



# Coffee and the Enlightenment

How coffeehouses became salons of the Enlightenment — fueling philosophy, science, and political thought across Europe. Part of The Coffee Encyclopedia, sponsored by PuertoRicoCoffeeShop.com.

- [Coffee Arrives in Europe](#)

# Coffee Arrives in Europe

## Summary

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Coffee first entered Europe through Venice in the early 1600s via trade routes from the Ottoman Empire, sparking a cultural revolution that would reshape European intellectual, political, and commercial life. Within a century, coffeehouses had spread to every major European city — London, Paris, Vienna, Amsterdam — each developing its own distinct coffee culture and playing a pivotal role in everything from the Enlightenment to the stock exchange. Coffee's European arrival set the stage for the drink's eventual global conquest, including its spread to the Americas and, ultimately, to Puerto Rico in 1736.



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## Coffee's First European Port: Venice

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<https://www.youtube.com/embed/s-WO2BTIUb8>

*Watch: The Complete History of Coffee: From Ethiopia to Modern Cafes*

Venice was the perfect gateway for coffee's arrival in Europe. The city had been trading with the Ottoman world for centuries and maintained active commercial connections with Istanbul, Alexandria, and other coffee-drinking cities. Venetian merchants were among the first Europeans to encounter coffee during their travels in the East, and they brought samples home.

By 1570, coffee beans were being imported into Venice as a luxury commodity. Wealthy Venetians could purchase small quantities through specialty merchants. For decades, coffee remained a rare and expensive curiosity, consumed primarily by people who had traveled to the Ottoman Empire and developed a taste for it there.

Everything changed in 1683 when the first true Venetian coffeehouse opened in Piazza San Marco. More followed rapidly. Venice's coffeehouses became gathering spots for merchants, intellectuals, and travelers. The famous Caffè Florian, which opened in 1720 and still operates today, is considered the oldest continuously running coffeehouse in Europe.

From Venice, coffee spread to other Italian cities — Rome, Florence, Naples, and Milan all developed their own coffee cultures. The modern Italian passion for espresso, which would emerge in the 19th century, has its deep roots in this 17th-century Venetian embrace of coffee.

## The Coffee Encyclopedia



*Historic Caffè Florian in Venice*

Image curation pending

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## The Pope Who Baptized Coffee

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Coffee's acceptance in Catholic Europe was not guaranteed. When the drink first arrived, some Christian clergy were suspicious of this "Muslim beverage" that had originated in Islamic lands. They petitioned Pope Clement VIII to ban coffee as a drink associated with infidels.

According to legend, the Pope decided to taste coffee himself before ruling. He found it delicious. Rather than condemn it, he is said to have remarked, "This devil's drink is so good that we should cheat the devil by baptizing it." He then symbolically blessed coffee, making it an officially Christian-approved beverage.

Whether this story is strictly historical or embellished folklore, its cultural impact is real. The Pope's approval removed the religious obstacle to coffee consumption in Catholic Europe. Within a generation, coffee was being drunk throughout Italy, Spain, Portugal, and Catholic France without any sense of religious conflict.

## London's Penny Universities

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Coffee arrived in England in the 1650s, and the first English coffeehouse opened in Oxford in 1650, founded by a Jewish-Lebanese immigrant named Jacob. Two years later, in 1652, the first London coffeehouse opened in St. Michael's Alley, founded by a Greek immigrant named Pasqua Rosée.

London coffeehouses quickly earned the nickname "penny universities." For the price of one penny — the cost of a cup of coffee — anyone could enter and participate in the intellectual and commercial life happening inside. Unlike taverns, which served alcohol and fostered drunkenness, coffeehouses served coffee and fostered conversation.

Each London coffeehouse developed a specialized clientele. Lloyd's Coffee House, founded in 1686, became the gathering place for ship owners and marine insurers — eventually evolving into the Lloyd's of London insurance market that still exists today. Jonathan's Coffee House attracted stockbrokers and became the precursor to the London Stock Exchange. Scientific societies, literary circles, political parties, and business networks all coalesced around specific coffeehouses.

By 1700, London had over 2,000 coffeehouses. They were so central to English life that King Charles II attempted to ban them in 1675, fearing their role in political discussion.

The ban lasted only eleven days before public outcry forced its repeal.

## Paris and the Literary Coffeehouse

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Coffee reached Paris in 1669, brought by the Ottoman ambassador Suleiman Aga, who presented the drink to Louis XIV's court. It became an immediate sensation among the French aristocracy.

The first Parisian coffeehouse in the modern sense was Café Procope, opened in 1686 by an Italian immigrant named Francesco Procopio dei Coltelli. Procope was unlike the male-only coffeehouses of London — it welcomed both men and women and offered an elegant, refined atmosphere more like a salon than a working-class meeting place.

Café Procope became the heart of French intellectual life. Voltaire was said to drink 40 cups of coffee a day at Procope. Rousseau, Diderot, and Benjamin Franklin all frequented it. The first encyclopedia — the Encyclopédie of Denis Diderot — was reportedly planned at its tables.

Parisian coffeehouses played a major role in the Enlightenment and, eventually, the French Revolution. They were spaces where ideas about liberty, reason, and reform could be discussed freely. Many of the revolutionary leaders of 1789 were coffeehouse regulars.

Café Procope still operates today in its original Parisian location, making it one of the oldest coffee establishments in the world.

## The Battle of Vienna and Coffee's Miracle

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Vienna's coffee origin story is the most dramatic in Europe. In 1683, an Ottoman army of 200,000 troops besieged Vienna for two months, threatening to conquer the city and potentially all of Central Europe. The siege was broken when a Polish-led relief force defeated the Ottomans at the Battle of Vienna on September 12, 1683.

The retreating Ottoman army abandoned their supplies, including hundreds of sacks of green coffee beans. According to tradition, a Polish-born Ukrainian named Jerzy Franciszek Kulczycki recognized the beans from his time living in Istanbul and claimed them as his reward for wartime services.

Kulczycki is credited with opening Vienna's first coffeehouse shortly after the battle. He supposedly modified the Turkish preparation to suit European tastes — filtering out the grounds and adding milk and honey. This style became the template for Viennese coffee culture.

The Viennese coffeehouse culture that grew from this dramatic beginning became world-famous. Cafés like Café Central, Café Hawelka, and Café Landtmann became legendary gathering places for artists, writers, and intellectuals. Sigmund Freud, Leon Trotsky, Adolf Loos, and Stefan Zweig all spent countless hours in Viennese coffeehouses. In 2011, UNESCO added Viennese coffeehouse culture to its Intangible Cultural Heritage list.

## The Coffee Encyclopedia



*Traditional Viennese coffeehouse interior*

Image curation pending



## Amsterdam and the Dutch Coffee Trade

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The Dutch did not just drink coffee — they revolutionized its trade. Amsterdam became Europe's main coffee wholesaling center in the 1600s, and the Dutch East India Company's successful cultivation of coffee in Java broke the Arabian monopoly on coffee supply.

By 1700, Dutch coffee merchants were supplying beans to all of northern Europe. Amsterdam's coffee auction houses set prices that affected markets from Lisbon to Stockholm. Coffee houses dotted Amsterdam's canals, serving merchants, sailors, and intellectuals.

The Dutch embrace of coffee had consequences far beyond Europe. It was Dutch smuggling of coffee plants from Yemen to Java (see [Yemen and the Port of Mocha](#)) that started global coffee cultivation outside the Arab world. And Dutch generosity in 1714 — when the city of Amsterdam presented a coffee seedling to King Louis XIV of France — set in motion the events that would eventually bring coffee to the Americas.

## Germany and Central Europe Catch On

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Coffee reached German-speaking lands in the 1670s, first in the port city of Hamburg and then spreading inland. Initial reception was mixed. Many Germans preferred beer, and coffee was seen as foreign and strange. Some German rulers actively opposed coffee, fearing it would undermine beer consumption (and the taxes collected from beer).

Frederick the Great of Prussia issued a famous 1777 manifesto attacking coffee in favor of beer, declaring that beer had been good enough for his soldiers' ancestors and should be good enough for them. He briefly attempted to regulate coffee roasting, requiring official licenses.

Despite these obstacles, coffee won over Germany. By the 1800s, German coffeehouses were thriving in cities like Leipzig, Berlin, and Munich. The Kaffeehaus tradition developed into a distinctive cultural institution, somewhat different from Viennese or Parisian models but equally rich in intellectual and social life.

## The European Coffeehouse as Democratic Space

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Perhaps the most important legacy of European coffeehouses was their role in creating a new kind of public space: a place where men of different social classes could interact on relatively equal terms. In traditional European society, social hierarchies were strict. A merchant did not sit at the same table as a lord; a craftsman did not debate with a professor.

The coffeehouse changed this. Anyone with a penny could enter, sit at any table, join any conversation. Ideas were judged on their merit, not on the speaker's birth. Newspapers were read aloud and discussed. News traveled. Debates happened.

Historians call this phenomenon the emergence of the "public sphere" — a space between the private household and the state where citizens could engage in collective reasoning about public affairs. The coffeehouse was the physical embodiment of this new public sphere, and its emergence was crucial to the development of modern democratic and scientific culture.

The revolutions of the 18th century — American, French, and the scientific revolution of the Enlightenment — all grew in part from conversations held in coffeehouses.

## European Coffee Preferences Emerge

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As coffee spread through Europe, different regions developed distinct preferences that persist today.

**Italians** preferred darker, more intense preparations, eventually developing espresso in the late 1800s.

**French** developed the café au lait — coffee with a generous portion of hot milk — and a refined café culture emphasizing pastries and breakfast coffee.

**Viennese** created layered coffee drinks with whipped cream, elaborate café menus, and long leisurely coffee sessions.

**Germans** preferred filter-brewed coffee, pioneered by Melitta Bentz in 1908, and developed strong coffee-and-cake afternoon traditions.

**British** preferred coffee mixed with hot water (similar to what we now call an Americano), often accompanied by milk and sugar.

These regional preferences would later influence coffee cultures around the world as European colonialism spread.

## How European Coffee Reached the Americas

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By the early 1700s, European nations were competing to establish coffee plantations in their tropical colonies. The French were particularly energetic. In 1723, a naval officer named Gabriel de Clieu transported a single coffee plant from France to the Caribbean island of Martinique in an epic journey that included a pirate attack, a devastating storm, and Clieu sharing his own rationed water with the plant.

Clieu's seedling thrived in Martinique. From that single plant, coffee spread throughout the French Caribbean colonies, then to Spanish territories. Coffee reached Hispaniola in the 1730s and Puerto Rico in 1736, carried by European colonizers who wanted to profit from the growing European demand for coffee.

Every coffee plant in Puerto Rico today is, in a genealogical sense, a descendant of plants that first entered European markets through Venice in the 1600s, spread through the coffeehouses of London and Paris, and traveled to the Caribbean in the hands of European colonizers.

## Frequently Asked Questions

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**Q: When did coffee first arrive in Europe?** Coffee reached Europe in the late 1500s as a luxury commodity in Venice, with regular trade established by the early 1600s and widespread coffeehouses by the mid-1600s.

**Q: What was the first European coffeehouse?** The first Italian coffeehouse opened in Venice in 1683. The first English coffeehouse opened in Oxford in 1650. The first Parisian coffeehouse, Café Procope, opened in 1686.

**Q: What were "penny universities"?** "Penny universities" was the nickname for 17th and 18th century London coffeehouses, where for the price of one penny (a cup of coffee) anyone could enter and participate in intellectual discussion.

**Q: How did coffee reach Vienna?** According to tradition, coffee arrived in Vienna after the 1683 Battle of Vienna, when retreating Ottoman forces abandoned sacks of coffee beans that were used to start Vienna's first coffeehouse.

**Q: Did the Pope really bless coffee?** According to popular legend, Pope Clement VIII tasted coffee around 1600 and approved it for Christian consumption. Whether the exact baptism story is literally true or embellished folklore is debated.

**Q: How did European coffeehouses influence history?** European coffeehouses served as incubators for the Enlightenment, the scientific revolution, modern journalism, the stock exchange, insurance markets, and political movements including the French Revolution.

**Q: What is the oldest continuously operating coffeehouse in Europe?** Caffè Florian in Venice (opened 1720) and Café Procope in Paris (opened 1686) both claim to be among the oldest continuously operating coffeehouses in Europe.

**Q: How did European coffee reach Puerto Rico?** Coffee reached Puerto Rico in 1736 via Spanish and French colonial networks. European coffee plants grown in Caribbean colonies like Martinique and Hispaniola were brought to Puerto Rico, where they found ideal growing conditions.

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## From European Coffeehouses to Your Cup

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Every cup of Puerto Rico coffee participates in a tradition that runs through the great coffeehouses of Europe — from Venetian Piazza San Marco to London's penny universities to the grand cafés of Vienna. Taste that heritage, shipped fresh from the

Puerto Rican mountains.

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