



Coffee of Kings and Popes: Puerto Rico's Vatican Connection

The Coffee Encyclopedia



antique wooden coffee grinder ornate european

Image curation pending

PuertoRicoCoffeeShop.com

Few coffee origins can claim a heritage as distinguished as Puerto Rico's, and the phrase "coffee of kings and popes" captures why. For decades during the 19th century, Puerto Rican coffee was the preferred choice of European royal courts and Vatican officials. Between the 1950s and 1960s, the Holy See in Rome purchased approximately 15,000 quintales per year directly from Puerto Rican producers, making the Pope's household one of the island's single largest coffee customers. This papal and royal patronage is real historical fact, not marketing invention, and it continues to

shape how Puerto Rican specialty coffee is understood, priced, and marketed today.

The Phrase and Its Origins

"El café de los reyes y los papas" — the coffee of kings and popes — became a settled description of Puerto Rican coffee during the late 19th and early 20th centuries. The phrase captured a commercial reality: Puerto Rican coffee was reaching the most prestigious customers in Europe and the Vatican, commanding prices and attention that placed it among the world's most coveted coffees. Puerto Rican grandmothers passed the phrase to grandchildren as part of family lore, and the description became woven into the cultural identity of the island's coffee tradition.

The Coffee Encyclopedia



ottoman turkish coffee historic engraving

Image curation pending

= PuertoRicoCoffeeShop.com

The phrase survives today in commercial marketing, academic writing about Puerto Rican coffee history, and conversational reference when Puerto Rican families discuss their coffee heritage. Brands including Alto Grande explicitly use "coffee of popes and kings" in their packaging and promotional materials, connecting contemporary product to this documented historical heritage. The phrase carries weight precisely because it

references real history rather than being invented for marketing purposes.

The 19th Century Foundation

Puerto Rico's emergence as a major coffee exporter during the 19th century made royal and Vatican patronage possible. By the 1870s, approximately 843 registered coffee haciendas operated across approximately 69 of Puerto Rico's 78 municipalities. Coffee exports dominated the island's economy, with shipments going to Hamburg, Bremen, Le Havre, Southampton, Barcelona, Marseille, and other major European cities. The combination of volume, quality, and geographic accessibility made Puerto Rican coffee a natural choice for European buyers seeking premium origins.



The quality characteristics that attracted European buyers reflected Puerto Rico's terroir. High-altitude mountain cultivation produced coffee with balanced acidity, full body, and complex flavor that European specialty consumers prized. The island's specific volcanic and clay soils contributed mineral characteristics that differentiated Puerto Rican coffee from other Caribbean origins. Processing practices developed over generations by Puerto Rican farmers produced consistently clean, well-fermented, carefully dried green coffee suitable for the demanding European specialty market.

European Royal Courts

Documentation of Puerto Rican coffee shipments to specific European royal courts survives in fragmentary form across trading records, hacienda receipts, and family histories. Letters and commercial documents from the 1850s through the 1890s show Puerto Rican coffee moving to royal households in Spain, Austria-Hungary, France, and other major European monarchies. The Museo del Café in Ciales and various haciendas preserve documents showing direct royal and dignitary purchases of Puerto Rican coffee during this era.



The Spanish connection was particularly natural given Puerto Rico's status as a Spanish colony until 1898. Spanish royal households would have had direct access to Puerto Rican coffee through colonial trading networks, and the quality of the island's coffee would have made it a preferred choice for court consumption. As Puerto Rican coffee gained recognition across European specialty markets, other royal households

followed Spanish example, and the network of royal patronage expanded across the continent during the decades of Puerto Rico's coffee golden age.

The Vatican Connection in Depth

The Vatican's purchase of Puerto Rican coffee became particularly significant during the mid-20th century. Documentation from this era is more complete than the earlier royal purchase records. Between the 1950s and 1960s, the Vatican government periodically purchased approximately 15,000 quintales of coffee per year — one quintal equals 100 pounds, so this represents approximately 1.5 million pounds annually, a substantial commercial order.



The supplier was Sobrino de Mayol Hnos, a Puerto Rican coffee firm that maintained a direct commercial relationship with the Holy See during this period. The Vatican was the only foreign government that directly purchased Puerto Rican coffee during this era, making the relationship commercially and symbolically distinctive. While there were many other foreign private buyers of Puerto Rican coffee during the same period, the Pope's prominence made the Vatican connection a particularly powerful symbol of Puerto Rican coffee export quality.

Café Rico and the Cooperativa Role

The Cooperativa de Cafeteros de Puerto Rico, which registered the Café Rico brand in 1924, played a central role in supplying coffee to the Vatican during the mid-20th century. Previously, the coffee sent to the Vatican came from Puerto Rico through this cooperative structure. The Café Rico brand included a specific "San Carlos Selection" that was particularly favored by the Pope's household. This cooperative-to-Vatican commercial relationship sustained Puerto Rican coffee farming during decades when the broader industry faced severe economic pressures.



The Cooperativa's operation included a coffee cupping laboratory and the only certified coffee taster in the entire Puerto Rican archipelago for a significant period. This quality control infrastructure was essential for maintaining the standards that papal and royal customers expected. The laboratory evaluated incoming cherry quality from member farms, separated coffee by grade, and certified specific lots for export to premium customers including the Vatican. Without this institutional quality control, the Vatican relationship likely could not have been sustained.

Alto Grande and the Lares Heritage

The Hacienda Alto Grande, established in 1839 in the Buenos Aires and Santa Isabel sectors of Lares, Puerto Rico, is the coffee brand most closely associated today with the

"coffee of popes and kings" heritage. Alto Grande produces 100% Arabica coffee from the deep mountains of Lares, and its marketing explicitly references acclaim in "the Royal Courts of Europe and the Vatican in Rome" during the 19th and 20th centuries. The brand positions contemporary purchasers as participants in a heritage that stretches back nearly two centuries.



Alto Grande's premium status in contemporary Puerto Rican coffee reflects both the historical heritage and the ongoing quality of production from the Lares region. The hacienda's location at high altitude in the island's central mountain range provides growing conditions that produce the balanced, full-bodied coffee that historically attracted royal and papal customers. Contemporary Alto Grande coffee continues to earn specialty grade quality ratings, and its packaging prominently features the historical heritage that connects today's consumers to the centuries of tradition.

The Commercial and Cultural Meaning

For Puerto Rican coffee today, the "kings and popes" heritage carries multiple kinds of meaning. Commercially, it provides positioning for premium pricing in specialty markets, justifying prices several times higher than commodity coffee by connecting product to documented historical prestige. Marketing materials for multiple Puerto Rican coffee brands reference the heritage explicitly, and consumers — particularly specialty coffee enthusiasts — respond to this kind of documented origin story.

The Coffee Encyclopedia



old book illustration coffee plant botanical

Image curation pending

— PuertoRicoCoffeeShop.com

Culturally, the heritage reinforces Puerto Rican pride in the island's coffee tradition. In a global coffee market dominated by much larger producers — Brazil, Colombia, Vietnam, Ethiopia, Indonesia — Puerto Rico's comparative advantage is heritage and quality rather than volume. The documented papal and royal patronage demonstrates that Puerto Rican coffee has historically competed at the very top of the global quality hierarchy, which matters for the contemporary specialty positioning that keeps the industry commercially viable.

The Museo del Café Evidence

Puerto Rico's Museo del Café in Ciales preserves documentation of the royal and papal coffee history. The small museum displays letters from kings and dignitaries requesting Puerto Rican coffee, receipts from Vatican purchases, and other historical evidence of the island's golden age exports. For visitors to Puerto Rico interested in the documentary basis of the "coffee of kings and popes" heritage, the Museo del Café offers direct encounter with original materials.

The Coffee Encyclopedia



venetian historic plaza canal

Image curation pending

PuertoRicoCoffeeShop.com

The museum's preservation work addresses the risk that historical knowledge might be lost as generations pass. Without institutional preservation, royal and Vatican purchase records could have disappeared into family archives, shipping company file cabinets, and other locations where they might be forgotten or destroyed. The Museo del Café makes this documentation accessible to researchers, educators, tourists, and Puerto Ricans seeking to understand their own coffee heritage in concrete rather than abstract terms.

Contemporary Vatican Relationship

The Vatican's relationship with Puerto Rican coffee has changed significantly in recent decades. The Cooperativa de Cafeteros was acquired in 2008 by Puerto Rico Coffee Roasters, and the direct institutional supplier relationship with the Vatican did not continue in the same form afterward. Coffee consumption at the Holy See continues, but current coffee sources at the Vatican reflect broader global supply chains rather than the specific Puerto Rican commercial relationship of the mid-20th century.

The Coffee Encyclopedia



antique silver coffee service european

Image curation pending

PuertoRicoCoffeeShop.com

Pope Francis, a certified sommelier with well-documented interest in food and beverage traditions, has been reported to enjoy coffee alongside his more famous appreciation for wine. Whether any Puerto Rican coffee reaches contemporary papal households through specialty channels is difficult to confirm, but the possibility preserves the symbolic continuity of the historical tradition even in altered commercial circumstances. Puerto Rican coffee producers today occasionally send gift packages to the Vatican or participate in cultural events that connect the island's coffee heritage to the Holy See in symbolic rather than commercial terms.

What It Means for Today's Buyers

For consumers purchasing Puerto Rican coffee today, the "kings and popes" heritage offers both historical connection and present-day quality. The farms producing contemporary Puerto Rican coffee are often the same haciendas that supplied the Vatican and European royal courts in earlier generations. The growing regions — Yauco, Adjuntas, Lares, Jayuya, Maricao — are the same mountain municipalities that produced the original papal and royal coffee. The terroir, climate, and basic agricultural traditions are continuous with the historical tradition.

The Coffee Encyclopedia



antique wooden coffee grinder ornate european

Image curation pending

PuertoRicoCoffeeShop.com

This continuity is not merely marketing. Coffee varieties have evolved with the introduction of rust-resistant hybrids like Limaní and Frontón, but many farms continue to grow traditional Typica and Bourbon alongside modern varieties. Processing methods have improved with contemporary equipment and quality control, but fundamental approaches — shade cultivation, selective picking, careful fermentation and drying — remain rooted in the traditions that produced the historical quality. When contemporary consumers drink Puerto Rican specialty coffee, they participate in a tradition that genuinely connects to the papal and royal heritage the marketing materials reference.

Key Facts — Coffee of Kings and Popes

- The phrase captures documented 19th-20th century Puerto Rican coffee heritage
- Late 19th century: Puerto Rican coffee reached European royal courts across the continent
- 1950s-1960s: Vatican purchased approximately 15,000 quintales (1.5 million pounds) per year
- Supplier firm: Sobrino de Mayol Hnos in Puerto Rico
- Cooperativa de Cafeteros registered Café Rico brand in 1924 with a San Carlos Selection favored by popes
- Alto Grande hacienda in Lares has been producing premium coffee since 1839
- The Vatican was the only foreign government directly purchasing Puerto Rican coffee
- Documentation preserved at Museo del Café in Ciales, Puerto Rico
- Heritage continues to shape contemporary specialty coffee marketing and positioning
- Pope Francis is a certified sommelier reported to enjoy coffee

Frequently Asked Questions

Was Puerto Rican coffee really served to kings and popes? Yes. Historical documentation shows Puerto Rican coffee reaching European royal courts in the 19th century and the Vatican in the mid-20th century. Between the 1950s and 1960s, the Vatican purchased approximately 15,000 quintales (1.5 million pounds) of Puerto Rican coffee per year from the Sobrino de Mayol Hnos firm.

Where is this history documented? Museum collections at the Museo del Café in Ciales, Puerto Rico preserve letters, receipts, and other documentation. Academic writing by coffee historians references these records. Several coffee haciendas maintain family archives with documentation of royal and papal purchases during their peak

export periods.

Why did royal courts and the Vatican prefer Puerto Rican coffee? Puerto Rican coffee's mountain cultivation, volcanic and clay soils, careful processing, and traditional farming practices produced the quality characteristics that European royal and Vatican customers valued: balanced acidity, full body, clean flavor, and consistent quality year over year.

Is Puerto Rican coffee still served to the Pope today? Direct institutional supply relationships between Puerto Rican coffee producers and the Vatican ended after the 2008 corporate consolidation of the Cooperativa de Cafeteros. Contemporary coffee at the Holy See reflects global supply chains. However, symbolic gifts and specialty shipments from Puerto Rican producers sometimes continue, preserving the historical connection.

Which Puerto Rican coffee brand has the strongest royal heritage? Alto Grande is the brand most closely associated with the "coffee of popes and kings" heritage. The hacienda in Lares has operated since 1839 and explicitly references its European royal and Vatican patronage in current marketing materials. Other brands with historical heritage include Café Rico, Café Yaucono, and Yauco Selecto.

Related Articles

- [The Golden Age of Puerto Rican Coffee \(1800-1898\)](#)
- [Lares: The Birthplace of Puerto Rican Coffee](#)
- [Puerto Rico Coffee Cooperatives and Economics](#)
- [Café de Puerto Rico: Denominación de Origen and Protected Heritage](#)
- [Puerto Rico Coffee Today: The 2026 State of the Industry](#)
- [Hacienda Caracolillo: The Jewel of Maricao Coffee](#)
- [Hacienda Buena Vista: Historic Ponce Coffee Estate](#)

Buy Authentic Puerto Rico Coffee

Drink the same tradition that served popes and kings. [Buy Authentic Puerto Rico Coffee ?](#)

This article is part of The Coffee Encyclopedia, sponsored by [PuertoRicoCoffeeShop.com](#) — the trusted source for authentic Puerto Rican coffee.

<https://www.youtube.com/embed/v2irY8zenxE>

Watch: El Motor — Coffee and the Heart of Puerto Rico (Library of Congress documentary)

Revision #14

Created 2026-04-18 11:27:41 UTC by Admin

Updated 2026-05-12 03:35:36 UTC by Admin