IT IS A SOMEWHAT ABSURD EQUATION. The Middle East is where modern coffee consumption began, yet it is one of the least known markets in the world of coffee. Emanating from Dubai—the commercial capital of the Middle East and the center of the ancient spice trade route between East Africa and India—coffee consumption is booming in all directions. From the oldest of drinking and roasting traditions to the most modern of coffee shop trends, it’s been some 800 years since the first cup of coffee is known to have been enjoyed in the Middle East. Today, the region is going through its second boom in coffee culture.
Traditional Light Roast

“Coffee culture is growing everywhere and you see that people are becoming much more aware of all the multiple types and different kinds of coffee you can get,” says Khalid Al Mulla, one of three partners in Dubai-based roaster Easternmen & Co. “The tradition for roasting coffee in the Middle East is entirely different from the Western style of coffee roasting because people here are used to drinking a very light roast and to so many people across the markets in the Middle East this is still the preferred way to have their coffee.”

The light roast is the oldest form of coffee roasting in known history, since the sacred little bean first was discovered in Ethiopia between the sixth and eighth centuries, according to most historical accounts. Arabian traders were the first to experiment with roasting the bean, and when coffee started arriving with the trade caravans in Dubai around the 14th century, it was with these very same light roasted beans that today are the favorite among traditional consumers here. Known in the Middle East simply as “Saudi-style” roast, the appearance of the beans and the drink can play more than a few tricks on surprised visitors.

When visiting supermarkets selling roasted coffee in Dubai, coffee lovers at first glance might think the yellowish beans are parchment coffee, green coffee still not hulled. Upon closer look, consumers will realize that in fact this is the super-light Saudi roast. Those who thought a cinnamon roast was light will have to rethink coffee.

“The three most popular blends used at home in the Middle East are the Saudi style, which by far is the lightest roast, the Arabic blend, which is a cinnamon roast, and then of course the Turkish coffee, which for many years has been one of the dominant types of coffee in the region,” explains Al Mulla.

“Even in the case of Turkish coffee, which normally in the Western markets uses a dark roast, here you will see the local roasters mix a French style very dark roast with a lighter roast,” he adds. “In Egypt, Jordan, Syria...
and Lebanon, all have their own roasting profile according to the local consumer preference. The Egyptians, they like it really dark, in an 80/20 percent blend, but the others like it less dark and mostly use a 60/40 mix. And most of them will mix the final roasted and ground coffee with cardamom, except for in Turkey and Egypt.”

To Western consumers, the dominant taste of the super-light Saudi-style roasted coffee mixed with cardamom and clove is that of spice rather than a traditionally brewed black coffee. And while it’s hard to argue against a roasting style that has survived in this region for hundreds of years, the Middle East today is evidence of how far the evolution in coffee culture has progressed.

A Growing Market

“The Middle East is an amazing market and it’s a very complete market when you look at the development of coffee culture and history, all present here and doing business side by side, from the old Arabian style to all the modern coffee shops,” says Remi Rouchon, head of the Middle East markets for French roasters Malongo. Rouchon estimates that the retail coffee business across key markets in the Middle East sees a growth rate of at least 10 percent per year.

“You have the European coffee roasters here, you have the Asian coffee roasters, and then of course you have the local roasters still maintaining a solid business share even as the region has embraced modern style coffee shops,” Rouchon adds. “It’s a very competitive market here, and every year you see a lot of new companies opening up new coffee businesses.”

That coffee is trending in the Middle East is beyond debate. Coffee is visible everywhere in Dubai, and as the key port and commercial capital of the United Arab Emirates (UAE), the city has climbed rapidly in recent years toward the top of the list for re-exporting coffee from across the world to the expanding consumer markets in the Middle East.
COFFEE CONTINUES TO PROVIDE everlasting fascination. As a subject of exploration, it has more plots, twists and turns than an HBO box set.

As a coffee roaster and Q Grader who learned the trade in New Zealand and London, (rather foolishly) suspected I would be stepping into the ‘cafe scene from the dark ages’ when I joined Coffee Planet in the United Arab Emirates (UAE) about two years ago. I was wrong—foolishly and luckily wrong.

The Gulf countries have taught me so much about coffee. While the Gulf’s fascination with coffee stretches well back into the annals of history, there is also an abundance of affection for the franchised coffee shop model and many people want to be seen sipping a frappe. But things are rapidly changing. Here in Dubai, we are beginning to see the rise of independent coffee shops serving specialty coffees and a new wave of roasters bringing fresh ideas and merging them with tradition and ceremony.

These specialty coffee-serving cafes realize the importance of investing in people, training and equipment. They are seeing the immediate benefits of spending money on quality coffee from a local roaster. The local roasters are having a huge impact on the coffee scene by injecting energy and passion into it, and having fun, too. In the last year, we have all seen a huge rise in the demand for specialty coffee. As a result of there being enough business for everyone, the roasters have let their guards down and we all spend time together, meeting every month to chat about coffee. It’s never a boring subject.

Roasters like us at Coffee Planet, Raw Coffee, Easternmen and Boon are changing the face of coffee in the UAE, bringing in new and exciting fresh coffees from around the world to deliver quality in every cup. Every year, the Gulfood show brings together the area’s coffee community, but this was the first year Dubai’s roasters and coffee shop owners worked together on a Specialty Coffee Association of Europe stand that featured a brew bar and hosted fantastic lectures. Since then, we have seen Easternmen open a coffee museum on the Dubai Creek, a monthly coffee cupping club open up, and the UAE take third place in the world Ibrik competition.

From Saudi Arabia to Egypt, from Yemen and Libya to Oman, Iran and Kuwait, coffee markets are reported to be expanding across the region. Figures are hard to find for many of these countries, but the fact that the USDA has added figures from countries such as Jordan, Yemen, Morocco and Algeria is a good indicator of the importance of this growing market. The USDA pegs total consumption for the core Middle East region of Iran, Jordan, Yemen and Turkey at 1.35 million bags in the 2013-14 crop year. Individual market figures range from 150,000 bags each in Syria and Yemen to as much as 300,000 bags in Jordan. Historical figures are not available for comparison.

A Blend of Old and New

Since the first Starbucks opened in the UAE in 1999, both local and foreign-owned coffee shop chains have been...
embraced by the region’s citizens. Tradition is still well represented, from taking your coffee in a Bedouin tent to enjoying your cup at one of the many modern cafes such as Caffé Nero, Caribou or Costa Coffee, but there is no denying that the Starbucks effect has set off the boom in coffee culture in the Middle East. From Turkey to Dubai, from Egypt to Qatar, the Seattle-based company must be given due credit for being instrumental in reviving the local coffee market.

"In Turkey we have always been drinking coffee, but during many years we forgot about our traditions, and it wasn’t until Starbucks came that people even knew about these different styles for how to prepare coffee," says Turkish roaster Aysin Aydogdu, who entered the coffee industry straight out of college in Istanbul and today works on quality improvement with eight micro-roasteries. "After Alshaya entered the market with Starbucks 15 years ago, coffee culture quickly started growing everywhere, but it’s in these last few to 10 years you really see the market shares starting to pick up and per capita consumption growing," says Hassan El-Badwi, a Lebanese coffee trader. I met at the Gulfood trade show in Dubai earlier this year. Starbucks entered the Middle East in 1999 through a licensing agreement with the Kuwait family business the Alshaya Group. Recognized as one of the leading and most influential retailing franchises in the region, the Alshaya Group today operates more than 230 Starbucks stores across the Middle East markets of Bahrain, Egypt, Jordan, Kuwait, Lebanon, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia and the UAE, according to company information. "We are extremely fortunate and proud to have forged a successful partnership for the past 10 years (with the Alshaya Group) and look forward to developing a real specialty coffee scene, which is what sparks an increase in consumption. But what started with the ambition to fill supermarket shelves and coffee shops with multiple origin choices for the growing base of local coffee consumers soon started to develop a side track that has attracted worldwide attention from the coffee industry. As part of the company’s commitment to educating consumers, Easternmen & Co. opened the region’s first coffee museum in February 2014. Situated in the old stone

Al Mulla adds that it wasn’t just the UAE but the region as a whole that lacked a variety of coffees from different countries, a fact industry officials considered crucial to developing a real specialty coffee scene, and what sparks an increase in consumption. But what started with the ambition to fill supermarket shelves and coffee shops with multiple origin choices for the growing base of local coffee consumers soon started to develop a side track that has attracted worldwide attention from the coffee industry. As part of the company’s commitment to educating consumers, Easternmen & Co. opened the region’s first coffee museum in February 2014. Situated in the old stone

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town of Dubai, the museum is squeezed in between the tiny sand-blasted streets of the souks in the spice quarter. The UAE government liked the idea so much it provided a historic building for the museum as part of a cultural partnership with the company. “The plan for setting up a coffee museum has been in the works for years,” says Al Mulla. “The idea of the museum just kind of started growing on me. The company was founded based on a philosophy of celebrating the coffee culture from its roots all the way to the cup, so it was the next natural step.”

The museum is a treat for tourists and coffee enthusiasts alike. With coffee antiques dating back more than 600 years, the artifacts are displayed beautifully, a fitting tribute to the remarkable story of the tiny bean’s journey from seed to cup.

At the heart of the museum is a replica of the Al Majlis from the house of the late Sheikh Rashid bin Saeed Al Maktoum, who is regarded as the founding father of modern Dubai. An Al Majlis is a special room used to welcome visitors with coffee throughout much of the Middle East and, as such, provides the perfect end to the museum tour.

“When you feature Arab people, you have to feature hospitality and with that comes the coffee,” says Al Mulla. “Go to any hotel in Dubai and in the very most of them you will be welcomed with an Arabic coffee as this is a symbol of hospitality and a way of bidding visitors welcome.”

WHAT THE FUTURE HOLDS

Global coffee consumption has been increasing at an impressive 2.5 percent per year on average since 2000, and demand is forecast to continue to grow by at least 2 percent in 2014, according to the ICO. It is the rapid increase in emerging markets—with an annual average increase of 3.8 percent—that is driving the figure up. As part of this group of emerging
WHAT'S OLD IS NEW AGAIN | Middle East (continued)

Markets, the Middle East should continue to attract growing interest from the global coffee community.

“The Middle East is an amazing market,” Rouchon says. “Malongo coffee has been here for 12 years now and the market continues to grow at impressive rates and you see huge volumes of coffee. People from across the region are moving to Dubai, but besides Dubai, you have so many other places where we are seeing an enormous potential for growth, like Mecca and Qatar.”

Still, Dubai remains a key indicator as to how much further the Middle Eastern coffee market can evolve. In a little more than five years, since Easternmen & Co. introduced single-origin beans to the local market, the specialty coffee market has progressed from the introduction of Italian style coffees by Starbucks to single origin, single estate and single variety. Today, Easternmen & Co. has at least 24 different origins of green beans in stock at its warehouse. As the coffee market in the Middle East continues to grow, Al Mulla and other industry officials expect the availability of different origins and the sophistication of roaster profiles to expand as well, along with additional growth supported by upcoming events of global significance.

“Dubai has proven to be one of the major tourist destinations, and in 2020 Dubai will host the World Expo while neighboring Qatar will host the World Cup in 2022,” Al Mulla says. “This is all great for coffee, and everybody wants to be part of it.”

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