

Ah, the price of bitterness

Harsher but cheaper Java floods U.S.

If today's skyscraper coffee prices are driving you to instant instead of fresh-brewed, chances are the South American accent in your morning cup has turned to a slightly bitter aftertaste—thanks to the African robustas bean.

And, if Americans grow accustomed to African coffees and promptly increased planting there, the result could be a coffee glut by the early 1980s that would send prices plummeting to record lows.

With coffee giant Brazil's exports falling—and world prices still at near-record levels—African coffee producers are taking up the slack. Africa's most commonly grown coffee, robusta, is the cheap, naturally harsh variety used largely in the making of instant coffees.

While it is a harder plant that yields more beans than most South African varieties, robusta also lacks the familiar delicacy of Brazil's arabica bean.

Instant coffee now accounts for about half of all sales in Britain and North America. And African robustas are used more and more as extenders in the less expensive roasted blends, replacing the once-plentiful arabicas, which were devastated by a killer frost in Brazil.

U.S. DEPARTMENT of Agriculture (USDA) statistics show that robusta imports rose from 12 to 32 per cent between 1960 and 1974—the bulk coming from Africa and Asia. At the same time, Africa's share of the total U.S. coffee market rose to 33 per cent, equal to Brazil's output at its peak.

And while Brazilian coffee production has slipped from over 25 million bags in 1972 to 9.5 million last year, Africa's output has held relatively steady around 19 million bags—despite numerous obstacles encountered in the past three seasons.

In Angola, once the world's third largest exporter behind Brazil and Colombia, the Portuguese exodus and the ensuing civil war have cut production by as much as 75 per cent. Tanzania—a producer of fine arabicas as well as robustas—has suffered declining yields since 1974 due to poor weather.

Uganda has been plagued with smuggling. And Ethiopia, the birthplace of coffee, has been forced to watch production drop because its coffee-growing provinces are the scenes of serious guerrilla insurrections.

Yet despite these setbacks, prices have been so good that most exporting countries have still enjoyed increased earnings. The Ivory Coast—now the world's third largest exporter—and Cameroon are setting the pace.

FURTHER INCENTIVE for stepping up production is that all producing countries are currently engaged in competition to determine their share of the world market in the event of a price plunge.

Under the International Coffee Agreement (signed by all major producers and consumers), export quotas will be imposed on producers if prices fall to an unsatisfactory level. Since this mechanism doesn't take effect until 1979, the quotas will be based upon a country's export performance during this interim period.

But there are pitfalls as well in the world coffee market that have led many African countries to hesitate about putting their coffee production into full gear.

There is now massive replanting under way in Brazil. Since it takes at least three years for newly planted coffee trees to mature and bear fruit, Brazilian production is expected to return to normal levels by 1980. That increase in supply alone could bring coffee prices down to 1975 levels.

IF ALL PRODUCING countries stepped up their coffee acreage, however, 1980 could bring an enormous coffee glut that would trigger an even steeper drop in prices—especially if sizeable numbers of Western consumers had already turned away from coffee for lower-priced alternatives.

There may be an even bigger catch, however.

According to a recent USDA study, robusta coffee has not gone over well with American consumers. The report alleges, in fact, that the increased use of robustas may account for much of the long-term 40 per cent decline in U.S. per capita consumption of coffee since the end of World War II.

If General Foods and other big roasters take the conclusion of the study to heart, they will follow the USDA's advice and use more expensive varieties in their mass market blends. Otherwise, African producers will likely continue to take a bigger share of the U.S. market, and Americans will be sipping a slightly more bitter brew with their morning meal.

State leads country in home ownership

More Michigan families own rather than rent their homes than anywhere in the country.

The United States League of Savings Associations has compiled statistical data showing Michigan with the highest home-ownership ratio—74.4 per cent.

Children's farm open year-round

Kensington Children's Farm in Kensington Metropark near Milford is open year-round. This actual working farm features farm animals, historic barn, pony rides, swan boat rides and miniature train. Admission charge is \$1.50 for adults and \$1 for children ages 15 and under. Vehicle entry permits are required through October (daily \$1).

Dems start con-con talk across area

Twice this month, Michigan Democrats will hold public discussions about rewriting the state constitution.

Dudley Bufla, chairman of the party's Commission on the Constitutional Convention, will be guest speaker at a meeting of Oakland County Democrats at 8 p.m. Tuesday, Sept. 20. It will be held in the county commissioners' auditorium, 1200 N. Telegraph, Pontiac.

A PUBLIC HEARING is scheduled for 7 p.m. Monday, Sept. 26 in the Henry Ford Centennial Library, 16301 Michigan, Dearborn.

After this and other out-state hearings, the party commission will recommend a stand to the Democratic State Central Committee.

A proposal to call a con-con goes on the ballot automatically every 16 years and will be on the 1978 ballot. The present constitution was adopted

in a 1963 election after being written by a convention dominated 2-1 by Republicans.

Republican leaders tend to oppose a new con-con. So far, Democratic leaders are divided or haven't made up their minds.

BUFFA HIMSELF is uncertain whether he would support a new con-con.

The former Michigan State University political science professor is currently midwest director of foundation working on rural life problems. Until last year, he was a Michigan aide to the late Sen. Philip Hart and is known to harbor senatorial ambitions himself.

One major change proposed by his 60-member commission is abolition of the State Board of Education and the direct election of state superintendent of public instruction.

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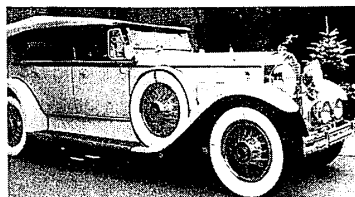
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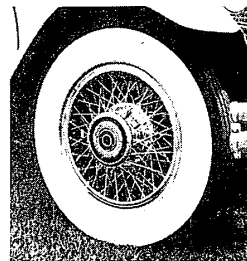
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