



# Yemeni Coffee: Past, Present, & Future

Nadia Mokhallalati, COL 2023

Dr. Heather Sharkey, COL, Department of Near Eastern Languages & Civilizations  
PURM

## Coffee's Origins in Yemen

- Native to Ethiopia, coffee took off in Yemen, where it was **first commercially traded around 1450**.
- Sufi mystics first used coffee to prepare *Qahwa*, a caffeinated drink that also uses the leaves of the stimulant *khat*. This would allow them to stay awake and perform *dhikrs* (prayers) after long working days.
- Coffee has played recurring roles in Yemeni history; for example, its trade fueled the Zaydi uprising against the Ottoman Empire in 1638.



## Coffee through the Crisis

Today, a few companies are working to bring the famous and elusive Yemeni coffee to the world, while simultaneously addressing the humanitarian crises, including:

### Al-Mokha

- Led by Harvard Alumni & experienced businesspeople

### Port of Mokha

- Founded by Mokhtar Alkhanshali, a Yemeni-American coffee trader



The city of **Mokha**: home to the historic port



A plantation full of coffee trees

Yemen once propelled coffee to international fame, and today, coffee may be able to save the country from the worst humanitarian crisis in the world.

## Complication: the Culture of *Khat*

Today, Yemeni coffee faces a strong rival for agricultural resources (such as water, land, and labor), in the form *khat* or *qat*: leaves picked from the *Catha edulis* plant. When chewed, *khat* produces a mild high, as its chemicals are similar to amphetamines.

Rates of *khat* consumption are so high, its market drains a major portion of household incomes. Due to its high demand, farmers often grow *khat* over coffee, especially since it is **at least twice as profitable (domestically)** per average hectare and produces a **regular crop**.

Unfortunately, *khat* is eating up to **2/3 of cash crop land** and about **1/3 of all Yemen's ground water**, at a time when the country is already facing a severe water crisis.

While *khat* may be successful domestically, coffee has far more **international potential** for generating revenue and enabling Yemeni prosperity in the long run.



**Alkhanshali** and Yemeni civilians deep in coffee cherries



Several varieties of **Al-Mokha**

## Reputation of Yemeni Coffee

Yemeni coffee has had long connections to the **historical port of Al-Mokha**. From the name of this port and with reference to Yemeni coffee's **chocolatey undertones**, we get the word **mocha**.

Yemeni coffee is world-famous, highly coveted, and very expensive: its scarce supplies translate into high prices.

It has a distinctive taste because:

- It is grown at **high altitudes** over 2,000 meters.
- Its beans are of the high-quality **Arabica** variety.
- It reflects **long traditions** of cultivation and processing.
- It has an **intense flavor** that is heavily valued for espresso.

## Challenges

- Political instability and civil war in Yemen
- Underdeveloped transportation infrastructure complicating exportation
- Rivalry with *khat*, exacerbated by its widespread grip on Yemenis today

## The Future of Yemeni Coffee

**Yemen can claim to have what may be the finest coffee in the world. While the country now faces severe challenges, coffee may be the key to a brighter future.**