

Coffee. The elixir of life. Whether used as a morning wake-up, a hangover helper or a late-night energy boost, it is the most popular hot beverage in the world. The usage of coffee spans the continents, and the beloved caffeine that courses through one's veins as a result of drinking copious quantities tends to ensure that we won't go to bed any time soon.

When I was in the military, and yes I joined almost 20 years ago so don't remind me, I found myself on observation posts and guard duty on many occasions. And my ability to stay awake and alert at all times in the field? The answer is simple, although perhaps a bit disturbing. We were never encouraged to eat our MREs (Meals Ready to Eat) hot, since the sight of the flame and the aromas of the subtle yet sublime Turkey Diced in Gravy could attract those on the other side and give up even the most formidably hidden of positions. Ergo, we ate everything cold, and there was no exception when it came to the coffee.

Of course, as you can't brew cold coffee, we would just chew on the coffee grounds out of the packet and swish them down with some water from our canteens. If you don't have time to brew coffee in the morning, this may become a decent substitute for you, although I wouldn't recommend it on a regular basis.

And where exactly does our beloved joe come from, anyway? To start with, coffee is grown around the globe, and its cultivation is believed to have originated in Ethiopia well over a thousand years ago. As with the many spices I have written about so many times, coffee traversed the globe as Asia visited Africa and the Near East, and as Europeans visited these great lands, coffee came home with them.

Ultimately, perfect climates were found and as a result, Brazil now tops the list as the largest producer and exporter (information courtesy of www.wikipedia.org). Something I did not know previously is that coffee is the second most traded commodity on the global scale, second only to crude oil.

The two standard types of coffee are Arabica and Robusta. Robusta has a ton more caffeine per ounce, but it tends to be more bitter, less flavorful, and have some interesting aromas. We typically see this in the cheaper mass-produced coffees, which might explain why those two small cups of coffee you drank at the auto shop while waiting for your oil to be changes left you sweating, wired and shaking like crazy.

The arabica is typically what you will see from small coffee roasters, of course at a heftier price, and the richness of the body easily makes up for the reduction in the energy-boosting caffeine. We drink good coffee here at the house, so it is a safe bet that it is not the Robusta, although robusta is used sometimes in blends in order to contribute its beneficial properties to the final cup of coffee.

And coffee is not limited to only drinking. I cook with it often, using espresso roasted grounds in steak and chicken rubs, great for grilling and blackening. Coffee is also a natural in the dessert section, as it can be used in mousses, candies, cakes, pies, and just about anything else you can think of.

So as you sip your cup of joe this morning, of course as you read the scintillating columns in this paper, you can nod your head that you are in an elite world-wide fraternity, The Knights of the Ground Table.