

Good to the Last Dropping, Caphe Cut Chon Is a Rare Find

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DAKLAK, Vietnam -- Coffee farmer Ho Hoang Yen fondly remembers one of his boyhood chores of half a century ago. With mist rolling off the hills, he would rise at dawn, trek through the lush highland wilderness, and forage beneath dewy bushes for the finest coffee beans.

His French-colonial plantation master expected nothing but the best on his breakfast table, and the young Mr. Yen knew just where to find it.

"Ah, fox dung," recalls the 66-year-old farmer, smacking his lips. "It makes the most, most excellent coffee."

Mr. Yen says it has been seven years since he has savored a cup of the improbable beverage, because Vietnam -- one of the world's big coffee exporters -- has been doing an injustice to one of its most instinctive coffee connoisseurs: the civet cat, a creature of the Viverridae family that looks something like a fox but is actually a cousin of the mongoose.

With its long, sensitive snout, this finicky eater is legendary among old-time coffee growers here for sniffing out the best ripe robusta coffee beans and eating them from the low branches of the coffee bush. The hardiest beans survive the digestive process intact and, according to aficionados, are improved by it.

"The fox is very clever," says Ba Chieu, a 74-year-old retired coffee grower. And industrious, too. She recalls in years past easily collecting as much as a kilogram of caphe cut chon, or fox-dung coffee, on her tiny five-acre farm.

But Vietnam's development ambitions are badgering the civet cat. Since the Vietnam War, the government has urged migrant farmers to settle down and grow more coffee for export. Thousands of acres of forest (civet-cat habitat) have been razed. And modern farming techniques have been introduced, such as picking beans before they are entirely ripe, the effect of which is to deprive civet cats of a decent meal.

Another reason caphe cut chon is disappearing from dinner tables: Civet cats are showing up as the main course. At the bustling Bac Map restaurant in coffee country's provincial capital, Buon Me Thuot, barbecued civet cat is a big-selling delicacy among newly rich coffee traders, says Chung Hue Bac, the proprietor. He isn't too troubled by the resultant scarcity of caphe cut chon. "I'd much rather eat the fox," he says.

At her home a few doors down the street from the restaurant, the elderly Mrs. Chieu despairs. "Young people today don't respect the old ways," she says.

Caphe cut chon is a remnant of French colonialism in Vietnam, along with Catholicism, a taste for banhe my phap (baguettes), and the Vietnamese script itself, which was romanized by a Frenchman in the early 17th century. About 100 years ago, the French introduced coffee farming in the central highlands, setting the stage for caphe cut chon.

Mr. Yen, the farmer who gathered beans as a boy, dimly recalls his French plantation master saying the practice was imported from other coffee-growing countries such as Ethiopia. (Coffee has been retrieved from bat and monkey droppings in Indonesia.) Mr. Yen's father developed a recipe for preparing the civet-cat beans. First, dry them in the sun for months, until the outer skin flakes off. "There's no need to wash them," Mr. Yen says, though some people do. Then mix the beans with butter, salt, a little sugar and a dash of "fine French red wine," and slowly roast them for hours over coffee-tree wood.

Each farmer in Vietnam seems to have his own coffee recipe: Some roast it quickly, some slowly, some add salt, some sugar, some add artificial flavorings.

"There's nothing like caphe chon to clear the head and bowels" first thing in the morning, he says.

Today, the coffee's scarcity has accorded it legendary status. One coffee trader in Ho Chi Minh City describes his beans as "just as good as fox dung," even though he concedes he has never dealt in the real thing. A dealer in one highland town declares caphe cut chon a "fairy tale," while another dealer in a nearby village claims to have "a ton" of it. A restaurateur in Ho Chi Minh City asserts that during wartime, Viet Cong fighters used caphe cut chon as "the coffee equivalent of cocaine-rat-a-tat-tat!"

In Buon Me Thuot, the main market town, stalls are brimming with boxes purporting to be caphe cut chon, packaged with the image of a civet cat nibbling at a bean.

Rising to the Top

"Definitely fake," pronounces Phan Quoc Sung, head of Vietnam's Coffee Research Institute, opening a packet and taking a sniff. Just to be sure, he brews a cup, which quickly develops a surface scum. "Chicken fat," he explains, which is used by farmers to mask the bitter tannins in low-grade beans.

But with the help of a few persevering coffee growers, caphe cut chon can still be found. In this poor nation, people make every bean count, explains one such farmer, Tran Thi Phuoc. She lives a bone-jarring 25-mile, three-hour motorbike ride south of the provincial capital, which means nearby forests still harbor a few civet-cat families. Thus, she was able to gather two kilos of cafe cut chon with her December harvest, she boasts.

What she and other farmers don't keep for their own pleasure is mixed with the rest of their crop, sold to middlemen, and eventually milled and marketed world-wide. "Dealers don't believe it's caphe chon, anyway," she says.

Alas, she has none on hand to share with a visitor. But two teenage boys in her tiny hamlet say they know a reliable source, undiscovered at the edge of their neighbor's small plantation. They sprint along a winding path, through flowering coffee bushes, and there, at the base of a jackfruit tree, lies the prize: a telltale length of bean droppings. Just enough for a single cup of coffee.

One Great Cup

Roasted and brewed, the beans produce a smooth, strong drink. "A little earthy," says Jeff Richardson, an American coffee retailer in Hanoi, who nevertheless rates it "triple A."

Mr. Sung of the coffee institute is confident there's a market out there. And he has a plan: When he retires next year, he will breed free-range civet cats to wander his own small plantation, eating and processing beans. "I could sell it to some cafes in Paris," he says.

As if to prove the practicality of his business plan, he drives a few kilometers down the road from his institute to a restaurant that has mangy animals in cages, including a gibbon and a female civet cat.

Pulling ripe coffee berries from his pocket, he offers them to the listless civet cat. She nibbles at one bean and ignores the rest. "See," Mr. Sung says. "The fox eats only the best."

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