

By James Sturz

ROAST



Your Own

Several years ago, I had the good fortune of working on a coffee farm in Holualoa on Hawaii's Big Island in the heart of its Kona belt. I'd start my days among the fields of trees, plucking ripe red cherries from branches, while others shook the blossoms Hawaiians call "Kona snow."

Then I'd feed the cherries into the pulper, and their pits would shoot out sticky, slippery and practically newborn—ready for their next stage of life. While wild turkeys ran past me and mynah birds pecked and watched, I'd rake the pits across the farm's wooden deck to dry them, as they gave off a sweet, papery scent. Afterward, all that remained was removing their stiff skins, at which point they were officially "green beans"—their final stage before roasting.

Beyond the farm's neat forests and drying deck, I'd spend those same hours peering down black lava slopes at the tropical enormity of the Pacific. As I toiled, it was hard to imagine a farm that was more lush or had any better views. That farm isn't just where I learned to love coffee: It's where I learned to love the beans themselves.

Everyone knows if you want good coffee, you need to grind the beans fresh (flavor ebbs after just 10 minutes). But when I returned from Hawaii laden with bags of the island's most cherished produce, it was with the knowledge that I should be roasting them, too. This wasn't just because roasting ensures their freshness (even with roasted, un-ground beans, flavor wanes after a single day, accelerating after a week and dramatically more after four weeks), but because it gives you access to the widest variety of coffee beans at a fraction of the already-roasted and packaged prices. Since then, I've radically changed my coffee-making approach in ways that you can, too.

This started with buying my own roaster, the only real expense. Commercial units are the size of boilers, sometimes as loud as jets, and can easily top \$10,000, but a handful of options are available for home use. Some people use popcorn poppers, which can roast coffee beans, too, but lack a cooling fan for halting the roasting process exactly when you want. So I use





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a purpose-built Hearthware I-Roast 2, which I bought from sweetmarias.com for \$179.99. That’s an important website to know because Sweet Maria’s is the country’s foremost importer of beans from around the world.

You can also find green beans on Amazon, eBay, and on some farms’ websites (for my own Big Island exploits, I like heavenlyhawaiian.com).

But aside from the range of choices, prices for green beans generally cost half as much as roasted ones, are better in quality and essentially have an indefinite shelf life. So, when you compare the pound of generic roasted Costa Rican beans my local grocer sells for \$12.99 with the green Costa Rican Cafetalera Herbazu beans (cupping score: 89.9) that Sweet Maria’s sells for \$6.50, or the grocery’s Peet’s Coffee French Roast Blend for \$17.32/pound with Sweet Maria’s Blend for \$6.75, you see what I mean.

Decaffeinated beans are also available. But even then, coffee is subjective. Finding one you like best is half the battle, and then the roasting begins. The beauty of a home set-up is you roast the beans only as much as you want—just as not every steak eater wants his filet well-done, not every coffee connoisseur wants a dark roasted coffee.

Each year, 18.5 billion pounds of coffee are grown worldwide. Perhaps 30 of those beans make it onto my New York City apartment’s balcony, where I roast half-pounds at a time in three 10-minute batches. And each time I do, the memory of my Hawaiian experience returns, along with the whirr of my air roaster’s little motor and the percussive bounce of the beans darkening inside. Each crop of beans is different, so each batch is an experiment and a discovery. Unlike with other cherries, we discard the fruits but savor the seeds, keeping us thirsty for what develops next.

