Native to Ethiopia, coffee was first cultivated as a food in Arabia more than 2000 ago. The drink we know today may have emerged in Sufi monasteries in Yemen during the 15th century. It wasn't always widely accepted. For example, some within the Catholic Church first associated coffee with the Islamic infidels because it came to Venice by traders from the Middle East. Pope Clement VIII later decreed it a Christian drink after trying it and discovering it was "so delicious that it would be a pity to let the infidels have exclusive use of it." In the Islamic world, it was banned by a religious court in Mecca in 1511 and a century later the Ottoman Sultan, Murad IV, attempted to prohibit alcohol, tobacco and coffee as dangerous intoxicants. The prohibitions of coffee were always quickly overturned.

By the middle of the 17th century, a leisured class of Renaissance men had brought the Turkish social practice of coffee drinking to Western Europe. The first coffee houses opened in Oxford and London in 1652. Soon after, London coffeehouses (called "penny universities" because that was the price of a cup of coffee) had become the "in" places for men from all walks of life to gather, engage in polite conversation and sober debate on matters of politics, science, literature, commerce and religion, In fact, the London Stock Exchange had its beginnings in Jonathan's Coffee House in 1698 and one of the world's largest insurance companies was born in Lloyd's Coffee House. Coffee houses fell out of favour in the late 18th Century because tea had replaced coffee as the drug of choice (another complex story). They were re-born by hippies in the 1960s and later commercialized by companies like Starbucks.

Coffee (along with other plant-based drugs like tea and tobacco) was taxed, and sometimes officially promoted, by colonial powers going back to the Ottomans. But only later (in French territories) did coffee production, plantations and slavery become linked. Coffee, like tea and tobacco, is a mild stimulant that fit well with colonial labour practices. Even in modern industrial production, "coffee breaks" and "smoke breaks" are tolerated as they help workers stay alert and work more efficiently.

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