

A man with dark hair, wearing a green long-sleeved shirt and a brown apron, is focused on operating a mechanical coffee mill. The mill is a complex piece of machinery with a hopper at the top, a grinding mechanism in the middle, and a collection tray at the bottom. The man is using a wooden tool to guide the coffee beans into the mill. The background shows a rustic structure made of woven bamboo or wood, and a lush green landscape under a bright sky. The text "THAILAND: READY FOR TAKEOFF" is overlaid in large, bold, red letters with a black outline.

# THAILAND: READY FOR TAKEOFF

A new generation of importers and roasters is helping Thailand's specialty coffee industry get off the ground—and travel the world

By Rachel Northrop





**H**igh in the mountains of Doi Pangkhon, a tank of coffee beans of the Chiang Mai-80 varietal has begun to ferment with the addition of winemaker's yeast. But the journey is just starting for this experimental, four-kilogram nanolot of coffee, grown and processed in Thailand. Once processed, the coffee beans will be transported halfway around the world to a roaster in The Netherlands, then on to Manhattan, where it will appear on the stage of the New York Coffee Masters competition.

The time has come for Thailand to take off in the global specialty coffee industry.

"We're looking for partners who aren't afraid to take a risk on an origin that has zero reputation," says Fuadi Pitsuwan of **Beanspire Coffee**, Thailand's first and only specialty coffee exporter. Since launching his business in 2013, Fuadi has been on a mission to fill the void of knowledge about Thai coffee. He would like to see the specialty coffee industry recognize the region's quality, and he does his best to help build that reputation—one exportable bag at a time.

"People in coffee tend to be prejudiced against Asian coffee," Fuadi says. "But once we get it past importer and roaster, it's always a consumer favorite, and Thailand already has the name recognition from tourism."

While Thailand has earned renown as a vacation destination, the country has kept its coffee production largely to itself. The domestic demand for specialty coffee consumes most of the country's coffee production, leaving just a fraction for export. »





**IN BLOOM:** Cherry blossoms act as shade trees for the coffee shrubs below.

“We grow more arabica than Panama and more total coffee than Kenya,” Fuadi says. “When people think of the micromill revolution, they think of Costa Rica, but it’s happening in Thailand.”

Conditions for coffee production are ideal in Thailand, unlike other countries, which are near crisis with the rapidly advancing age of coffee farmers, a lack of rural infrastructure, and a dearth of education to equip rural residents with the skills necessary to meet the processing and logistic demands of specialty coffee.

“The city of Chiang Mai is the Seattle of Asia, but with all local coffee! Thailand is the only place you can see a closed supply system with such high-end shops so close to farms,” Fuadi says.

### YOUTH MOVEMENT

According to one of Fuadi’s first import partners, Lennart Clercx, founder of **This Side Up** in The Netherlands, “Concepts like processing diversification, branding, direct exchange with roasters, and the importance of social media are second nature to Thailand’s new generation of coffee entrepreneurs.”

That’s because the average age of Thai coffee farmers is 25. This young, savvy generation of Thai farmers sees opportunity to develop an export market for high-quality, differentiated products.

“They’re the same age as the barista and the consumer. Coffee is a way for the elites in Bangkok to build connections to farmers who grow coffee in the north,” Fuadi says. He notes that families from the mountain regions are the only ones to own and farm land. As a result, Thailand has no absentee gentlemen farmers, and land owners are also land administrators and workers.

“We’re more expensive than [neighboring coffee-producing countries],” Fuadi explains. “But with the price, you get farmers who have completed university, are former accountants, have worked in the city, and have chosen to come back to the farm, because the quality of life is better in the mountains, where they can make more income as a coffee farmer than as a government employee with a PhD.”

Thai farmers and micromill owners are in a uniquely lucrative position, where agriculture and responsible

land management can coexist. In almost every other coffee-producing country, producers are at serious risk of losing money by growing coffee, often relying on debt cycles to maintain their farms.

“To see an origin where passionate coffee lovers and baristas actually go to the countryside to buy and upgrade coffee farms is inspiring,” Clercx says.

Thanks to these favorable cultural and economic conditions, agriculture is financially viable in Thailand. The country’s young farmers—themselves also coffee consumers and students of global markets—understand the balanced, complex cup profiles the specialty coffee sector wants. “This is exactly the type of agro-entrepreneurship that we need to keep coffee alive. It is comforting for some of my other origin partners to know that such a utopian coffee future, however small and distant, is already in the making in Thailand,” Clercx says.

“Each farm is basically its own side of the mountain, and we have the ability to pair each farmer with a roaster,” Fuadi says. “It’s so new—everything is up for grabs.”

While exporting microlots is a new strategy being promoted by Fuadi,



Thai coffee production is already quite developed and includes varieties not grown elsewhere.

Coffee cultivation in Thailand started as a crop migration project to replace opiates and came with the guaranteed domestic buyers needed to sustain it. Named after the 80th anniversary of the former king, the Chiang Mai-80 varietal, an SL-28 back-crossed with Catimor, was released in 2007. (Fuadi notes that it is more commonly known simply as “Chiang Mai,” so that the “80” is not misinterpreted to indicate a low point score. Chiang Mai coffees regularly score in the mid to high 80s.)

“With so many Catimor strands, we have to do everything perfectly to get to 85. We work with what we have. We can’t rely on soil or varietal to get us the best final cup,” Fuadi says. The Chiang Mai varietal is rust resistant and, when processed as a honey or natural coffee, delivers desirable attributes in the cup.




**YOUNG FARMER** Ata (left) with Miguel Meza, Darrin Daniel (ACE’s executive director) and Fuadi Pitsuwan.

Beanspire’s dry mill buys parchment on quality-based consignment from 25 farmers and is working to make Thailand the next Hawaii, Jamaica, or Panama—a niche origin with coffees priced to be sold as single origins to discerning customers.

### AN ORIGIN EMERGES

As Thailand works to establish its status on the world stage, several curious roasters have already dug in.

Miguel Meza of **Paradise Coffee Roasters** in Minnesota started working with Fuadi five years ago. “Arabica »




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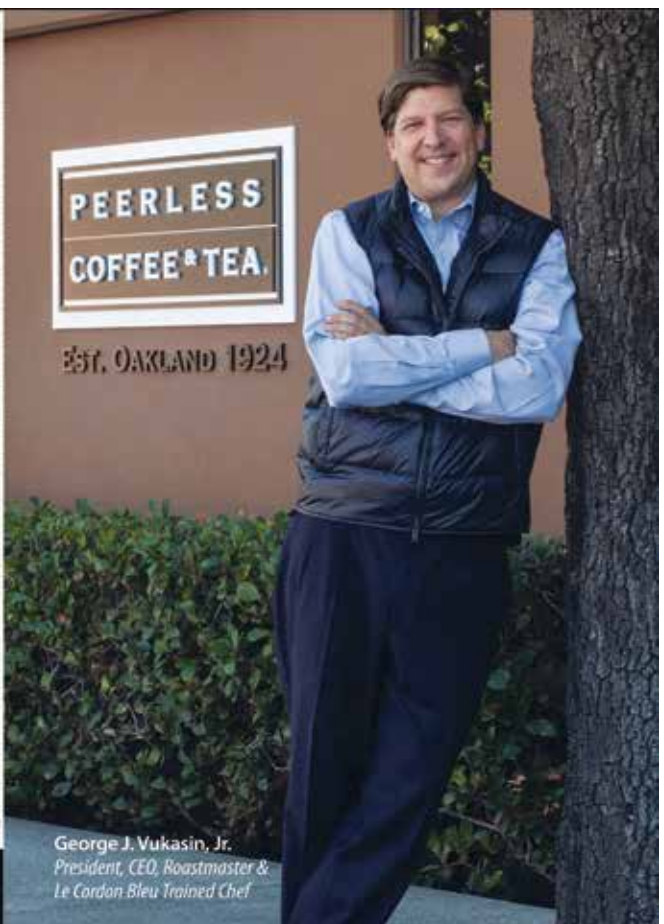


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from Doi Pangkhon and robusta from Ranong Province are our foremost direct-trade projects,” Meza says. “As a company, we are focused on highlighting and helping to develop emerging origins. My partners and I are all coffee producers ourselves [in Hawaii], so this gives us a unique perspective on and understanding of how to improve coffee quality at the farm level and through the supply chain,” Meza says.

Paradise has found Thai arabicas to work quite well as espresso—no big surprise, given how widespread espresso culture is in Thailand.

On a more macro level, **Allegro Coffee** is a Whole Foods Market subsidiary accustomed to importing large quantities. Allegro coffees are roasted in small batches and hand-packed at six roasteries located across the United States, with limited distribution to local markets. Stephanie Kieran, Allegro’s digital and experiential



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marketing manager, explains how the company sources meaningful volumes of Thai coffee.

“We have been thrilled to include Thailand Doi Pangkhon AA [and support] the involvement of the youth in the specialty coffee sector there. They just needed a market to sell to. We came in as a larger roaster with the ability to buy a full container,” Kiernan explains.

**Joe Coffee Company** last year showcased a small lot of honey-processed heirloom Typica from Thailand’s Doi Saket area—grown on trees older than the farmers who now tend it—at 19 of its New York City cafés during a one-day Bonus Track offering.

The Big Apple got another taste of Thai coffee when Rob Clarijs, a barista from The Netherlands, competed at last year’s New York Coffee Masters with Doi Pangkhon-grown Chiang Mai-80 varietal processed using wine



**FAMILY LEGACY** Fuadi Pitsuwan (far right) at a micro mill where the son is learning to run the family coffee farm.

yeast in a controlled fermentation method. Clarijs was the only competitor to represent a producer group with his featured coffee.

“Usually people think of Thai coffee as really rough, not specialty coffee style. But this coffee was super bright and rich in tones of light

citrus, nuts, apple, and crisp flavors like minerals,” Clarijs says. “This coffee was just so balanced that I could drink it every day.”

Thai coffee’s youthful production sector, combined with its appeal in the final cup, make Thailand an exciting origin to explore. ☕

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