



Coffee Processing Overview

Comprehensive guides covering all coffee processing methods and their comparison. Deep-dives on individual methods are in the masterclass books (Washed, Natural, Honey, Anaerobic, Experimental).

- [Coffee Processing: Washed, Natural, and Honey Methods Explained](#)
- [Wet vs Dry Processing: The Two Original Coffee Methods](#)

Coffee Processing: Washed, Natural, and Honey Methods Explained



Summary

Coffee processing is the critical series of steps that transforms ripe coffee cherries into the green coffee beans shipped to roasters worldwide. The processing method fundamentally shapes how the final cup will taste — a single coffee variety can produce dramatically different flavors depending on whether it's processed using washed, natural, honey, or experimental methods. Understanding processing reveals why coffees from the same farm can taste entirely different, why certain regions prefer certain methods, and why specialty coffee increasingly features processing as a key

quality variable alongside variety and terroir.

Why Processing Matters

Inside a ripe coffee cherry, you'll find:

Outer skin: The bright red (or yellow, orange, pink) exterior

Mucilage layer: A sticky, sweet, fleshy pulp surrounding the seed — similar to stone fruit flesh

Parchment: A tan paper-like layer protecting the seed

Silverskin: A thin silvery membrane closely adhering to the seed

The seeds (coffee beans): Usually two per cherry, positioned flat-side to flat-side

Processing separates the coffee beans from everything else. But how that separation happens — whether mucilage contacts the bean during drying, how long fermentation occurs, how drying proceeds — dramatically changes the final coffee's flavor character.

The same coffee cherries from the same tree on the same day can produce:

- **Bright, clean, tea-like coffee** (if washed)
- **Sweet, fruity, wine-like coffee** (if processed as natural)
- **Balanced, complex coffee** (if processed as honey)
- **Extraordinary or bizarre flavors** (through experimental fermentation)

Processing is therefore one of the three major flavor determinants alongside origin (terroir) and variety.



Washed (Wet) Processing

Washed processing is the most common method globally and produces the cleanest, brightest coffee cup profiles.

The Process

Step 1 — Sorting and pulping: Ripe cherries are sorted (unripe or overripe cherries removed). The skin and most mucilage are mechanically removed using a pulping machine, which crushes the cherry and separates the beans from the outer skin.

Step 2 — Fermentation: The beans, still coated with some mucilage, are placed in fermentation tanks filled with water for 12-48 hours. During this time, natural enzymes and microorganisms break down the remaining mucilage.

Step 3 — Washing: After fermentation, beans are washed in clean water channels, removing all remaining mucilage. The beans emerge clean.

Step 4 — Drying: Washed beans are dried on patios, raised beds, or in mechanical dryers until moisture content drops to 10-12%. Drying typically takes 5-15 days depending on conditions.

Step 5 — Hulling: After adequate drying and resting, the parchment layer is mechanically removed, producing green coffee beans ready for grading, bagging, and export.

Characteristics

Cup profile:

- Clean and clear flavor
- Bright acidity
- Pronounced origin character
- Tea-like qualities in light roasts
- Well-defined flavor notes

Best for:

- High-quality arabica varieties
- Regions with adequate clean water
- Coffees intended for specialty markets where clean flavors matter

Major regions using washed method:

- Central America (Guatemala, Costa Rica, Honduras)

- Colombia
- Kenya (with slight variation called "Kenyan double washed")
- Tanzania
- Rwanda and Burundi
- Puerto Rico
- Ethiopia (wet-processed Sidamo, Yirgacheffe)

Considerations

Environmental impact:

- Requires substantial clean water (though modern closed-loop systems reduce usage)
- Produces wastewater that requires treatment
- Energy requirements for pumps and equipment

Risk factors:

- Sensitive to weather during drying
- Fermentation errors can damage entire lots
- Equipment investment required

Natural (Dry) Processing

Natural processing is the oldest method, used for centuries in Ethiopia where coffee originated. It produces distinctly different cup profiles.

The Process

Step 1 — Sorting: Ripe cherries are sorted. Defective cherries removed.

Step 2 — Drying: Whole cherries — skin, pulp, mucilage, parchment, and beans together — are spread on patios or raised beds to dry in the sun. Drying continues for 3-6 weeks, with workers turning cherries multiple times daily to prevent mold and ensure

even drying.

Step 3 — Storage (rest): Dried cherries rest for several weeks to stabilize moisture and develop flavor.

Step 4 — Hulling: All outer layers (now dried hard) are mechanically removed in one step, revealing the green beans.

Characteristics

Cup profile:

- Heavy body
- Pronounced sweetness
- Fruit-forward flavors (berry, stone fruit, tropical fruit)
- Winey, fermented notes
- Less acidity than washed
- More complex, less clean

Best for:

- Regions with limited water
- Dry climates suitable for extended sun drying
- Coffees where fruit character is desired

Major regions using natural method:

- Ethiopia (traditional method, especially for high-grade naturals)
- Yemen
- Brazil (substantial portion of production)
- Some specialty production in Indonesia, Central America, and elsewhere

Considerations

Environmental advantages:

- Minimal water usage
- Lower energy requirements
- Suitable for water-scarce regions

Risk factors:

- Requires consistent dry weather during extended drying
- Vulnerable to mold if rain occurs during drying
- Labor-intensive requires constant turning
- Uneven fermentation can produce off-flavors

Quality variation:

- Can produce extraordinary coffee when done well
- Can produce defective coffee when done poorly
- Larger quality range than washed processing

Honey Processing

Honey processing (also called pulped natural or semi-washed) is a middle approach between washed and natural, producing coffees that balance clean character with sweetness.

The Process

Step 1 — Sorting: Ripe cherries sorted as in other methods.

Step 2 — Pulping: Skin removed using pulping machine (similar to washed method).

Step 3 — Controlled mucilage retention: Unlike washed processing, mucilage is NOT completely removed. Varying amounts of sticky mucilage remain on the beans going into drying. The amount of retained mucilage determines the "color" of honey:

White honey: Minimal mucilage retention (~20-30%). Cup approaches washed character but with additional sweetness.

Yellow honey: Light mucilage retention (~40%). Balanced between washed and natural characteristics.

Red honey: Moderate mucilage retention (~75%). More body and sweetness, still clear flavors.

Black honey: Maximum mucilage retention (~90%+). Approaches natural processing character.

Step 4 — Drying: Beans with adhering mucilage dry on patios or raised beds for 2-4 weeks. The mucilage dries hard onto the beans (creating the "honey" appearance), contributing flavor characteristics.

Step 5 — Hulling: Parchment and dried mucilage removed mechanically.

Characteristics

Cup profile varies by honey color:

- **White honey:** Clean flavor with mild sweetness
- **Yellow honey:** Balanced acidity and sweetness
- **Red honey:** Heavier body, more pronounced sweetness
- **Black honey:** Close to natural character with wine notes

Best for:

- Costa Rica (where honey processing was substantially developed)
- Specialty producers seeking balanced flavor profiles
- Coffees targeting specialty markets interested in processing variations

Major regions using honey method:

- Costa Rica (most commonly associated with honey processing)
- El Salvador and other Central American countries
- Panama
- Nicaragua
- Some Colombian and Ethiopian specialty producers

Considerations

Environmental middle ground:

- Uses less water than washed
- Requires less drying time than natural
- Generates less wastewater than washed

Risk factors:

- Requires skilled technique to achieve consistent results
- Vulnerable to mold if drying conditions inadequate
- Harder to standardize than washed or natural

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Coffee honey processing drying patio beans

Image curation pending

Experimental and Specialty Processing

Beyond the three main methods, specialty coffee culture has embraced experimental processing approaches:

Anaerobic Fermentation

Fermentation without oxygen, either in sealed tanks or specialized equipment. Produces distinctive flavor compounds not possible in aerobic fermentation. Can produce remarkable cups — or odd ones. Popular among experimental producers.

Carbonic Maceration

Whole cherries fermented in CO₂-rich environment before pulping. Technique borrowed from wine making. Produces intense fruit and winery notes.

Yeast Inoculation

Specific yeast strains introduced during fermentation to direct flavor development. Increasingly common in specialty coffee.

Extended Fermentation

Fermentation for 72+ hours in controlled conditions. Produces intense complex flavors.

Double Processing

Some operations run coffee through multiple processing steps (natural then washed, or other combinations) to develop specific characteristics.

Barrel-Aged Coffee

Green coffee aged in barrels (wine, whiskey, rum) to absorb flavor compounds. Controversial among purists but produces distinctive cups.

These experimental methods often produce coffees at premium price points for specialty markets interested in novel flavor experiences. Quality varies dramatically —

some experiments produce exceptional coffees, others produce defective coffees that specialty markets would otherwise reject.

Processing and Variety Interaction

Different coffee varieties respond differently to different processing methods:

Varieties suited to washed processing:

- Typica (classic profile emerges with washed)
- SL28 and SL34 (Kenyan washed coffees exemplify the combination)
- Caturra (clean washed coffees from Central America)
- Colombia varieties (washed produces bright Colombian character)

Varieties suited to natural processing:

- Ethiopian heirloom varieties (natural is traditional there)
- Gesha (natural Gesha can be spectacular though washed Gesha dominates the record-setting auctions)
- Some Brazilian cultivars (naturally suited to natural method)

Varieties suited to honey processing:

- Bourbon (honey-processed Bourbon can be particularly balanced)
- Caturra and Catuaí (Central American honey coffees are established specialty categories)
- Villa Sarchí (Costa Rican variety often honey-processed)

Experienced coffee producers match varieties to processing methods based on desired cup outcomes. A single farm might produce the same variety using multiple processing methods to offer distinct coffees to different markets.

Processing in Puerto Rico

Puerto Rico traditionally uses primarily washed processing, which suits the island's climate and aligns with Caribbean coffee heritage:

Climate compatibility: Puerto Rico's climate — warm with regular rainfall — supports washed processing. Extended sun drying for natural processing is more challenging in Puerto Rico's typical weather patterns.

Infrastructure: Established washed processing infrastructure from the golden age continues operating on many Puerto Rican farms.

Heritage preference: Puerto Rican coffee's historical flavor profile — clean, balanced, chocolate-caramel notes — emerges naturally from washed processing.

Experimental emergence: Modern Puerto Rican specialty farms have begun experimenting with honey processing and even some natural processing lots. These experimental coffees represent small volumes but showcase the island's coffee flexibility.

Export markets: Puerto Rican washed coffees align with traditional Caribbean and Central American specialty coffee market expectations, facilitating premium pricing.

For consumers, authentic Puerto Rican coffee — primarily washed processed — delivers the clean, balanced cup character that built the island's historic reputation. PuertoRicoCoffeeShop.com offers this authentic Puerto Rican coffee experience through quality-focused washed processing traditions.

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Coffee beans drying raised bed sun traditional

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— PuertoRicoCoffeeShop.com

Environmental Considerations

Coffee processing has environmental impacts that vary by method:

Water consumption:

- Washed: 2,000-4,000 liters per ton of coffee (though modern systems reduce this dramatically)
- Natural: Minimal water beyond initial cleaning
- Honey: 500-1,500 liters per ton (intermediate)

Wastewater:

- Washed: Significant wastewater requiring treatment
- Natural: Minimal wastewater
- Honey: Moderate wastewater

Climate/drying:

- Natural: Requires dry climate for extended drying (3-6 weeks)
- Washed: More flexible climate requirements
- Honey: Moderate climate requirements

Energy requirements:

- Mechanical drying equipment uses energy
- Sun drying is essentially zero-energy but weather-dependent
- Pumps and pulpers require electricity

Modern innovations:

- Closed-loop water systems recycling washing water
- Solar drying infrastructure
- Mechanical demucilage machines reducing fermentation water use
- Energy-efficient mechanical dryers

Environmental impact increasingly matters in specialty coffee markets. Many buyers pay premiums for sustainably processed coffees with documented reduced environmental impact.

Quality Grading After Processing

After processing, coffee is graded by multiple criteria before export:

Bean size: Typically measured in screen sizes (18, 17, 16, 15, 14, etc.)

Bean density: Denser beans from higher altitudes command premium prices

Defect count: Maximum allowed defects per sample establishes grade

Cup quality: Sensory evaluation determines specialty grade eligibility

Processing consistency: Uniform appearance indicates careful processing

Moisture content: Target 10-12% for stable storage and shipping

Color: Consistent green-blue or green-yellow indicating proper processing

Specialty coffee (Specialty Coffee Association definition: 80+ points on cupping scale) commands premium prices. Below-specialty grade coffee enters commodity markets at much lower prices.

Key Facts

- **Three main processing methods:** Washed, natural, honey
- **Washed processing:** Uses water to remove mucilage through fermentation
- **Natural processing:** Whole cherries dry with mucilage intact
- **Honey processing:** Partial mucilage retained during drying
- **Honey subcategories:** White, yellow, red, black (by mucilage amount)
- **Drying time:** 5-15 days (washed), 3-6 weeks (natural), 2-4 weeks (honey)
- **Traditional regions for washed:** Colombia, Central America, East Africa, Puerto Rico
- **Traditional regions for natural:** Ethiopia, Yemen, Brazil
- **Traditional regions for honey:** Costa Rica, Central America
- **Experimental methods:** Anaerobic fermentation, carbonic maceration, yeast inoculation, barrel aging

Frequently Asked Questions

Q: What's the difference between washed and natural coffee? Washed processing removes mucilage (the sticky fruit layer) before drying, producing cleaner, brighter, more acidic coffee. Natural processing dries whole cherries with mucilage intact, producing fruitier, heavier-bodied, more winery coffee. Same variety, very different taste profiles.

Q: What is honey processed coffee? Honey processing is a middle approach between washed and natural — skin removed like washed, but varying amounts of mucilage remain on beans during drying. Produces balanced coffee with sweetness and clarity. Popular in Costa Rica and Central America.

Q: Why is it called "honey" processing? The name doesn't refer to honey as an ingredient. During drying, the retained mucilage dries hard onto the bean, creating a golden, sticky appearance that reminded early producers of honey. The processing was named for this visual characteristic.

Q: Which processing method produces the best coffee? No single method is "best" — each produces different flavor profiles suited to different preferences. Washed processing is standard for most specialty arabica. Natural processing produces dramatic fruit flavors. Honey processing balances both. Experienced coffee drinkers appreciate different methods for different experiences.

Q: Can the same coffee be processed multiple ways? Yes. Many farms process portions of their harvest using different methods to create distinct products. A single variety from a single farm might be available as washed, natural, and honey — three completely different coffee experiences from identical green input.

Related Articles: [Coffee Roasting: The Complete Science Guide](#) | [What is Coffea Arabica? The Noble Coffee Species](#) | [The Gesha Coffee Variety](#) | [The Bourbon Coffee Variety](#)

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https://www.youtube.com/embed/kv_t2hf445Y

Watch: Methods of Processing Coffee: Natural, Washed & Honey Explained

Wet vs Dry Processing: The Two Original Coffee Methods

Wet vs Dry Processing: The Two Original Coffee Methods

Comparison		
Option A		Option B
Ethiopia	ORIGIN	Yemen
Wild forests, 9c.	FIRST CULTIVATED	Terraces, 15c.
Natural + washed	PROCESSING	Natural only
Floral, tea-like	FLAVOR	Deep, winey
Heirloom landraces	KEY VARIETY	Udaini, Dawairi

— PuertoRicoCoffeeShop.com

Before honey processing, anaerobic fermentation, or any modern processing variant existed, coffee was processed in just two ways: dry (also called natural) and wet (also called washed). These two methods are the foundation of every modern coffee processing technique. Dry processing is the older method, dating back over 1,000 years to Ethiopian coffee cultivation. Wet processing emerged in the 18th and 19th centuries in colonial coffee operations — first in Caribbean French colonies, later refined in Brazil and Colombia — as a way to produce more consistent, cleaner cups by removing the fruit before drying. The choice between wet and dry processing today still depends on the same fundamental factors that

shaped their original development: climate, water access, labor availability, infrastructure, and the cup character a producer wants to deliver. This article compares the two methods in depth, the trade-offs each requires, and how Puerto Rican coffee has built its identity on wet processing since the 19th century.

Dry Processing: The Original Method

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ethiopian coffee cherries drying patio whole fruit

Image curation pending

— PuertoRicoCoffeeShop.com

Dry processing — letting whole coffee cherries dry in the sun until the fruit material can be hulled away from the bean — is the original coffee processing method. Ethiopian farmers have processed coffee this way for over 1,000 years, and it remains the dominant method in Ethiopia, Yemen, and Brazil today.

Coffee evolved in the Ethiopian highlands, where dry seasons coincide with coffee harvest. Farmers needed only to spread cherries in the sun on flat surfaces — patios, rooftops, woven mats — to dry. No water infrastructure required. No fermentation tanks. No depulping machines.

The traditional dry processing workflow has changed remarkably little over centuries: pick ripe cherries by hand, sort to remove damaged ones, spread cherries evenly on a clean drying surface, turn them multiple times daily to prevent mold, cover during rain or dew, continue drying for 3-4 weeks until cherries reach approximately 11-12 percent moisture content, and finally hull the dried cherries with mechanical hullers that remove all layers in one pass.

The result is a green coffee bean that has been in contact with fermenting fruit material for the entire 3-4 week drying period. Sugars from the mucilage and fruit slowly migrate into the bean. Naturally occurring microbes ferment in the surrounding fruit, producing volatile flavor compounds that the bean absorbs. The cup character that emerges is fruit-forward, complex, and often distinctly fermented or wine-like.

Dry processing is sometimes called the natural process because nothing is added — no water beyond what is in the cherries themselves, no inoculated cultures, no chemical interventions.

Wet Processing: The 19th-Century Innovation



MOLLYS
COFFEE GALLERY

PROUT
ELECTRICAL

Bewley's
ESTD 1827

Albany Paint Centre

Wet processing emerged centuries after dry processing as a deliberate innovation by colonial coffee operations seeking more consistent quality. The first systematic wet processing operations appear in 18th-century French Caribbean colonies (Saint-Domingue, Martinique), spread through 19th-century Latin American coffee development, and reached industrial sophistication in late-19th-century Colombia and Costa Rica.

The original wet process workflow: pick ripe cherries by hand; float the cherries in water tanks where ripe heavy cherries sink and underripe ones float for removal; mechanical depulping (a depulper machine squeezes cherries against a rotating drum, popping the seeds out and removing skin and most fruit flesh); fermentation in tanks for 12-72 hours where local microbes break down the mucilage; washing in clean water; drying parchment coffee on patios for 7-21 days; storage as parchment for months; and mechanical hulling just before export.

Wet processing produces dramatically different cup character than dry. The fermentation in water tanks does not significantly affect bean flavor. The brief drying period prevents the bean from absorbing fermented fruit flavors. The result is a coffee that tastes like the underlying terroir — clean, bright, with the acidity and origin character clearly visible.

Wet processing also dramatically improves quality consistency. The depulping and fermentation steps allow farmers to identify and remove defective cherries. The shorter drying period reduces spoilage risk.

The trade-offs of wet processing are real: water consumption (3-15 liters per kilogram, though modern eco-pulpers reduce this by 80-90 percent), wastewater management requirements, capital investment in equipment, fermentation expertise, and concentrated harvest-time labor demands.

How Climate Determines the Method

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coffee growing climate map dry wet processing regions

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The most fundamental factor determining which method dominates in a given region is climate, specifically the rainfall pattern during harvest season.

Dry processing requires reliable dry weather during the 3-4 week drying period. Regions with predictable dry harvest seasons can rely on natural drying without significant spoilage risk.

Wet processing tolerates wetter climates because the drying period is shorter and the beans dry without surrounding fruit material.

Puerto Rico's climate — tropical, with frequent rain and high humidity even during harvest season — strongly favored wet processing. Drying coffee with intact fruit during the wet Caribbean climate would risk catastrophic mold and rot losses. The Puerto Rican coffee industry built its 19th-century European reputation on careful wet processing in the central cordillera.

Puerto Rican Coffee Processing History

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*puerto rican coffee mountain hacienda 19th century
historic*

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Puerto Rican coffee has been processed almost exclusively through wet methods throughout the modern industry, with deep historical roots in the 19th-century European-export industry that built the island's coffee reputation.

The 1830s-1890s golden age of Puerto Rican coffee — when Yauco Selecto and other premium designations reached the Vatican, European royal tables, and the finest cafés of Paris — was built on careful wet processing in mountain haciendas. The Corsican, Mallorcan, and Spanish immigrant families who founded the haciendas brought European wet processing knowledge and adapted it to local conditions. Mountain spring water, gravity-fed washing channels, fermentation tanks dug into hillsides, and patio drying on hacienda courtyards became standard infrastructure.

The 1899 Hurricane San Ciriaco devastated this infrastructure along with the coffee trees themselves. Reconstruction in the early 20th century rebuilt washing stations and drying patios but never restored the pre-hurricane production levels.

The 1990s-2010s specialty coffee revival has rebuilt the careful wet-processing tradition. Small farms in Yauco, Adjuntas, Lares, Jayuya, and Maricao now operate with

care comparable to the 19th-century haciendas — selective hand-picking, careful float sorting, controlled fermentation, attentive drying.

Pure dry processing remains rare in Puerto Rico because the wet climate during harvest season makes it risky.

Water Use and Environmental Impact

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*coffee farm sustainability water conservation
environment*

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Traditional wet processing was water-intensive and produced significant wastewater pollution. Modern innovations have reduced both substantially.

Eco-pulpers mechanically remove mucilage during the depulping step, eliminating the need for fermentation tanks and reducing water consumption by 80-90 percent. Water recycling in modern wet mills allows the same water to be reused multiple times. Wastewater treatment is now legally required in many origin countries.

Honey processing emerged in the 1990s as a hybrid that compromises between wet and dry — drier than washed but cleaner than full natural, with significantly lower water

requirements.

Decision Factors for Producers

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A producer choosing between methods weighs climate during harvest, water availability, capital and infrastructure, target market preferences, labor patterns, risk tolerance, and tradition. Climate is usually the determining factor in regions where rainfall is unpredictable.

The Future of Processing

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modern coffee processing innovation experimental

Image curation pending

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Coffee processing has entered a period of unprecedented experimentation. Beyond the traditional wet/dry/honey trio, modern specialty coffee features anaerobic fermentation, carbonic maceration, lactic fermentation, thermal shock, and combination approaches.

These experimental methods produce dramatic flavor results but require substantial expertise. They represent a small fraction of global production but command premium prices. The fundamentals remain: every coffee on earth is still processed using either the wet or dry method or some hybrid of the two.

Common Misunderstandings

Wet processing is more modern is incorrect — the basic technique dates to the 18th century. Dry processing is for low-quality coffee is incorrect — specialty natural coffees rank among the world's most expensive. Wet processing always uses lots of water is outdated — modern eco-pulpers reduce consumption by 80-90 percent.

Key Facts

- Dry processing dates back over 1,000 years; wet processing emerged in the 18th-19th centuries
- Wet processing requires water, fermentation tanks, depulping equipment, and parchment drying
- Dry processing requires only flat surfaces and reliable dry weather
- Wet processing produces clean, bright, terroir-forward cups
- Dry processing produces fruity, complex, sometimes fermented cups
- Climate during harvest is the primary factor determining feasibility
- Puerto Rican coffee has been predominantly wet-processed since the 19th century
- Modern eco-pulpers reduce wet processing water consumption by 80-90 percent

Frequently Asked Questions

Why does dry processing produce fruitier coffee?

The whole cherry stays around the bean for 3-4 weeks of drying. Sugars from the fruit migrate into the bean and microbes ferment, producing flavor compounds the bean absorbs.

Why is most specialty coffee wet-processed?

Specialty coffee culture historically prized clean, terroir-forward cup character. Wet processing produces that clean expression.

Does wet processing waste water?

Traditional fermentation-tank wet processing was water-intensive. Modern eco-pulpers reduce this dramatically.

Can the same coffee be both wet and dry processed?

Yes. Many specialty farms split harvests across multiple processing methods to offer different cup profiles.

Why doesn't Puerto Rico do natural processing?

Climate. The Puerto Rican coffee harvest coincides with significant rainfall. Drying coffee with the fruit intact during this wet period would produce mold and rot losses.

Related Articles

- [The Golden Age of Puerto Rican Coffee \(1800-1898\)](#)
- [Hurricane San Ciriaco and the Coffee Collapse \(1899\)](#)
- [Yauco: Puerto Rico's Crown Coffee Region](#)
- [Modern Experimental Coffee Processing: Anaerobic, Carbonic Maceration, and Beyond](#)
- [Coffee Cupping: The SCA Protocol and How Professionals Taste Coffee](#)

Taste Authentic Puerto Rico Coffee

The 19th-century European reputation of Puerto Rican coffee was built on careful wet processing in mountain haciendas. PuertoRicoCoffeeShop.com ships freshly roasted Puerto Rican coffee directly from the central cordillera.

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