragile, but resilient. Its future will depend on the balance between global demand, climate adaptation, concern for sustainable development, and equity for producers.

Sources

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