

COFFEE FACTS

First discovered Ethiopia

In the 9th Century, an Ethiopian goatherder named Kaldi noticed his animals became particularly frolicsome once they'd nibbled on a certain berry bush, so he decided to try it himself. Once Kaldi tasted the plant, legend has it "poetry and song spilled out of him." Other variants of the tale describe an imam or monk coming across Kaldi after he'd eaten the berries, and noticing the plant's stimulating effects. After sampling the berries himself, the religious man stayed up and prayed long into the night. Soon, coffee began to spread as a way for religious devotees to remain alert and worship until the early hours of the morning.

"This was particularly important for Sufism, the very mystic strand of Islam... coffee is what made the dervishes whirl,"

First coffee house Oxford (1651) London (1652)

Pasqua Rosee an Armenian-born servant of a British merchant named Daniel Edwards employed by the Levant Company, which once monopolised England's trade with the Ottoman Empire. In 1652, Rosee opened a coffee-serving stall in St Michael's churchyard to entertain Edwards' guests. Edwards had grown weary of hosting guests in his home, and so Rosee's shed, conveniently located near the Royal Exchange centre of commerce, became the go-to hub where London's merchants congregated each day. Within a year or two, Rosee had earned enough revenue from selling his energy-inducing drink to upgrade from a stall to a store across the alley.

Coffee House Culture

The early coffeehouses had an almost exclusively male clientele.

"Coffeehouses provided a number of things that taverns didn't."

In a uniquely egalitarian model of sociability, men gathered around a long table at most coffeehouses to talk business, but also to discuss news, politics and ideas. The explosion of coffeehouses across London coincided with the build-up to the early Enlightenment period, and coffeehouses played a key role in that.

"That mixture of news reading, discussion, sharing of ideas [was] absolutely crucial to the rapid spread of the coffeehouse during a period of rapid rise of knowledge," Hawley explained. It was also the birthplace of periodical literature in England, whereby Hawley said "the coffeehouse was put on paper" in the form of essays. The periodicals Tatler and The Spectator were founded in 1709 and 1711, respectively, through collecting stories from the coffeeshops, which further forged them as the foremost place to learn the latest news.

However, in addition to coffee's perceived political threat, it was also believed to be a threat to British masculinity, as some thought coffeehouses made men more effeminate. "They gossiped like women and then when they came home... [were] no good for anything... coffee houses made men impotent,"

Decline of the Coffee House

The early 19th Century saw Britain expanding coffee production in Ceylon (Sri Lanka) and India, but an outbreak of rust caused by the fungus *Hemileia vastatrix* destroyed coffee plantations in both colonies over the course of a decade. Coffee drinking declined in Britain, particularly as tea drinking became more widespread. The plantations were thereby converted to tea growing, cementing the leaf's role as the drink of choice in Britain

As drinking fads shifted in Britain during the second half of the 18th and early 19th Centuries, so too did coffeehouses, which became more exclusive. Some, such as those around St James' in London, evolved into elite, members-only institutions associated with gambling.

The Dark Ages of Coffee

By the mid-20th century, British coffee culture had largely collapsed into instant coffee. Nescafe and Maxwell House dominated British kitchens. Coffee was what you drank when you did not want tea, and the expectation of quality was minimal. The UK was a tea nation in every meaningful cultural sense.

The Coffee Renaissance

"We can date the contemporary coffeehouse moment back to the mid-1990s, that's the moment when it really takes off," Morris explained of the rebirth of the UK's coffeeshop culture, when chains like Costa Coffee and Caffè Nero formed in the UK. "Coffeeshops are opening as more pubs are closing; the number of pubs has gone down, year-on-year-on-year, [while] the number of coffeeshops has gone up. In effect, the coffeeshop has sort of taken over as a social space from the traditional pub."

Starbucks arrived in the UK in 1998, opening its first store in London. Costa Coffee, which began in London in 1971, expanded rapidly through the 2000s. This second wave introduced espresso-based drinks to a mass British audience and normalised the concept of paying several pounds for a coffee drink.

The flat white arrived in UK cafes around this time, introduced by Australian and New Zealand baristas who began opening specialty cafes in London. This was the beginning of something genuinely new.

From approximately 2010, a specialist coffee scene emerged rapidly in London, led by roasters and cafes that had no interest in competing with Starbucks.

By 2026, the UK has over 700 specialty roasters. London alone has over 200. The UK specialty coffee market is one of the fastest-growing in Europe.

What Makes UK Coffee Culture Distinct

The Flat White as National Drink

The flat white which originated in Australia and New Zealand has become the most culturally significant espresso drink in UK cafe culture. It arrived with the Australian and New Zealand baristas who opened London's early specialty cafes in the 2000s and became the drink that signalled sophistication, quality, and knowledge.

The flat white is now on the menu of every UK coffee chain including Costa, Pret a Manger, and Greggs. Its presence on mainstream menus is a measure of how far British coffee culture has travelled.

The Cafetiere at Home

While cafe culture is espresso-dominated, home coffee in Britain is overwhelmingly cafetiere-driven. The cafetiere (called a French press everywhere else) is the most common manual brewer in British homes. This is partly practical it is simple, produces multiple cups at once, and requires no equipment beyond a kettle and partly cultural. The cafetiere has been a British kitchen fixture since the 1970s.

Tea Heritage and Coffee Seriousness

Britain's long tea culture has created an unusual characteristic in its coffee culture: British coffee drinkers who care about coffee tend to care quite seriously. The tea tradition meant that hot beverages were already taken seriously as a craft, with detailed attention to temperature, timing, and quality. When specialty coffee arrived, the cultural infrastructure for taking drinks seriously already existed.

British coffee culture has a notably wider gap between home and cafe quality than some other countries. At home, the cafetiere and instant coffee remain dominant. In cafes, specialty espresso is increasingly the standard

Milk-Forward Preferences

British coffee culture is strongly milk-forward. Lattes, flat whites, and cappuccinos dominate UK cafe orders. Black coffee is growing but remains a smaller share than in some European countries. This milk preference explains why the flat white resonated so strongly it provides espresso quality with the comfort of milk.

Coffee Oddities

First instant coffee in Britain – Camp Coffee

Early coffee producer – Mocha (now Yemen)

Sources

UK Coffee Culture Guide 2026: How Britain Became a Coffee Nation

August 2, 2026 by [Munir Ahmed](#)

<https://www.bbc.com/travel/article/20201119-how-coffee-forever-changed-britain?ocid=ww.social.link.email>

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