



The Gesha Coffee Variety: From Ethiopian Forest to Record-Breaking Auctions

Summary

Gesha (also spelled Geisha) is the most prestigious variety of *Coffea arabica*, prized for its extraordinary floral and tea-like flavor characteristics that command record-breaking prices in specialty coffee auctions. Originally from the Gesha mountain region of Ethiopia, the variety reached global fame in 2004 when a Panamanian coffee farm submitted Gesha beans to the Best of Panama competition and shocked judges with the coffee's unprecedented cup quality. Since then, Gesha has become synonymous with the pinnacle of specialty coffee — a variety so distinctive and valuable that single-origin Gesha has sold for over \$10,000 per pound at specialty auctions. Understanding Gesha illuminates what coffee can achieve at the highest end of quality.

The Ethiopian Origin

Gesha takes its name from the Gesha (or Gasha) region of southwestern Ethiopia, where the variety originated as wild forest coffee. Ethiopia, as the genetic birthplace of *Coffea arabica*, contains thousands of distinct wild and semi-wild coffee populations, each potentially a unique variety. The Gesha region's specific microclimate and ecological conditions produced plants with distinctive genetic characteristics that differed from other arabica populations.

In the 1930s, British agents in Ethiopia collected seeds from the Gesha region as part of botanical research and disease-resistance studies. These seeds traveled through a chain of agricultural research stations — first to Kenya, then to Tanzania's Lyamungu research station, then to the Costa Rica research station CATIE (Centro Agronómico Tropical de Investigación y Enseñanza), where they were catalogued as a distinct variety and eventually distributed to interested growers.

The research interest focused primarily on disease resistance. Gesha showed some resistance to coffee leaf rust that researchers hoped might be useful for breeding programs. The exceptional cup quality that would later make Gesha famous was not initially recognized — it was considered just another Ethiopian variety with potential breeding value.

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Ethiopian highlands forest coffee wild origin

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The Panamanian Discovery — 2004

Gesha remained obscure for decades, planted in small research collections and occasional experimental plots. Some Panamanian coffee farms received Gesha seedlings from CATIE in the 1960s as part of disease-resistance experiments, but the

variety's low yield and tall awkward growth made it commercially unappealing. Many farms abandoned Gesha cultivation in favor of higher-yielding varieties.

Everything changed in 2004. Hacienda La Esmeralda, owned by the Peterson family in Panama's Boquete region, submitted separate varieties to the Best of Panama coffee competition that year. Among their submissions was a Gesha lot from a small planting on their farm.

When judges cupped the Gesha, they were stunned. The coffee displayed aromatic and flavor characteristics unlike any coffee the judges had ever tasted — intense jasmine-like florals, bergamot citrus, stone fruit sweetness, and an exceptional cleanliness that professional cuppers struggled to describe in familiar vocabulary. The Gesha scored 95 points out of 100, among the highest scores ever recorded in coffee competition.

When the coffee went to auction, it sold for a then-record \$21 per pound wholesale — shattering previous coffee auction records. The specialty coffee world took immediate notice.

The Panama Gesha Phenomenon

<https://www.youtube.com/embed/16pRNfeJ5GM>

Watch: A History of Gesha and the Coffee Farm That Made it Famous (Coffee & Cocktails)

Panama Gesha quickly became the prestige variety of specialty coffee. Hacienda La Esmeralda continued winning competitions year after year with Gesha submissions, repeatedly setting new auction records. Other Panamanian farms planted Gesha aggressively, hoping to replicate La Esmeralda's success.

Key moments in Panama Gesha's rise:

2004-2010: Panama Gesha dominates specialty coffee competitions and auctions. Prices climb steadily as demand outstrips supply.

2017: La Esmeralda Gesha sells at auction for \$601 per pound — a new record, demonstrating that Gesha's exceptional character commands exceptional prices.

2018-2020: Multiple Gesha lots break previous records. Ninety-Plus Coffee and other premium producers achieve cupping scores exceeding 96 points.

2021: Panama Gesha sells at auction for over \$2,500 per pound wholesale.

2023: Nicaraguan farm La Soñada Gesha sells at auction for \$10,005 per pound — a record that demonstrated Gesha's prestige had spread well beyond Panama.

Present: Top-tier Gesha regularly sells at auction for \$200-\$1000+ per pound wholesale, with exceptional lots reaching much higher.

These prices make Gesha one of the most expensive coffees in the world. Retail coffee shops serving premium Gesha often charge \$20-\$50 per cup, reflecting the extraordinary bean cost.

Physical and Growing Characteristics

Gesha plants have distinctive physical features that make them recognizable in the field:

Tall, lanky structure: Gesha grows significantly taller than most arabica varieties, with a more open, angular branching pattern. Trees can reach 4-5 meters without aggressive pruning.

Long, narrow leaves: Gesha leaves are distinctively longer and more slender than other arabica varieties, giving the tree a distinctive silhouette.

Elongated beans: Gesha beans are unusually long and pointed, more elongated even than Typica.

Bronze new growth: Like Typica, Gesha's new leaves emerge bronze before maturing to green.

Lower yield: Gesha produces significantly less coffee per tree than more commercial varieties — sometimes only half the yield of Bourbon or Caturra.

Climate sensitivity: Gesha thrives in specific high-altitude conditions and struggles in warmer or lower-altitude environments where other arabica varieties produce adequately.

Disease susceptibility: Despite some modest rust resistance compared to other Ethiopian heirlooms, Gesha faces the same disease pressures as other arabica varieties.

These characteristics make Gesha commercially challenging — low yields, tall growth requiring management, climate demands, and cultivation complexity all drive production costs up. The premium prices the coffee commands make Gesha cultivation economically viable, but the variety is not suitable for commodity-scale production.

The Distinctive Flavor Profile

Gesha's cup characteristics define the variety's appeal and justify its extraordinary prices:

Jasmine: The most iconic Gesha flavor note. Well-grown Gesha produces unmistakably floral aromatics reminiscent of jasmine tea or jasmine flowers.

Bergamot: Citrus notes with the distinctive complexity of bergamot (the citrus used in Earl Grey tea), differentiating Gesha from simpler orange or lemon notes.

Stone fruit: Peach, apricot, and nectarine notes appear in many Gesha cups.

Tropical fruit: Passion fruit, mango, or pineapple notes in some examples.

Tea-like quality: Many Gesha cups are described as "tea-like" — clean, delicate, layered, and evolving rather than bold or intense.

Pronounced sweetness: Often featuring honey, cane sugar, or delicate floral honey notes.

Bright, complex acidity: Multiple acid compounds create layered, structured acidity rather than simple brightness.

Long, evolving finish: Flavors transition and evolve over extended time after swallowing, with new notes emerging as the cup cools.

Clean character: Exceptional clarity with no off-notes, muddiness, or harshness.

Professional cuppers often describe Gesha as "ethereal" or "transcendent" — language rarely used for any other coffee variety. The flavor profile creates a drinking experience that many specialty coffee enthusiasts consider the pinnacle of what coffee can be.

Processing and Preparation

Gesha's delicate character shapes how producers process and prepare the coffee:

Careful harvest: Only peak-ripe cherries are selected, often through multiple harvest passes.

Meticulous processing: Both washed and natural processing produce exceptional results, with increasing interest in anaerobic and experimental processes that enhance Gesha's floral character.

Preparation methods: Gesha is typically brewed using methods that highlight clarity — pour-over, siphon, Chemex — rather than bold methods like espresso. However, exceptional Gesha espresso does exist and commands extraordinary prices.

Lighter roasts: Gesha is almost always roasted light enough to preserve its delicate floral and fruit character. Dark roasts destroy Gesha's distinctive qualities, making them essentially pointless given the variety's price.

Careful brewing: Water quality, temperature, and extraction precision matter more for Gesha than for more forgiving varieties.

The combination of careful production and careful preparation creates coffee experiences genuinely different from standard specialty coffee.

The Spelling Controversy

The variety is commonly spelled two ways: "Gesha" and "Geisha." Both spellings reference the same Ethiopian origin, but preference differs among producers and specialty coffee professionals:

Gesha spelling: Closer to the original Ethiopian pronunciation and the actual Gesha region name. Favored by producers wanting accuracy and by those uncomfortable with the Japanese cultural association of "Geisha."

Geisha spelling: Popularized during the Panamanian rise to fame. Easier for English-speaking consumers to recognize and associate with prestige. Commercially dominant in many markets.

In recent years, many Ethiopian producers, researchers, and cultural advocates have pushed for the "Gesha" spelling to honor the Ethiopian origin. Several major specialty coffee organizations have shifted toward "Gesha" in official use, though "Geisha" remains common in commercial marketing. This encyclopedia uses "Gesha" in

recognition of the variety's Ethiopian heritage while acknowledging the alternative spelling remains in widespread use.

Gesha's Global Spread

Following Panama's success, Gesha cultivation has spread to multiple specialty coffee origins:

Colombia: Several prestigious Colombian farms have planted Gesha, producing exceptional Colombian Geshas with distinctive regional character.

Costa Rica: The original CATIE location for Gesha seed distribution, Costa Rica has maintained Gesha cultivation with increasing specialty attention.

Honduras, Guatemala, El Salvador: Central American specialty farms increasingly cultivate Gesha.

Nicaragua: Site of the record-setting 2023 auction at \$10,005 per pound.

Bolivia, Peru, Ecuador: South American specialty regions have added Gesha to varietal portfolios.

Ethiopia: The variety's origin continues cultivation, though Ethiopian Gesha is less commercially promoted than foreign-grown Gesha due to Ethiopia's broader heirloom variety tradition.

East Africa: Kenya, Tanzania, Rwanda, and Burundi have experimental Gesha plantings.

Asian specialty origins: Indonesia, Thailand, China, and other Asian specialty origins have begun Gesha cultivation experiments.

Hawaii and other Americas specialty origins: Premium specialty operations in various regions plant Gesha for top-tier markets.

This global spread has created interesting variation — Gesha grown in different terroirs produces distinctive regional Gesha expressions. Panama Gesha, Colombian Gesha, Costa Rican Gesha, and Ethiopian Gesha all share the variety's fundamental character while expressing their specific origins.

Modern Gesha Economics

Gesha's pricing structure is unlike any other coffee variety:

Commodity coffee: \$1-3 per pound wholesale for mass-market arabica.

Specialty arabica: \$4-15 per pound wholesale for most quality specialty coffees.

Premium specialty: \$20-100 per pound for exceptional lots of named varieties.

Gesha base range: \$50-200 per pound wholesale for competent but not exceptional Gesha.

Premium Gesha: \$200-1000 per pound for high-quality Gesha from established producers.

Record-tier Gesha: \$1000-10,000+ per pound for competition-winning or exceptional lots from premier farms.

At these prices, Gesha operates as a luxury good rather than a standard agricultural commodity. Consumers pay Gesha prices for the experience rather than for caffeine delivery, placing the coffee closer to wine culture than to standard coffee consumption.

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Premium specialty coffee auction cupping

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Gesha in Puerto Rico and Caribbean

Puerto Rico has begun experimental Gesha cultivation as part of the island's specialty coffee revival. Several forward-looking Puerto Rican coffee farms have planted small Gesha lots, targeting high-end specialty markets. Puerto Rican Gesha, grown in the island's mountain terroir, shows promise for producing distinctive Caribbean Gesha expressions.

The combination of Puerto Rico's altitude, volcanic soil, trade wind climate, and specialty coffee expertise provides favorable Gesha cultivation conditions. As Puerto Rican coffee continues its renaissance, Gesha represents an exciting frontier — the potential for the island to produce its own Gesha expressions alongside its historic Typica and Bourbon heritage.

Key Facts

- **Variety type:** Coffea arabica cultivar

- **Origin:** Gesha region, southwestern Ethiopia
- **Global rise to fame:** Hacienda La Esmeralda, Panama, 2004
- **Record auction price:** Over \$10,000 per pound (Nicaragua 2023)
- **Flavor characteristics:** Jasmine, bergamot, stone fruit, tea-like, ethereal
- **Optimal elevation:** 1,500+ meters
- **Yield:** Significantly lower than commercial varieties
- **Spelling:** "Gesha" preferred for Ethiopian heritage accuracy
- **Cultivation:** Spread globally since 2004, demanding high-altitude specialty conditions

Frequently Asked Questions

Q: Why is Gesha coffee so expensive? Gesha produces extraordinary cup quality — distinctive floral and tea-like flavors unmatched by other coffee varieties. Combined with low yields, demanding cultivation requirements, and strong specialty market demand, these factors create premium pricing that can reach thousands of dollars per pound for exceptional lots.

Q: What does Gesha coffee taste like? Well-grown Gesha typically features pronounced jasmine floral notes, bergamot citrus (like Earl Grey tea), stone fruit sweetness, clean tea-like body, and complex layered flavors that evolve across the sip. Many describe the experience as ethereal or transcendent.

Q: Should I spell it Gesha or Geisha? Both spellings are common. "Gesha" is closer to the Ethiopian origin and increasingly preferred in specialty coffee. "Geisha" became popular during Panama's rise to fame. This encyclopedia uses Gesha in recognition of Ethiopian heritage.

Q: Where is the best Gesha grown? Panama has the strongest reputation for Gesha, particularly Hacienda La Esmeralda in Boquete. Colombia, Costa Rica, Ethiopia, and other specialty origins also produce exceptional Gesha. The "best" Gesha depends on specific farms and harvests rather than country alone.

Q: Can Puerto Rico grow Gesha coffee? Yes. Several Puerto Rican farms have begun experimental Gesha cultivation, with Puerto Rico's mountain altitude and volcanic soil providing favorable conditions. Puerto Rican Gesha is an emerging specialty coffee frontier.

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Revision #8

Created 2026-04-16 10:07:04 UTC by Admin

Updated 2026-05-07 22:40:38 UTC by Admin