





DA LAT, VIETNAM

SEEN FROM ABOVE, Lam Dong province is a web of irrigated terraces, plateaus, and waterfalls that wind down pine-covered mountains with as much mathematical impossibility as an M.C. Escher sketch. Da Lat, the capital city of Lam Dong, stands out like a picture-book town amid the towering greenery and fog.

Move a little closer and the terraces grow dense with farms cultivating tea, vegetables, and coffee. Get even closer still, and your attention might be drawn toward the bright-red berries growing from an heirloom arabica tree.

Lam Dong is the birthplace of coffee in Vietnam, having survived colonialism, war, and famine to eventually help push the country into its place as the second-largest coffee producing region in the world. Most Vietnamese beans are now grown in neighboring Dak Lak province, where robusta farms stretch out from the city of Buon Ma Thuot, the modern-day coffee capital of Vietnam.

Robusta is the backbone of Vietnam's coffee industry. It launched the fortunes of several famous coffee families in the country, yet the beans themselves remain low profile. Rarely touted internationally as more than a coffee-blend addition, Vietnamese robusta is more often than not destined to be dried and packed into instant powder.

Now nearly two centuries since coffee arrived in the country, a small community of coffee professionals are revamping the country's arabica farms in Lang Biang and Cau Dat near Da Lat to create specialty coffees poised to change the face of Vietnamese coffee and establish a specialty destination.

We had the opportunity to sit down with some of the major players in Vietnam's burgeoning specialty-coffee scene to find out where they see third-wave coffee going in terms of sustainability and varieties, and the difficulties associated with harvesting from farms that have existed for nearly 200 years. Our story begins in Lang Biang, a

Opposite page at top: On Lang Biang, a mountain situated 12 kilometers from Da Lat, a field of THA1 hybrid coffee plants has just been planted at Zanya Farm. Zanya is run by husband-and-wife team Marián Takáč, originally from Slovakia, and Jan Lim, a member of the K'Ho ethnic group, Vietnam's original coffee farmers. Arabica has always been grown on Lang Biang mountain, but THA1 is set to take the region's coffee profile up several points from the Typica and Catimor varieties that have historically been planted there.

Below: Anh Dung from Radar Farm walks among his hybrid THA1 trees. The variety produces a better flavor profile than the Typica and Catimor trees that have traditionally grown in the region. Radar is situated about 25 kilometers from Da Lat in the region of Cau Dat.

This page: Baristas at the trendy Le'J Café in Da Lat prepare pourovers and espressos for their customers using beans from the region's specialty-coffee farms as well as top-ranking international sources. The café, owned by Đức Lê, also includes a fancy homestay for a coffee experience without the trek to a farm.

mountain situated 12 kilometers from Da Lat, and the homeland of Vietnam's original coffee farmers: the K'Ho ethnic group.

THE LANG BIANG STORY

Tucked into the verdant slopes of Lang Biang mountain are some of Vietnam's oldest heirloom coffee farms. Arabica seeds arrived in the region in the late 1800s during the era of French colonialism. The K'Ho, one of Vietnam's more than 54 distinct ethnic groups, were solicited to tend the farms, which they still do to this day, despite several decades of political and economic turmoil, during which coffee production was a low priority.

In 2012, fourth-generation K'Ho coffee farmer Rolan Co Lieng and her American husband, Joshua Guikema, decided to start a cooperative with other families in the region in an effort to reconnect with their agricultural origins through sustainable farming practices and a focus on developing specialty-grade arabica coffee. K'Ho Coffee has helped hundreds of K'Ho households improve their coffee-processing practices over the last decade.



Kiyotaka Yamaoka (center) pours coffees for collaborators Tam (left) and Pat Cil (right). Kiyotaka, the founder of Lang Biang Coffee Project (LCP) on Lang Biang mountain, worked in the specialty-coffee industry in Japan before moving to Vietnam. The project functions as a collective in order to ensure that growers can live, work, and sell their products in the best conditions possible.

The fertile growing regions of Lang Biang now include a small, 100% farmer-owned cooperative made up of both K’Ho and international farmers and producers who focus on single-origin arabica varieties, including Bourbon, Typica, Catuai, Caturra, and a new heirloom called THA1, which was developed by Vietnam’s Western Highlands Agriculture & Forestry Science Institute.

Kiyotaka Yamaoka, founder of Lang Biang Coffee Project (LCP), was working in the specialty-coffee industry in Tokyo before he decided to move closer to Vietnamese coffee production. He initially launched Babros Coffee Roaster and Café in Ho Chi Minh City—formerly and still commonly known as Saigon—before moving to growing areas in the Central Highlands. He’s gone full circle as a coffee geek, from barista to roaster, trader, and now to the roots of the supply chain working with producers. Kiyotaka felt that he’d been able to earn a profit from coffee for 20 years and that it was time to give something back to the growers, who often live in impoverished conditions.

Since the number of farmers and coffee estates are decreasing in Lang Biang, LCP’s mission focuses on quality and stability rather than quantity, with an eye toward real fair-trade Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). To achieve this, LCP plans to teach willing locals to properly process specialty-grade green coffee, an area of study that has improved drastically over the last few years in the Da Lat region. In Kiyotaka’s opinion, processing goes beyond textbook studies into real-world problems, such as the transportation of cherry across the challenging mountainous terrain. In addition, it’s difficult to expand the production area because of deforestation.

“Quantity is very limited so we can’t be selfish,” says Kiyotaka. “If locals stop [farming], we can’t make coffee.”

ZANYA COFFEE

“Instead of trying to change the system, we bought a color sorting machine,” says Marián Takáč of Zanya Coffee, a coffee farm, processor, and roaster that works with LCP. Marián’s statement illustrates how specialty-coffee professionals in the region are thinking outside of the box to grow and process their product with all the care it takes to make world-class coffee.

According to Marián, farmers in the region were unwilling to pick only red cherries because they were afraid of price fluctuations. Because cherries don’t ripen evenly, it was too time-consuming to focus on the selective picking necessary for high-quality green coffee. The smallholders worried that if they didn’t agree to sell all the cherry—ripe or unripe—traders might refuse to pay them the same price at the end of the season. Additional quality-control measures are necessary to get the best coffee cherry, but Zanya’s optical color sorting machine simplifies the initial task of separating reds from under-ripes while still paying farmers a fair daily rate.

Marián wasn’t even a coffee drinker until he moved from Slovakia to Vietnam, where he met his wife, Jan Lim, from the K’Ho. After dating for a few months, Jan brought Marián back home to Lang Biang to meet her family. Marián was surprised by the conditions that most of the farmers lived in and immediately began thinking of ways to make the farm a more sustainable venture for his future wife’s family.

He studied coffee hard and eventually fell in love with the complexity of it—the history, the evolution, the future, and, of course, the flavor.

BARISTA ATTITUDE

EXPLORING
MEANS
FEELING



www.barista-attitude.com



Left: Kiyotaka Yamaoka shows off a new batch of green beans grown through the Lang Biang Coffee Project.

Right: Kiyotaka enjoys coffee with his neighbors Pat and Tam at the Lang Biang Coffee Project co-op.

The duo processes coffee harvested from Jan's extended families' farms. They use Kenyan double fermentation on a large portion of their coffee to highlight brighter fruit notes like blueberry, which is a prized flavor in the Lang Biang region. This process involves fermenting pulped coffee cherry in clean water for 36 hours with weak aerobic fermentation before washing. The processed coffee is then soaked in another batch of clean water for 24 hours. Marián believes that this added step highlights origin characteristics even more.

Zanya also acts as a consultant for local farmers and offers tours of the farms in the Lang Biang coffee region. Jan and Marián, along with other producers in the area, say that the difficulties no longer lie in training farmers to produce excellent coffee as much as in encouraging them not to sell their land.

CULTURE BEAN

Sabet Sa, who is of K'Ho descent, is upgrading Vietnam's coffee culture on two fronts through her company Culture Bean. She owns a café with her partner, Huong Anh, in Da Lat, and also works to improve the quality of coffee processing in Lang Biang with a focus on washed, honey, and natural processes.

Sabet says that production has been affected over the last few years due to unfavorable weather and COVID. The resulting price fluctuations have resulted in hikes in cherry prices and, as Marián mentioned, an increase in farmers selling their land. "How do we convince them to keep the land and continue farming?" Huong Anh asks. She feels it's crucial to provide farmers with a solution to keep their land and have a sustainable income.

Digital



Premium packaging made the Savor Brands way.

SB5D

www.sb5d.com
@sb5digital

Rotogravure



SAVOR BRANDS
www.savorbrands.com
@savorbrands

just great
coffee.



www.cafetaf.gr

Indeed.



Clockwise from top left: Leaves from a THA1 varietal on Radar Farm.

Anh Dung from Radar Farm scoops out some green beans from his latest harvest.

Nguyen Van Son, owner of Son Pacamara coffee farm and café, demonstrates how to create the perfect pourover. He also runs daily “coffee experiences” for tourists who are interested in going straight to the source of their beans.



One thing that makes Lang Biang so special is the importance with which the community of farmers regard collaboration. Through LCP, Zanya, and Culture Bean, producers are coached about diversifying their products to include fruit along with coffee, and the use of chicken droppings to create semi-organic fertilizers in order to reduce reliance on chemicals. Another potential income augments; these coaches teach, is to make cascara tea from the discarded skins of the cherry, which after processing usually end up as coffee waste. But once dried, cascara can be sold in the export market. Cascara packs the same caffeine levels as a strong black tea but with herbal, hibiscus undertones.

The cooperative also helps promote the region’s specialty coffee outside of Vietnam to increase international perception of the country as a specialty producer. Kiyotaka has brought beans from Zanya, Culture Bean, and local farmers Pat and Tam Cil into the Japanese and Australian markets. Zanya also sells green coffee to the U.S. through VN Beans and is starting to enter the European market.

RADAR FARM

Cau Dat is the historical name of the area that includes the valley villages of Xuân Trường and Trạh Hành. It’s located 25 kilometers southeast of Da Lat, neighboring Lang Biang’s coffee farms. This region’s coffees have a subtly different flavor profile than what can be found in Lang Biang. Cau Dat’s arabica has more pronounced chocolatey notes with black tea undertones, while coffees from Lang Biang are fruitier with notes of tropical fruit and citrus.

Anh Dung from Cau Dat’s Radar Farm has set himself the challenge of achieving a single-origin Catimor that consistently receives a cupping score of 84+. Anh plans on using a 100–160-hour wet fermentation process on next season’s harvest because, based on tests done at Bosgaurus

Coffee Roasters in Saigon, the technique reduces nutty notes and increases floral notes, which results in an overall improvement of tasting scores by around two points.

According to Anh, one of the difficulties in coffee farming in the Da Lat region is that many local farmers plant new trees using seeds from F2, F3, or even F4 generation plants, which results in a degradation of quality and a loss of good traits. Some of the trees have even degraded to the point that they no longer yield cherry. Anh, however, is optimistic that this process will lend itself to the proliferation of specialty-grade coffee in the region. He's pinned some of his hopes on the THA1 varietal, which offers a similar pest resistance and yield to Catimor, but with a significantly better cup quality.

SON PACAMARA

Nguyen Van Son of Son Pacamara runs a farm, offers daily coffee experiences for tourists, and operates a café inside of which he runs his roastery in Da Lat. Son is known for growing varieties that are rare in the region such as Gesha, Mundo Novo, and Bourbon as well as his Pacamara trees, which he says were originally gifts from the El Salvadoran government to Vietnam. Ninety percent of his clients are baristas or dedicated coffee lovers who want to go deeper into the origin of their coffee.

According to Son, most Vietnamese specialty farmers are doing it out of passion; the more appreciation they get for their product, the longer they'll be able to hold on to their land.

Son's ultimate goal is to craft high-end coffee that will rank well internationally. "Everyone praises their own coffee," he says, adding that the final say is always the cupping score coffees receive from the Specialty Coffee Association cupping form.

Son hopes that his Gesha trees will be mature enough to produce drinkable coffee by the end of 2022, but only time will tell.

LE'J COFFEE

If you're not ready for a full farm experience, two cafés owned by Đức Lê in downtown Da Lat called Le'J showcase the region's specialty-coffee production. Offerings include top-ranking contenders from Zanya and other local producers, as well as high-scoring beans for pourovers and espresso preparations. In addition to sipping coffee in the café, guests can attend coffee workshops and watch in-house roasting.

Le'J is part of Vietnam's nascent specialty-coffee movement. By making the farm-to-cup process more accessible, Đức hopes to bring knowledge about Da Lat's specialty coffees to a broader customer base. He is also a processing enthusiast and is excited about a recent experiment processing a batch of THA1.

Regarding the broader potential of THA1 in Vietnam's coffee market, producers in Lang Biang, Cau Dat, and Da Lat say that many things remain unknown about the hybrid since it was only approved in 2016. THA1 trees are smaller and easier for farmers to harvest. Other benefits include a double yield over traditional varieties and cherry that seem to ripen evenly across the trees.

Marián from Zanya says, "Lang Biang's [terroir] did something [good] to Catimor—maybe it will do that for THA1, too."

In contrast, Kiyotaka of LCP believes that THA1 has higher potential in terms of taste, but it may not be practical for local farmers to replant and wait years for a viable harvest. In his opinion, Catimor is still "Vietnam's taste."

One thing that specialty-coffee professionals throughout Vietnam can agree on is that despite the challenges, the Lam Dong province is capable of consistently producing coffees that score above 80 points. Once the majority of producers hit that mark, they believe Vietnamese arabica will be widely accepted as an international specialty product—and all because of the love and knowledge that this small community of growers and processors has poured into it. **b**

The advertisement features a blue background with a repeating pattern of the word "STONE" in a grid. On the left, a circular logo contains the letters "GH" above the text "GRINDING & BREWING SOLUTIONS". To the right of the logo, the text "Email" is followed by a downward-pointing arrow icon and the email address "support@ghgbs.com". Below this, the phrase "to order" is written in a stylized font. At the bottom, a banner reads "the new Mahlkönig E80 Grind by Weight!". On the right side of the ad, a black Mahlkönig E80 coffee grinder is shown, filled with coffee beans. In the background, there are faint circular logos for "Anfim" and "B".