The Origins of Coffee

It is often thought that coffee was first discovered in Ethiopia by a 9th century goat herder named Kaldi. As he tended his herd he noticed that his goats became quite excited after eating the red berries of a certain shrub so he chewed on the fruits himself and felt somewhat invigorated. Kaldi is said to have taken the berries to a local monastery where he told the monks of his find. The monks did not approve and threw his berries into the fire wherefrom an enticing aroma emitted, drawing other monks to investigate the origins of this new fragrance. The monks raked the beans from the fire and drenched them in water to cool them thus creating the first cup of coffee.

This is likely a fanciful tale because the first writings of Kaldi and his Coffee are not known to have been recorded until 1671 (some 800 years after the event), which makes its authenticity quite dubious.
True or False, we like the story and it is likely that coffee did originate in East Africa and more specifically Ethiopia, indeed it is thought by many that all coffee plants can have their origin traced back to Ethiopian origin.

Fable aside, we can be reasonably certain that coffee was originally mainly consumed in the Islamic world and had direct connections with religious practices. Studies of genetic diversity indicate the plants to be of African origin but there is no specific evidence of the exact location. Harar is widely considered as the origin point but the best we can say is that coffee originated from the region of Ethiopia, Kenya or Sudan where local populations may have cultivated the plants.

Credible evidence exists to show that coffee drinking took place in the Sufi Monasteries of Yemen in the mid 15th Century and we still use the term Mocha (a Yemen port on the Red Sea) in coffee references today. The Sufi’s used the drink to keep them alert during their night-time devotions and held it in high reverence. It is most likely that coffee spread from Mocha into Egypt, North Africa, then the Middle East, Persia and Turkey. In many locations coffee would be banned by the orthodox imams but most of such bans were overturned in the mid 16th Century by order of the Ottoman Turkish Sultan Selim I and the Grand Mufti Mehmet Ebusuud al-Imadi issued a fatwa permitting coffee drinking.

By the end of the 16th Century, coffee was established in all of these areas and from the Middle East it made its way to the busy trading port of Venice, Italy and thence to the rest of Europe.

The coffee plants were highly prized and protected, so it wasn’t until 1616 that the Dutch merchant Pieter van der Broecke managed to obtain some of the bushes and transport them to the botanical gardens in Amsterdam. The plants thrived in the carefully managed microclimate of the botanical gardens and some 40 years later the Dutch took some of the plants to Ceylon (Sri Lanka) and India then on to the Indonesian territories Java and Sumatra. At the Treaty of Utrecht the Dutch gifted the French a coffee plant for the Jardin des Plantes in Paris and it was the French naval captain Gabriel des Clieux that carried plant cuttings to the Americas. It is rumoured that during the voyage there was strict water rationing and des Clieux shared his ration with the coffee cuttings to maintain them until arrival in Guadeloupe. Through the efforts of the French coffee quickly thrived in the West Indies. A cocoa blight was hurting the farmers and the prolific growth of the coffee trees made them an ideal substitute.

In 1727 Lt Col. Francisco de Melo Palheta smuggled coffee seeds from French Guiana into Brazil and within 80 years coffee production had grown to such a level that it was no longer a drink for the elite.... coffee was available to the masses.