

# Brewed Awakening

THAI COFFEE IS A RELATIVELY NEW ADDITION TO THE JAVA ECONOMY, BUT ONE THAT'S FAST EXPANDING. **SCOTT COATES** TRAVELS TO NORTHERN THAILAND WHERE HE DISCOVERS A VIBRANT HILL TRIBE-LED INDUSTRY



## THAILAND

“Before, the hill tribe farmers didn’t drink coffee. They only started eight years ago,” explains Wicha Promyong, president of Doi Chaang Coffee, as he sips an espresso at the company’s quaint shop atop the mountain from which it takes its name.

In fact until recently, coffee growing wasn’t a hill tribe custom either. Twenty-five years ago, their native Golden Triangle region was most famous for opium, which was then the primary crop. This dependence and the effect of forest-clearing, slash-and-burn agriculture meant that poverty reigned. Much of the population was addicted to the drug and there were few schools or clinics. Today, life has changed for hill tribe communities. World-class coffee beans are being produced and exported and, as a result, coffee has become a major source of revenue for the region.

I’m in Chiang Rai, Thailand’s northernmost province, for a four-day road trip to trace the coffee journey from tree to cup. The trip was devised by specialty travel company Smiling Albino. Our adventure, which begins in Chiang Mai, takes us across one of the country’s most remote regions, where we’ll meet local producers, visit burgeoning coffee companies and discover the perfect brew.

Although coffee production in Thailand dates back to the early 1800s, it didn’t become a commercial venture until 1974 when the Royal Project for hill tribe development, under the direction of His Majesty King Bhumibol Adulyadej, conducted research on highland cultivation of arabica coffee. It was found that quality arabica coffee could be grown throughout Thailand’s northern mountains at elevations of 1,000m and above. As a result, beans

were distributed, methods of production shared and coffee quickly overtook opium as the region’s leading crop.

About 90 minutes after touching down in Chiang Mai, we’re 150km north of the airport and climbing a steep, winding road to the top of Doi Chaang (Elephant Mountain). Thatched huts dot the mountains around us, children in brightly coloured traditional garb wave as we pass by and the temperature drops dramatically the higher we climb. At just over 1,700m, Doi Chaang is one of Chiang Rai province’s tallest peaks and is home to one of the kingdom’s most successful coffee companies, Doi Chaang Coffee.

“I didn’t even drink coffee before coming here more than 10 years ago,” Wicha recalls. “They had about 800,000 m<sup>2</sup> of coffee trees at that time and I thought: if we can grow more and better-quality coffee, life could really improve for people here. Ten years ago our coffee was selling for US\$0.50 per kg and now it’s getting as much as US\$12 per kg.”

Doi Chaang Coffee has grown from producing five tons of roasted beans in 2000 to more than 2,000 tons last year. A philanthropic Canadian businessman who invested in the company in 2006 donated a 50% stake in the Canadian

venture to the villagers and the coffee they produce is now enjoyed around the world. It has scored as high as 91 out of 100 at several international coffee competitions and has helped raise the profile of Thai coffee.

In the fields, Ahka farmers – who trace their lineage to Tibet – are busy collecting ripe, red berries from dark green trees, some more than 1.5m tall. The hand-woven baskets that are

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“แต่ก่อน ชาวไร่ชาวนาเขาไม่ดื่มกาแฟ แต่เริ่มดื่มเมื่อแปดปีที่แล้ว” คุณวิชา พรหมยงค์ ประธานกรรมการบริหารบริษัท กาแฟดอยช้าง เล่าพลางจิบกาแฟของดอยช้างในร้านกาแฟที่ตั้งอยู่บนยอดดอยช้าง ที่เป็นที่มาของชื่อบริษัท หากจะว่าไปแล้ว การดื่มกาแฟหรือแม้แต่การปลูกกาแฟ ไม่ใช่ชนบทรรมนิยมของชาวเขาเลย แต่ก่อน พื้นที่สามเหลี่ยมทองคำมีชื่อเสียงจากการปลูกฝิ่น ประชากรจำนวนมากติดฝิ่นและมีฐานะยากจน หลังจากโครงการในพระราชดำริในพระบาทสมเด็จพระเจ้าอยู่หัว ที่แนะนำกาแฟพันธุ์อาราบิก้าแก่พื้นที่บนดอย เพื่อทดแทนการปลูกฝิ่น ทำให้ปัจจุบัน วิถีชีวิตของชาวเขาเปลี่ยนแปลงไปมาก จากการปลูกกาแฟที่ได้มาตรฐานระดับโลก และกลายเป็นแหล่งรายได้หลักของชุมชน



CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: ripe arabica berries; sunset over the mountains; Wicha Promyong of Doi Chaang; tea plantation







CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: hills of Doi Mae Salong; Akha villagers; an excellent cup of coffee; chilling out with a cappuccino



worn around their necks are quickly filled. The picking season runs from late October to early February and it takes about three years for each new tree to produce usable, tasty beans. Coffee is interesting in that the fruit of the berry is discarded and it's the seed that's used.

There's nothing easy about the long and meticulous process of producing a world-class cup of coffee, explains Wicha. "You have to get up early in the morning, pick the berries, take them to the washing station, pre-wash them, pulp them, then dry-ferment them for a day. Underwater fermentation takes another day, then we soak the beans in natural spring water for another 24 hours, drain the water and naturally sun-dry them for seven to eight days. The entire process takes about 14 days. Then you have to store the beans for another six to seven months, pulp them to get the parchment off the green beans and then, finally, roast them."

The work day begins at dawn in the mountains and, thankfully, Doi Chaang's coffee shop is open. We dive in to rich cups of Americano before bidding farewell. We board our 4x4 and tackle a challenging dirt road down the mountain to Chiang Rai city and on to our next destination, Doi Tung. Along the way, it's obvious that many coffee shops have sprung up over the past few years, testimony to the fact that Thailand is now the third largest producer of coffee in Asia, after Vietnam and Indonesia.

Operating under the direction of the Mae Fah Luang Foundation, which was established by the king's late mother in 1988, Doi Tung Coffee was the first Thai producer to gain national acclaim. As in Doi Chaang, coffee was introduced here as an alternative crop to opium and as a means of improving

the environment. According to Doi Tung's executive director Khunying Rungroi, "Our main intent was to figure out how we could keep man and forest together so the forests wouldn't be destroyed again. We did several trials and found that coffee worked well under the shade of the pine trees that we had planted to reforest the mountains."

Today, Doi Tung is home to 1.7 million trees farmed by more than 1,000 hill tribe people. The trees produce 200 tons of beans annually. As well as providing work and support for local communities, the foundation is committed to conserving the environment. "We say our coffee is 'bird-friendly'", says Khunying Rungroi. "It's a coffee term meaning that when the birds eat the coffee they don't drop dead. They can live on the coffee as we don't use pesticides but let it grow naturally."

As the sun sets, we make our way down the mountain via a dirt track that passes by mandarin orange and lychee orchards as well as a temple famous for its horse-riding monks. It's hard to believe we're only 45km from Chiang Rai. After an overnight stay in the city, we head north-west to one of Thailand's most vibrant towns, Doi Mae Salong, to visit a small-scale coffee farm.

Kuomintang (KMT) soldiers from Yunnan province in southern China

settled in Doi Mae Salong in the 1970s and it's more Chinese than Thai. It is also home to 12 ethnic hill tribes that mainly farm tea, which was another crop introduced in place of opium. Coffee has started to catch on here in the past few years, but at 1,000m, the town is just barely high enough to produce arabica that can compete with that of Doi Chaang and Doi Tung.

In a small Akha village, our host introduces us to Meechu, a

**"'Bird-friendly' is a coffee term meaning that when the birds eat the coffee they don't drop dead. They can live on the coffee as we don't use pesticides but let it grow naturally"**

ชาวอาข่าที่ทำไมไร่กาแฟกับการเก็บผลกาแฟสุกอมสีแดงใส่ตะกร้าที่คล้องคอ ชาวไร่อีกบอกว่าสามปีกว่าต้นกาแฟจะให้ผลกาแฟที่มีคุณภาพรสชาติดี ที่น่าสนใจไปกว่านั้นคือผลแดงๆจากต้นกาแฟจะถูกทิ้งไป เหลือเพียงแค่เมล็ดข้างในที่จะนำมาผลิตเป็นกาแฟ คุณวิซากล่าวว่า กว่าจะได้กาแฟระดับโลกสักแก้วนั้น ไม่ใช่เรื่องง่าย ๆ เนื่องจากต้องผ่านกระบวนการมากมาย ชาวไร่อีกบอกว่ากาแฟแต่เช้าตรู่ น้ำฝนไปล้าง นำไปหมักแห้งหนึ่งวัน หมักเปียกอีกหนึ่งวัน จากนั้นก็นำไปแช่ในน้ำสะอาดอีก 24 ชั่วโมง ก่อนจะตากแดดให้แห้งที่ใช้เวลาเจ็ดถึงแปดวัน รวมกระบวนการทั้งหมดประมาณ 14 วัน ก่อนการนำไปเก็บรักษาอีกราวหกถึงเจ็ดเดือน จากนั้นก็สีกาแฟเพื่อแยกกะลาแห้งออกจากเมล็ดกาแฟ แล้วจึงนำไปคั่ว



## THAILAND

90-year-old woman he has known for a number of years. She puffs away on her pipe – defying the notion that smoking kills – and it’s hard to drag ourselves back to the dirt footpath to resume our journey. An hour later we emerge from the forest and walk right into a small coffee shop, where the owner treats us to steaming cups of brew made with beans from Thailand, Africa and South America. As we gaze at the mountains through which we’ve just trekked, we learn that there are some coffee farmers close by and decide to drop in on them.

Wilai and Weeral Cheewinwon, both from Doi Mae Salong, spent many years working in Taiwan and in the Thai beach resort town of Pattaya before returning home in 2006. The couple had grown tired of cities, craved a more peaceful life and, upon hearing about coffee’s potential, decided to give it a try.

It hasn’t been easy, according to Wilai, but things are starting to look up: “We have about 2,500 trees, which produce 400kg of roasted beans per year. It’s not a lot, but they can fetch up to US\$15 per kg and since the trees are only three years old, this is a pretty decent yield.”

The next day, after a journey of 200km, we’re at 1,600m, high above Chiang Mai city and its most famous temple, Doi



Meechu, a 90-year-old woman who defies the notion that smoking kills

### TOP COFFEE SPOTS

#### DOI CHAANG

**Doi Chaang Coffee Shop:** [www.doichaangcoffee.com](http://www.doichaangcoffee.com)

#### CHIANG RAI

**Le Petit Café:** 194 Sankongnoi Rd, tel: +66 (0)53 756761

**Doi Chaang @ Art:** Rattanakhet Rd, tel: +66 (0)53 752918

#### DOI MAE SALONG

**Sweet Mae Salong:** 41/3 Doi Mae Salong, tel: +66 (0)53 745028, <http://sweetmaesalong.multiply.com>

#### DOI TUNG

**Care Doi Tung:** Doi Tung Royal Villa, tel: +66 (0)53 767015, [www.doitung.org/cafe\\_our.php](http://www.doitung.org/cafe_our.php)

#### MAE SUAY

**Doi Chaang Mae Suay:** Hwy 118, tel: +66 (0)53 950332

#### TRAVEL WITH

**Smiling Albino** has been leading unique, custom-made experiences in northern Thailand since 1999. Experts in the region, Smiling Albino offers everything from soft experiences travelling by private car to mountain biking, dirt biking and motorcycling throughout the region. [www.smilingalbino.com](http://www.smilingalbino.com), [info@smilingalbino.com](mailto:info@smilingalbino.com), tel: +66 (0)2 718 9560

Suthep. We’re here to visit Thailand’s original coffee fields – and the scenery is unforgettable. The Highland Research Facility is located in Doi Suthep National Park, next to a Hmong hill tribe village, and it’s here that the Royal Project for hill tribe development introduced arabica coffee back in 1974.

Later, while flying back to Bangkok, I review my notes and stumble upon a quote by Wicha of Doi Chaang Coffee: “I’m quite sure you can grow good coffee anywhere in Thailand above 1,000m, but the really important thing is processing,” he says. “Most people are lazy and don’t take the time to process it properly. It took us five years to figure out the process. I’m sure in the next five years people around the world will know a lot more about Thai coffee.”

I’ll drink to that.

ชาวเขาบนดอยแม่สลองเริ่มปลูกกาแฟเมื่อไม่กี่ปีที่ผ่านมา ระดับความสูงของดอยแม่สลองก็ดูจะเพียงพอสำหรับการปลูกกาแฟอาราบิกาแข่งกับดอยช้างและดอยตุงได้ คุณวิไลและคุณวีรา ชีวินวร เป็นคนดอยแม่สลอง หลังจากทำงานที่ประเทศไต้หวันและรีสอร์ทในพัทยาหลายปี ทั้งคู่ก็ย้ายกลับมาสูดดมอากาศบริสุทธิ์ที่ดอยแม่สลองหลังจากได้ยินเรื่องกิจการกาแฟบนดอย แม้ว่าจะไม่ใช่เรื่องง่ายๆ ทว่าคุณวิไลก็คิดว่าสิ่งต่างๆก็เป็นไปได้ด้วยดี คุณวิไลมีต้นกาแฟกว่า 2,500 ต้นที่ผลิตกาแฟได้ราว 400 กิโลกรัมต่อปี แม้ว่าจะไม่มากนัก ทว่ากาแฟก็ได้ราคาราว 15 เหรียญสหรัฐต่อกิโลกรัมทีเดียว