

Tempest in a Coffee Pot

By Cat Wheeler

bali_cat7@yahoo.com

Copyright © 2010 Greenspeak

The opening of a branch of the Starbucks coffee chain in Ubud has raised quite a few hackles in our little town. Almost everyone polled felt that Ubud should be celebrating Indonesian coffee under local brands. It was pointed out to me pretty energetically that Ubud already had plenty of cafes that took domestic coffee seriously. So I had an excellent excuse to sip my way around town researching this important topic.

First stop was Tutmak, Ubud's oldest and still most famous coffee house. Opened in 1993, Tutmak has always featured its own special house blend of Indonesian coffees. Ketut, the owner, still jealously guards his secret blend recipe for which he travels around Indonesia sourcing beans from different places. He has imported a roaster and two coffee machines from the US, and Tutmak's special blend is roasted daily in Mas for delivery to the restaurant. The coffee is freshly ground several times during the day for use in the restaurant. Tutmak's famous coffee is for sale; for those who prefer to buy it ground, that is done on the spot.

Some customers have been coming to Tutmak's for coffee for many years, including regular customers from overseas. The really fussy ones ask Putu (pictured here) to make their coffee; they swear she has a special touch and brews the best Java in Bali.

Yvonne Day of Kue tells me that when she was in Thailand and Laos a few months ago she sampled quite a bit of local coffee. The Lonely Planet doesn't mention the locations of any Starbucks in their Thai guide, but highlights local cafes and local franchise companies that use Thai beans, which helped Yvonne find her way to some very interesting cups of coffee. I checked with Lonely Planet Bali author Ryan Ver Berkmoes who told me, "Generally, a good guidebook points readers to places they might not find otherwise, and encourages the more timid travellers who would patronize a multinational chain because it's 'safe' to move beyond their comfort zone and try something local."

"Kue uses organic Bali coffee for our kopi Bali," Yvonne tells me. The original impetus to put organic Bali coffee on the Kue menu was based on customer response about the lack of local choices. "We use this local bean for the cardamom-infused coffee that we have on the menu and sell packaged in the store. We also use these beans for our in-house coffee chocolates and to create extracts for the various coffee desserts, like Tiramisu. For our Vietnamese coffees, we're using Tutmak's roast which has just the slightly bitter edge needed for this type of brew. Finally, for the Italian coffees like espresso, we make a blend from around Indonesia, courtesy of Bhineka Jaya. So all of our coffees are 100% Indonesian."

Juice Ja Café has always endeavored to use local products as much as possible. Owner Suzan Kohlik says, "This is our way to try and keep the carbon footprint of our business to a minimum. We're always interested in doing business directly with the growers and documenting how the coffee is harvested and processed. In this way, we can show respect to the local farmers and create a network of educated, responsible consumers." Suzan, who also sells several other direct-sourced products at her café, tells me that she purchases her coffee from organic growers of both Robusta and Arabica in the mountains of Bali. "I haven't felt the need or desire to purchase coffee from other countries because of the abundance of delicious coffees right here!"

Popular Biku in Seminyak (okay, it's not Ubud, but we still consider Asri one of our own) uses exclusively Indonesian coffee. It features a special blend made to its own specifications. "We get many positive comments about our coffee and people say it's the best in Bali," says Asri. "We of course specialise in tea and showcase locally grown teas as much as we can, but we felt it was very important to also showcase great Indonesian coffee."

Karen Waddell, whose Ubud restaurants include Kafe Batan Waru, Terazo, Cinta Grill and Siam Sally, began working with a coffee roaster in Bandung when she first opened Kafe Batan Waru in 1997. She continues to use their beans to this day in all her restaurants. It's a small family-run business that opened in 1927, and the signature mellow flavor of the coffee comes from a lightly roasted blend of Arabica and Robusta beans that have been aged in jute sacks for seven years. Her restaurant staff was originally trained by a barista who ran a coffee bar in Sydney.

Casa Luna's Janet DeNeefe says, "At Casa Luna we're serious about coffee and only serve the finest coffee beans from Indonesia's fabled coffee-growing regions. Earthy and velvety smooth, our exclusive local blend has a strong, lasting aftertaste and full-bodied flavour. No other coffee matches Indonesian food better than our country-of-origin blend."

According to really, really serious coffee aficionados, the best coffee on the island is available for just one hour every weekday morning at a tiny warung on the Green School Campus. FREAK (Freshly Roasted Enak Arabica Kintamani) comes from a tiny plantation high on Kintamani. Coffee wizard Asher Yaron selects the beans, carefully monitors the on-site roasting of just 10 kilograms at a time every few days and adjusts the size of the grind according to the acidity of each batch. To taste his extraordinary brew, join the queue of coffee freaks outside the Green Warung between 0800 and 0900.

"Coffee has four times the flavour complexities of wine," Asher told me. "A medium roast optimizes and maintains these nuances of flavour. Because the big coffee chains have to ensure consistency so their coffees will taste the same in outlets around the world, they roast the beans a long time until

they're very dark, and those subtleties are lost." Then the coffee is packaged and travels around the world to the chains' outlets, which compromises its absolute freshness and adds a large carbon footprint to each cup. Only small, hands-on operations can deliver an outstanding cup of freshly roasted, freshly ground coffee.

Coffee grows best in highlands and can do well on steeply sloping land that's usually unsuitable for other crops. "Growing conditions for specialty coffee can be as exacting as conditions for wine grapes," explains Big Tree Farms co-founder and sustainable agriculture specialist Ben Ripple. "If you plant the same coffee variety here and in Bukit Tinggi, you may very well end up with two completely different coffees. This concept of terroir is especially true of Arabica varieties."

Indonesia has some of the best origin coffees in the world, especially those from North Sumatra/Aceh, Toraja and newly discovered Flores mountain coffees. When the internal conflict in Aceh ended and local coffee growers were able to return to their trees which had been inaccessible and neglected for years, they started to bring out amazing coffee that drove tasters crazy at cupping events around the world; now Gayo Highlands is one of Indonesia's leading origins. While not certified as such, a vast majority of Indonesia's coffees are grown without synthetic inputs and therefore essentially organic. The nineties saw the rise of the big coffee houses and a huge demand for specialty coffees, which are 90% Arabica varieties. "In Indonesia, Robusta is mostly grown by smallholders while Arabica is the target of many plantations," Ben points out. "Although in most cases plantations tend toward a more intensive/less sustainable model than smallholder's diverse 'food forests', the plantation model has extreme benefit to the specialty market because it reduces risk of variance in the crop from varietal, plant age, husbandry or climate. In essence it creates a more focused, concise product which ultimately creates further price premiums.

"While not as consistent in flavor or quality perhaps as plantation-grown, smallholder coffee is usually better for the land and community because its cultivation supports multi-strata forest, enhanced biodiversity, soil and water conservation and social equity."

With all these obstacles, however, "Coffee offers great potential to create more opportunities for direct farm-gate value addition, and for creating new systems for transparent cooperative structures that will benefit growers," Ben observes.

A little bit of Ubud's uniqueness and charm, especially in the form of its small family businesses, disappears every week. As Janet DeNeefe wrote in a Jakarta Post story last March, "The advent of Circle K every 500 metres, Gucci bag stores every other 500 metres and a curious new breed of non Ubud-looking generic eateries are spear-heading the new face of Ubud. Glass-fronted shops are creeping in and brands from down south are now taking pride of place in our main streets. The Ubud warung is becoming a thing of the past. Is Ubud on the way to becoming just another tourist trap? One way to dilute the presence of a community is to simply move them out,

or tempt them with glistening business deals. The very quality that has made Ubud special could be washed away or filtered like coffee.”

During my interviews about Indonesian coffee, several people suggested that it was high time someone local opened a coffee house in Ubud that featured only the best Indonesian origin coffees and unique blends. It would not only provide Indonesia’s most outstanding coffee by the cup or kilo, but would also directly support local growers while serving as a centre for consumer education.

“The best way to support local coffee is to ask questions in the cafes whenever you order a cup,” Ben reminds us. “There’s no reason to be drinking poor quality commercialized coffee when there are so many high quality, small Indonesian origin coffees available. The more people ask for it, the more cafes will make it available. And that in turn supports the small producers.”

I’ll drink to that.

Dragons in the Bath, a collection of Ibu Kat’s stories, it is available at Ganesha Books in Ubud and at Biku in Seminyak, and at Periplus bookstores in Bali. It can be ordered nationally and internationally through www.dragonsinthebath.com <<http://www.dragonsinthebath.com>>

E-mail: bali_cat7@yahoo.com

Copyright © 2010 Greenspeak

Ibu Kat’s book of stories *Bali Daze - Freefall off the Tourist Trail* is available from:

1. *Ganesha Books in Ubud and Seminyak*
2. *www.balidazethebook.com downloadable as a PDF file*
3. *Amazon downloadable for Kindle*