



PHOTOGRAPHY SINOUK COFFEE PAVILION

# A CUP *RUNNETH OVER*

First planted by French colonists, Lao coffee is brewing up a contemporary scene of third-wave cafés in Vientiane. **Barbara Woolsey** takes a sip of the Lao coffee culture and finds what's good in the brew





**ABOVE  
FROM LEFT:**

The Tropical Fruit Blast (fruits, yoghurt, and granola) is an enjoyable breakfast treat at Joma; Cappuccinnos are a Joma speciality.

It's no secret that coffee is one of Laos' top agricultural exports. The growing demand for coffee worldwide has bolstered production in the Southeast Asian country – reportedly up to USD 100 million in 2017. First planted in early 20th-century times, coffee has become a hot seller on the streets of the country's capital today.

"Expatriates living in Vientiane were looking for the kind of coffee that would give them that feeling of home away from home," says Michael Harder, co-owner of café-cum-bakery Joma and Canada native. "These days, over 50% of our customers are locals."

## THE BIG BARISTA BOOM

A decade ago, you would have been hard-pressed to find an espresso



machine in Vientiane. But now the laidback city – known for its temples and historic architecture – is home to a burgeoning scene of speciality coffee shops (also known as third-wave cafés) that are doing their own roasting and taking an overall artisanal approach by using locally grown single-origin beans.

Two main varieties are grown in Laos: robusta, a common bean with a strong, sometimes bitter taste; and arabica, a more coveted type with smoother, finer notes. The vast majority of this production takes place on the

Bolaven Plateau, a mountainous region in southern Laos. Coffee flowers thrive thanks to mineral-rich volcanic soil and mild weather.

Most farmers still prefer organic farming methods because using modern fertilisers are more expensive. Shade-growing is also popular, decreasing soil erosion and allowing coffee cherries to ripen slower (the process leads to a deeper, more mature flavour in the produce). "There's a nice earthy taste to Lao coffee, which comes from the lava bed that's growing on that unique topsoil," explains Harder.

PHOTOGRAPHY JOMA BAKERY CAFE



The number of cafés with modern decor and proper espresso machines has also multiplied. The coffee scene is noticeably being steeped by Lao people returning home from abroad, bringing with them concept ideas and barista-brewing techniques.

Take Bakery By Boris for example, a café wherein Paris-trained chef Boris Luangkhut serves dainty macarons and homemade ice cream with tasty cappuccinos. The setup is as fresh and cosy as any café you would seek refuge in in Paris or Melbourne. Bakery By Boris' floor-to-ceiling windows flaunt the surrounding landscaped garden, basking modern-design tables in natural light.

Another French-inspired coffee house, Le Trio, sports a black-and-white checkered terrace and marble tables that deliver serious Parisienne vibes. And get this: their lattes brandish foam flowers and other artsy flourishes.

## SINGLE-ORIGIN STORY

But the entire cuppa scene has its roots in Sinouk Coffee – the

first company in Laos to harvest and process green (or unroasted) coffee beans on a large scale.

In 1994, at the age of 35, Sinouk Sisombat moved back to Laos from France where he had been living most of his life. “My grandfather was a member of parliament, and thought it would be nice if one of his children could contribute to the country,” explains Sirina Sisombat-Hervy, managing director of Sinouk Coffee and Sisombat's daughter. “I believe [my father] truly pioneered the development of Laos' coffee industry.”

Sisombat founded the Lao Coffee Association that same year. He headed the association for several years and became instrumental in introducing Lao coffee to international markets. “Today, it's a highly regarded bean often blended into European blends,” adds Harder.

Sinouk Coffee opened its first Café Sinouk in Vientiane in 2007. Today, there are several locations throughout the capital, including the flagship Sinouk Coffee Pavilion, the de facto headquarters of Laos' entire coffee culture. It offers

**ABOVE FROM LEFT:** Third-wave cafés in Vientiane take an artisanal approach by using single-origin beans; Locals swear that Joma's baked goods are as excellent as their coffee.

## BREWED AWAKENING

Experience a cup of joe like never before at these sustainable, eco-tourism-promoting coffee plantations.

### Sinouk Coffee Resort

Stay in a cosy lodge in green caffeine paradise and enjoy an immersive learning experience about the production process.

[f sinoukcoffeeresort](#)

### Green Discovery

Go on multi-day trek around the Bolaven Plateau to visit coffee plantations, meet the farmers, and stop by hill-tribe villages and waterfalls.

[g@greendiscoverylaos.com](#)

### Saffron Coffee

Pulp beans and discover how coffee bean roasting works at this riverside café. They also offer “cherry to cup” tours at a local plot and production facility.

[g@saffroncoffee.com](#)





visitors the unique opportunity to learn about Laos' coffee production through a gallery, mini-museum, and a peek into their roasting and cupping rooms. There are daily tours and regular barista training courses that teach everything from how to operate an espresso machine to creating foamy latte art.

"We don't just want to prepare cappuccinos for customers; we aim to share our passion for Lao coffee," says Sisombat-Hervy. "We use the cupping rooms for work and testing new recipes. As roasters and experts, it's essential for us to have not just a coffee shop but a place to explore the taste of good coffee."

## PILLARS OF THE COMMUNITY

The café has also been a particularly successful space for aligning with community outreach. Sinouk Coffee supports school fees for plantation farmers' children and donates to several schools. The coffee company

also believes in equal-opportunity employment by accommodating the schedules of employees who are students or mothers.

"It's been in the DNA of the company since the beginning – creating jobs and providing an improvement of livelihood," says Sisombat-Hervy. "When the company expanded to the capital, most of the staff came from the plantation."

Common Ground, a café that roasts organic Lao coffee and serves Mexican dishes like taco bowls and fajitas, also supports various community projects – the café double as an art gallery wherein proceeds from sold works go to benefit at-risk women.

According to Harder, Joma – which has five locations across Laos – works with many non-government organisations to help disadvantaged individuals who have difficulty finding jobs elsewhere. The company has partnered with initiatives such as Hagar International and Destiny Rescue to employ human-trafficking victims.



## SOCK IT TO ME

The dark, steaming brew of traditional Lao coffee is typically made with strong robusta beans, as well as ingredients like rice and tamarind powder. All ingredients are then pulled through a cloth filter that resembles a sock before the brew is sweetened with condensed or evaporated milk. Locals even like to joke that their coffee is so thick, you could stand a spoon in it!

"We've given around 100 girls career opportunities; women whom our competitors wouldn't even give a chance to interview," says Harder. "We've always wanted to do business while making a difference, and having enough impact to make the world a better place." 

**ABOVE:**  
Roasting  
underway at  
Sinouk Coffee  
Pavillion.



**Scoot**

flies three times  
weekly to  
Vientiane.  
Book your flights  
at [flyscoot.com](http://flyscoot.com)

