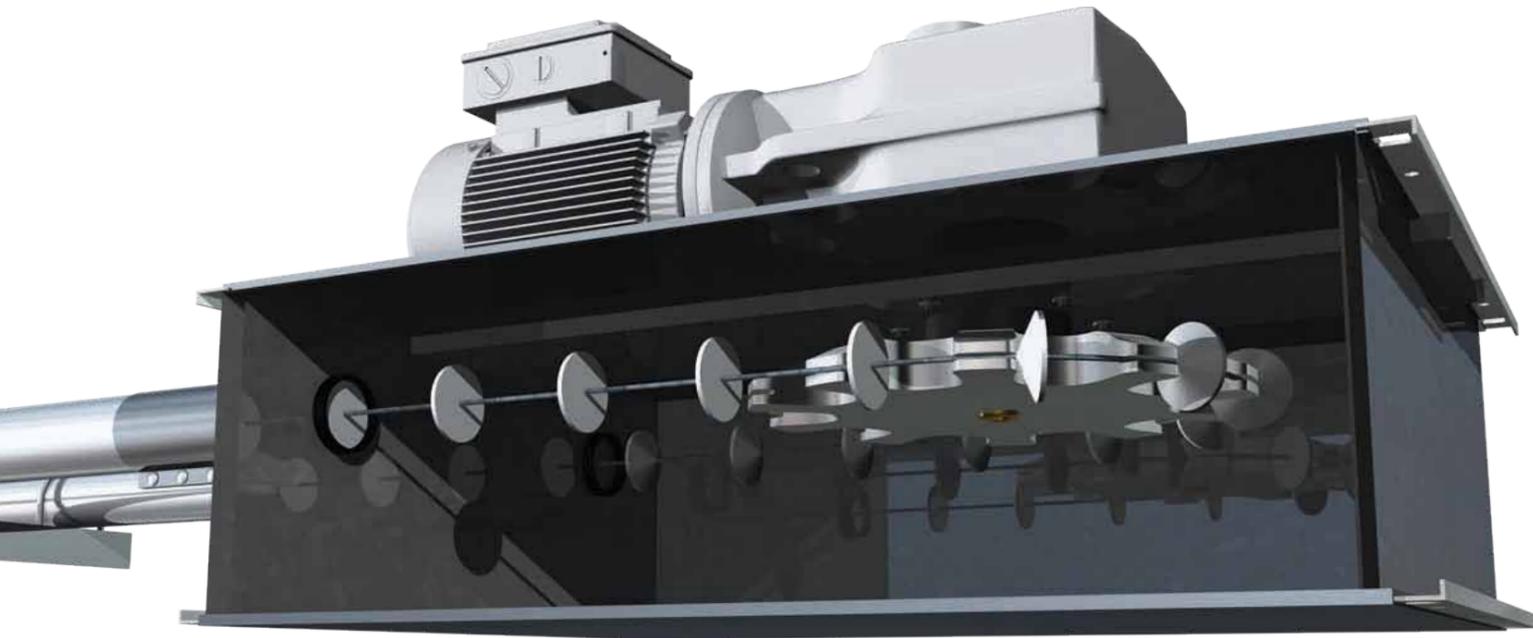


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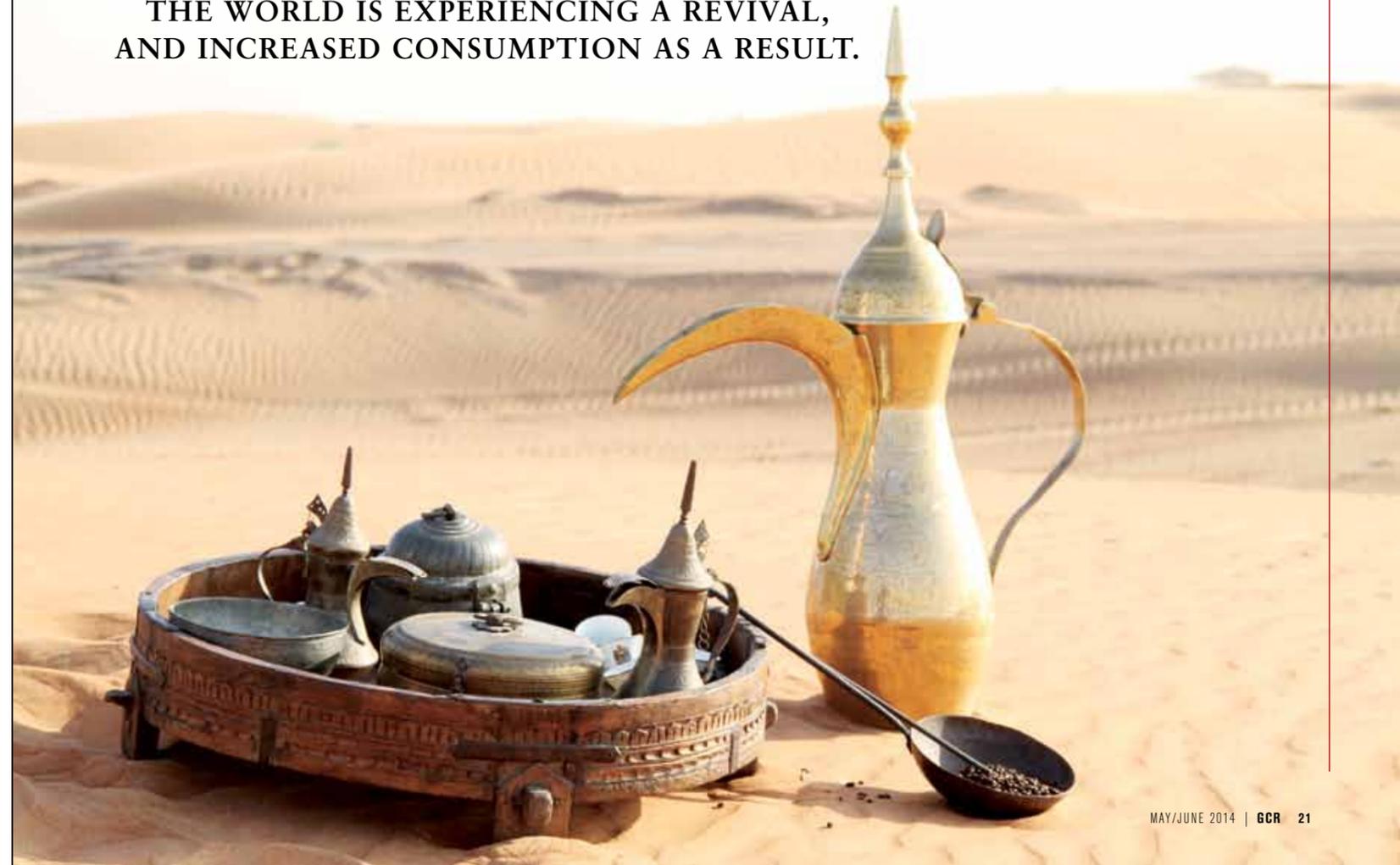
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# MIDDLE EAST SHIFT TO MODERN COFFEE TIMES

ONE OF THE OLDEST COFFEE CULTURES IN THE WORLD IS EXPERIENCING A REVIVAL, AND INCREASED CONSUMPTION AS A RESULT.



**O**n the outskirts of Dubai, in the shade of a big tent stuffed with oriental rugs and traditional red pillows, an 80-year-old Bedouin, Ali Abdullah Alshikki, recalls a life filled with coffee traditions that date back over 800 years.

Slowly brewing a pot of coffee, Alshikki goes through each step with careful diligence. From cutting the wood, preparing the fire, filling the old pot with water and putting it to boil, only then, when the fire is right, does he start to prepare the coffee itself. In an elaborate ceremony that takes the better part of an hour, he slowly grounds the coffee and mixes it with Cardamom before finally boiling the pot.

Taking in the late afternoon sun on a stretch of red desert sand along the coast of the Persian Gulf, coffee drinking doesn't get more magical than this. The Bedouins who are still found across most of the region are the closest to what could be considered the world's first generation of baristas.

This is where and how coffee was consumed in the earliest beginnings of coffee trade and commercial cultivation. On these shores, the oldest of coffee traditions now seems to be taking a leap into the modern era of coffee drinking, driven by Western-style coffee chains serving up espresso-based drinks.

"Coffee is such an important part of our culture here and it has such a deep-rooted history. For centuries it has been used as the way to welcome your guests, whether in your home or at formal meetings," explains Khalid Al Mulla. Al Mulla is one of three partners in Easternmen & Co. Based in Dubai, the company is one of the biggest roasters in the Middle East. Around a decade ago, Easternmen & Co was one of the first regional companies to step away from tradition, and embrace the modern coffee scene, by roasting single origin coffee and specialty beans.

"Here in Dubai, it used to be that only the Syrian and Lebanese were involved in coffee roasting, but in a very traditional way," Al Mulla tells *GCR Magazine*. "By 2000 it all started to change. Now coffee culture is growing everywhere and you see that people are becoming much more aware of the multiple types and different kinds of coffee you can get."

Since Easternmen & Co started introducing single origin beans into the local market, specialty coffee seems to be on the rise, with consumers appreciated a quality brew.



**"THE MIDDLE EAST, AND DUBAI IN PARTICULAR, REALLY IS AN AMAZING MARKET AND A VERY COMPETITIVE MARKET. EVEN IF YOU STAY IN THE OFFICE WITHOUT DOING ANYTHING AT ALL, YOU'LL STILL HAVE AT LEAST 10 PER CENT GROWTH A YEAR."**

*Remi Rouchon*  
French roasters Malongo Café

At the recent GulFood trade fair – one of the largest food and hospitality shows in the world with around 4300 exhibitors – long queues formed whenever a stand put on a coffee brewing session. The crowd of Middle Eastern consumers that dominated the GulFood audience drew a record 87,000 visitors.

"I really am impressed by the level of knowledge of coffee found in these countries. The Middle East, and Dubai in particular, really is an amazing market and a very competitive market. Even if you stay in the office without doing anything at all, you'll still have at least 10 per cent growth a year," says Remi Rouchon of French roasters Malongo Café. "If you do something and work on your business you should see growth rates of at least 30 per cent a year."

That growth is spread throughout the region. Thanks to Dubai, the UAE is rapidly becoming one of the top countries that imports green coffee and re-exports it as roasted.

"Dubai is the biggest hub for connecting the East and West. It has one of the best ports in the world and it's the financial centre of the Middle East," says Al Mulla. Local industry figures put the UAE as the fifth biggest country

for re-exporting coffee.

Since the end of the Cold War, importing countries have earned a combined average of US\$5.5 billion a year from re-exporting 24.2 million 60-kilogram bags of coffee, according to the International Coffee Organization (ICO). This compares to an average of US\$962 million from 1965 to 1989. The world's largest re-exporter is Germany, followed by Belgium, the United States and Italy.

In a 2013 report, the ICO said that both the value and volume of re-exports increased significantly during the free market period, and considerably over the last few years. For 2012, total value was estimated at around US\$14.7 billion, compared to \$2.4 billion in 2000. In general, the ICO said that: "re-exporting activities in importing countries have shown consistent growth over the last 50 years."

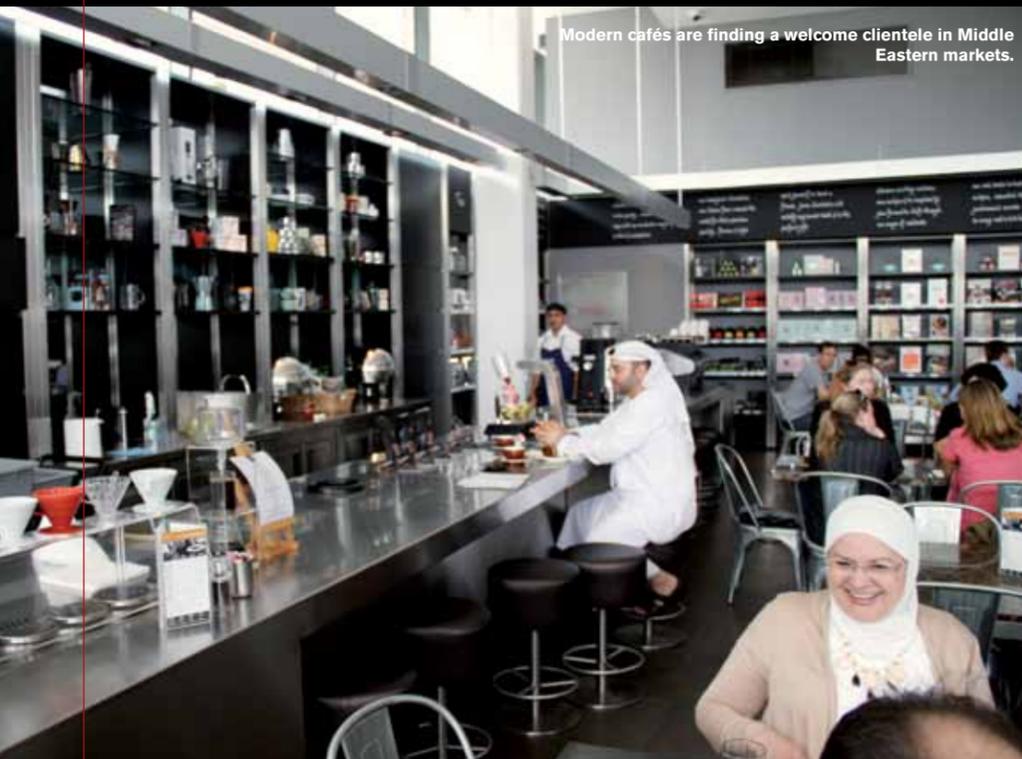
The UAE, and most other countries in the Middle East region, are not included in ICO figures as non-member countries, making it challenging to source comparable data. Countries that are covered, however, leave little doubt that a coffee boom is widespread in the Middle East.

"There are so many coffee shops and coffee chains in Turkey today, even Turkish coffee shop chains," says Aysin Aydogdu, a coffee roaster based in Turkey. She got into coffee straight out of college, and today works with eight micro roasteries to help them improve the quality of coffee, and introduce Western espresso-based coffee into the market. She says that while most Turks still drink Turkish coffee, the local market has been quick to embrace lattes and cappuccinos.

"In the last three years we have seen a really big change in the local market. We have always been drinking coffee in Turkey, but for many years we forgot about our traditions, and it wasn't until Starbucks came that people even knew about these different styles," she says.

The first Starbucks opened in the UAE in 1999, and both local and foreign-owned coffee shops have followed, including Café Nero, Caribu, Costa Coffee and Australia's Jones Coffee Bar, among others.

In the last four years, Turkey has doubled its green coffee imports to 500,000 bags in the 2013-14 crop cycle, from just 275,000 bags in 2009-10, according to the US Department of Agriculture (USDA). The group pegs total consumption for the core Middle East region of Iran, Jordan, Yemen and Turkey at 1.32 million bags. Comparative figures were not available.



Modern cafés are finding a welcome clientele in Middle Eastern markets.



Coffee-drinking culture originates in the Middle East, dating back 800 years.



Bedouin, Ali Abdullah Alshikki performs traditional coffee preparation.

“At this point, most of the coffee we import is from neighbouring countries and it’s already roasted. But we have a lot of potential for industrial roasting, and we have a lot of interest from roasters to come and set up business,” says one coffee trader from Tehran, who distributes coffee and machinery to coffee shops across Iran and Iraq. Total consumption in Iran today is around 250,000 bags. No figures are available from Iraq.

“Jordan is one of the biggest markets here. You see a lot of different styles in coffee shops set-ups, with some offering customers up to 16 different blends to choose from. In Lebanon, you have coffee shops generally offering a standard 4 – 10 different [blends] in the shops and that level of choice is what is driving volumes up,” says one official from Swiss grinder manufacturer Ditting.

Coffee markets are reportedly growing across the region, although it’s challenging to obtain figures to confirm this growth. The fact that the USDA today has added figures from Jordan, Yemen, Morocco and Algeria is a good measure of the market potential.

Smaller markets are Syria and Yemen, which consume each around 150,000 bags. Jordan consumes a healthy 450,000 bags. Key markets are Morocco at around 700,000 bags, and Algeria which, according to the ICO, has seen demand rise to almost 2.4 million bags from around 1.7 million less than a decade.

“Algeria has a very large demand which mostly is being supplied through France, and new countries are starting to come along like Qatar and Bahrain,” says the official from Ditting.

“Now the market is starting to pick up in Bahrain, and it’s a market of quality here in the Gulf region, even if we are only a market of about 1 million people,” says Abdul Khaliq Milad, of Bahrain’s Tasneem Trading company, which primarily imports coffee and food products.

Bahrain, he says, has “no good official statistics”, but local industry officials estimate the per capita consumption in 2010 was around 2 kilograms a year, compared to around 4.6 kilograms for Dubai.

“We are planning to establish a coffee club where normal people and specialists alike can visit and



Consumption is on the rise, with the USDA starting to keep track of figures in Jordan, Yemen, Morocco and Algeria.

get knowledge about coffee culture, training in preparing coffee and can enjoy an excellent final cup,” says Khaliq Milad. He is also looking to hold the first Barista Championships in Bahrain, another strong indication that specialty coffee culture is starting to take hold of this region showing ample potential. ☕

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