

# A Conscious BREW

TEXT: COCOMARETT IMAGES: MATTROSS



*To taste Sijahtra is to embark on an unparalleled journey through taste, aroma and sensation. Two men embarked on a remarkable journey to bring this most rare of coffees into being. From inspiration to education, cultivation to craft, their dream has been to create the world's first delicacy coffee.*

First served in its brewed form around 1000 A.D, coffee has a history as rich and intriguing as its distinctive and multi-faceted aroma. It was only in the 12th Century, when coffee was offered as a gift to royalty, that it was attributed with the value it deserved.

Coffee takes its fabled beginning from the story of Kaldi, an Ethiopian goat herder in the 9th Century, who learned about its unique effects from watching his livestock energised after eating coffee cherries. However, the first documented reports about the potency of this bean come from the historical accounts of the Sufi monks in 15th Century Yemen, who drank coffee to stay awake during midnight devotions. What is indisputable is the meteoric journey of coffee into the world's consciousness. The coffee plant was brought from Ethiopia to the Middle East, spreading swiftly along the legendary trade routes to Europe and Asia, as demand continued to grow in response to the unique tastes and aromas of this dark elixir.

Of all the coffee plants surreptitiously appropriated from Mocha, Ethiopia, it was those obtained by Dutch merchant Pieter van der Broecke in 1616 that began the true commercialisation of coffee. From his botanical conservatory in Holland, his cultivars were transported around the world to many countries but it was Dutch-controlled Indonesia that was the first to establish itself as a world supplier.

A proliferation of coffee houses throughout the early 17th Century solidified coffee's standing in the fabric of daily life. These cultural melting pots welcomed people of disparate origins to exchange new ideas over a shared new passion: coffee.

At the exhortation of this burgeoning community of coffee aficionados, new varieties were explored, new brewing methods introduced and a sub-culture of true coffee connoisseurs emerged - a passionate group tirelessly seeking the perfect bean.

In 1696, the Dutch East India Company established a coffee estate in modern day Java to meet the emergent demand from Europe, positioning Indonesia at the epicentre of coffee production.

Indonesian coffee is noted for its superior quality, satisfying the palates of those who seek the ultimate coffee experience. The refined *Coffea Arabica* plant flourishes amid the archipelago's delicate balance of elements, endowing the beans with their characteristic taste and flavour. The current small-scale farming system, aided by the region's unique natural components, sustains Indonesia's position as the origin of some of the finest and most varied coffee in the world.

And so begins the story of the creation of Sijahtra.

"Two and half years ago, I was lying in the desert in Nevada watching the sunrise and I had an epiphany to follow my passion in finding the perfect coffee," says Matt Ross, Co-Founder of Sijahtra.

A man of his word, Ross not only left behind a lucrative career in banking, but traded his swanky apartment in Hong Kong for what was essentially a shack in rural Sumatra. "They built it after the tsunami, no-one lived in it, and when I took it there was no electricity or water," Ross recalls. "I rented it for four years for US\$600."

Ironically, it was here that Sijahtra, the most expensive coffee in the world, was born.

"We [the partners] said, we'll start this company and make the best coffee that has ever been made. We didn't care too much if it made money, it was more of a passion. The more we studied it, the more it became an obsession," says Ross. "We decided that we wouldn't sell anything for the first few years; we bought 400 kilos of coffee to study before we even sold our first bean."

For four years, Ross and his partners in Sijahtra lived in Sumatra's picturesque, predominantly isolated northern shores of Aceh to develop an ethical growing and harvesting process that completely redefines the elusive *Kopi Luwak*.

"When we first went to Sumatra they exported one ton of *Kopi Luwak* that year. Last year, they exported 30 tons. There's an insatiable demand, and they need a product, so sadly, some farmers have resorted to caging the civet cats which are extremely territorial and solitary animals," says Ross as he offers a step-by-step demonstration of how Sijahtra has managed to find a way to produce an ethical *Kopi Luwak* whilst showing the utmost respect for wild civet cats.

Foraging by night amongst lush mountainous ranges, civets go searching for food and armed with the keenest of senses, they distinguish disparities in ripeness from cherry to cherry, instinctively seeking out only the coffee cherries at the apex of quality. These indigenous mammals are superior to humans when it comes to selecting the best beans. Eliminating the chances for even the slightest imperfections, the flavours, tastes and experiences conjured up by *Luwak* coffee have been selected by nature's experts.



“We’ve developed a variety of ways to identify and ensure the difference between wild and caged civets. We insist on receiving all of our coffee beans wet and in their freshest form, so we can identify the components of a wide array of fruits, indicating the civet’s wild, varied and organic diet,” states Ross.

Attracted to the naturally stimulating attributes of coffee cherries, the civet seeks them out during cold and rainy weather, deriving all the nourishment they need from the cherries before expelling the whole coffee beans, still wrapped in their parchment. These discarded beans are transformed irrevocably as they pass through the civet’s stomach, mingling with fruits to produce the exceptionally unique flavours of Sijahtra.

“Our coffee is 100% organic. We have coffee trees next to passion fruit trees, avocados and tomatoes; here, nature looks after itself,” says Ross. “Whatever is in season is what the cats eat and it changes the flavour of the coffee completely. The flavours in November will taste different from those in March. We have perfected our processing so we can guarantee a coffee of a certain quality but until we taste it, we don’t know if we’re going to taste wonderful hints of chocolate or papaya.”

During coffee season, from October through to June or July, the team splits each month between Aceh and the inland coffee valleys surrounding Lake Laut Tawar. Here, in a lush Eden-like jungle completely untouched with the exception of Sijahtra’s founders and handful of farmers, mineral-rich volcanic terroir delivers not only a generous and varied diet for wild civet cats, but also a means of income and a sustainable future for local villagers who have been trained to collect the freshest civet-processed beans.

Sijahtra, which translates to ‘prosperity and harmony’ in Acehnese, pays the villagers for wet beans, whilst also depositing money into a development fund utilised to address local infrastructure issues such as water, health and farming education. This fund serves not just the people who provide the Luwak, but also other areas that have been identified to be in dire need of help.

“Every bean is opened by hand to reduce damage and prevent it taking on microscopic dust from the dried parchment as it is removed,” Ross explains. “We employ women who are tsunami widows to do this. By local custom, if a woman has been married, she can’t remarry, so she’s on her own from then on. Sadly a lot of men died in the 2004 tsunami and it’s the first time that many of these women have had an income in years.”

The beans are then wrapped in leaves and driven 10 hours from the jungle to Banda Aceh beach, where they are sorted and processed. “We don’t dry coffee the normal way, we dry them in nets half a mile from the beach so we have a nice sea breeze and natural heat from above and below. We are completely in control of drying the beans,” says Ross. “No-one has made coffee like this before and you know, it doesn’t actually make any financial sense to do it this way. However, we’ve turned a typical five-stage process into a 17-step process to achieve a perfect coffee.”

Brought to life through passion and precision in symphony with nature and the people of Sumatran Indonesia, Sijahtra seeks to preserve and celebrate the region’s captivating heritage. Engaged with and invested in the land and people the company works with, it respectfully harnesses these elements to bring coffee aficionados an addictively indulgent and sustainable drinking experience.

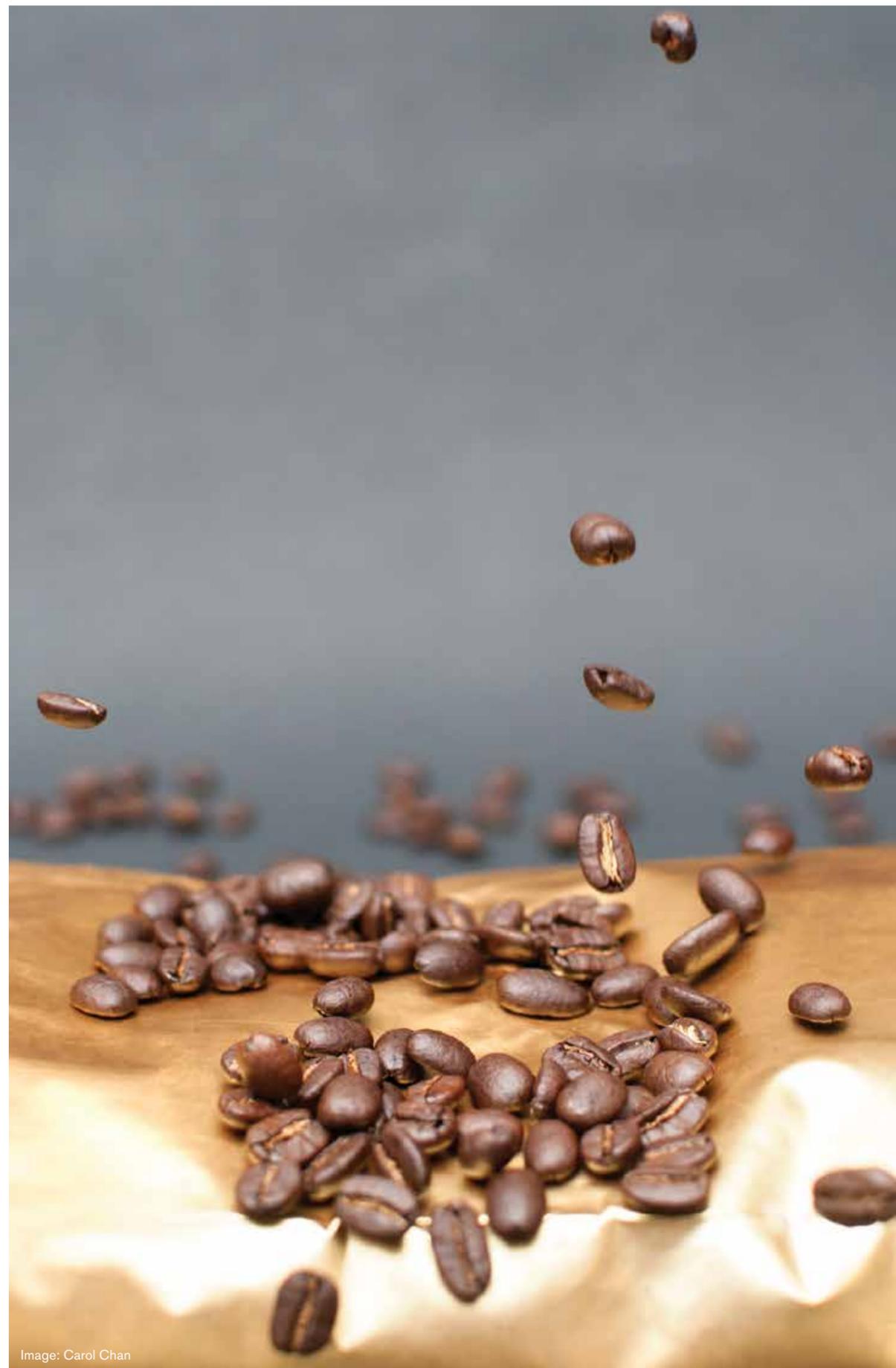


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