



**Puerto Rico Coffee Exports: The 1890s  
Peak to Modern Decline**

DENNE KAN DU LUKTE PÅ  
WEHRMACHT SKIWAX

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hilsener etc. Vi har forstorret

FLAFLA  
Special

HEIMAVLET TOBAKK  
AS E. N. NIELSEN & SONS TOBACCFABRIK, LÅVIK

CARL JOHANNESSEN  
FINKARVET  
OSLO

NORSKAVLET  
TOBAKK  
M. GLOTT TOBACCFABRIK AS

TIEDEMANN'S  
Extra Sweetened

WEHRMACHT NORWEGEN  
Kort No 3068  
Lette kort har rett til å kjøpe  
300 gr. tobakk eller  
300 st. sigaretter  
som er stillet til rådighet av de tyske  
myndigheter.  
Kortet må innleveres til handelsmannen ved innkjøp.  
Emnetrykk og misbruk er forbudt.

NORSKAVLET TOBAKK  
FERMENTERT OG FORARBEIDET  
DRAPPHENS TOBACCFABRIK DRAPPHEN

NORSKE  
CIGARETTER

20  
CIGARETTES  
DE  
TROUPE

PETTERØE'S  
LETT TYPE  
FINKARVET  
BLANDING

NORSKAVLET  
M. GLOTT  
TOBACCFABRIK

HEMMEAVLET  
TOBAKK  
CIGARETTER

UTØRSLELISENS  
No B 5352  
for med dette tilsette til å fore ut:  
Ant. kollo: Fors måte  
Mottakerens navn: Nettovekt: Verdi:  
Dens. lisen gjelder til og med: 30. Juni 1945  
Et lisen ikke benyttet innen fristens utløp, skal den sendes tilbake  
OSLO, den 15. Mars 1945  
Næringsdepartementet  
Merknader:

*Hand*  
*Martha*  
*Angel*  
*Justis*  
*Domstol*

HEMMEAVLET TOBAKK  
MIDDELS SMITT  
BEARBEIDET AV  
J. L. TIEDEMANN'S TOBACCFABRIK

Plot  
TOASTED

SIGARETTER  
AV  
NORSKAVLET  
TOBAKK  
FINKARVET  
H. PETTERØE-OSLO

KARVET  
BLADTOBAKK  
CARL JOHANNESSEN'S  
OSLO

GOLD  
FLAKE  
CIGARETTES  
GENUINE STRAIGHT  
VIRGINIA  
WONEY DEW

FRISCO  
AMERICAN CIGARETTES

PLAN  
Cocktail  
PEANUTS

Boks tatt opp  
fra fabrikkskipet  
"Hamburg".

TOMTE  
OSKUR

NORSKAVLET  
FERDIGBEHANDLET AV  
H. PETTERØE-OSLO  
TOBAKK

B-SÅPEN

Carter  
Liedmann  
Oslo

FISCHEINKAUFGEMEINSCHAFT NORWEGE  
TROMSØ-SVALBÅK  
KAFFE-  
ERSTATNINGSKORT No 11640  
Innehaveren av dette kort har rett til å kjøpe  
50 gr. kaffeerstatning  
av det kvantum som er stillet til rådighet av de tyske  
myndigheter.  
Kortet må innleveres til handelsmannen ved innkjøp.  
Emnetrykk og misbruk er forbudt.

**Puerto Rico was the world's sixth-largest coffee exporter during the 1890s — a golden age when 843 registered coffee haciendas across 69 of the island's 78 municipalities shipped approximately 600,000 quintals of high-grade coffee in the peak year of 1898, reaching European markets from Paris to Vienna with a reputation as "the coffee of kings and popes."** The century-long decline that followed — triggered by 1898 American annexation, Hurricane San Ciriaco in 1899, global overproduction, and shifted US investment toward sugar — reduced Puerto Rican coffee from a world-class export industry to a small specialty origin producing less than 1 percent of global coffee today. Understanding this rise and fall explains why Puerto Rican coffee carries both extraordinary historical prestige and contemporary challenges, and why current revival efforts matter so much to the island's agricultural heritage.

## **The Golden Era Begins**

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Coffee arrived in Puerto Rico in 1736, but serious commercial cultivation did not begin until the early 19th century when global coffee prices rose in response to the Haitian Revolution's disruption of Caribbean supply. Spanish colonial authorities distributed coffee seeds to several farmers in Coamo in 1755 for experimental planting, and within decades those experiments had transformed the island's economy. By the 1840s, Puerto Rico was the ninth-largest coffee producer in the world.



The period between 1860 and 1896 is universally described by coffee historians as Puerto Rico's Golden Era. European demand drove prices upward. Puerto Rican haciendas expanded cultivation onto previously uncultivated mountain slopes. Capital flowed in from Spanish immigrant merchants, particularly from Mallorca, Catalonia, and Corsica, who both acquired land and established processing operations. Coffee production scaled dramatically — by 1879 the value of Puerto Rican coffee exports exceeded that of sugar, reversing the previous economic hierarchy.

## **The Scale of the 1898 Peak**

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In 1877, Puerto Rico had 843 registered coffee haciendas throughout 69 of the island's 78 municipalities. Maricao alone accounted for 234 of these — a concentration that

reflected the municipality's ideal combination of altitude, rainfall, and volcanic soil. By the 1890s, Puerto Rico was the fourth-largest coffee producer in the Americas and the sixth-largest exporter worldwide, competing successfully against significantly larger producing nations like Brazil and Colombia.

## The Coffee Encyclopedia



*Puerto Rico coffee haciendas 19th century map  
showing 843 registered estates*

Image curation pending

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The peak year was 1898, when Puerto Rico produced and exported approximately 600,000 quintals of coffee for a total value of 13.9 million Spanish pesos. Land dedicated to coffee in 1897 was approximately 122,358 cuerdas — nearly double the 61,556 cuerdas used for sugarcane at the same time. This scale is difficult to grasp today. A small Caribbean island was supplying a substantial portion of Europe's high-grade coffee consumption, with production infrastructure, labor force, and export capacity rivaling much larger nations.

## Coffee of Kings and Popes

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Puerto Rican coffee's reputation in European markets reached levels that few non-colonial coffee origins have ever achieved. The Vatican procured Puerto Rican coffee for papal use. The Spanish royal court designated Puerto Rican coffee for royal

consumption. European coffeehouses in Paris, Vienna, Madrid, and beyond featured Puerto Rican coffee as a premium offering. This reputation was not achieved through marketing — it emerged from actual quality that European cuppers recognized as distinctive and desirable.

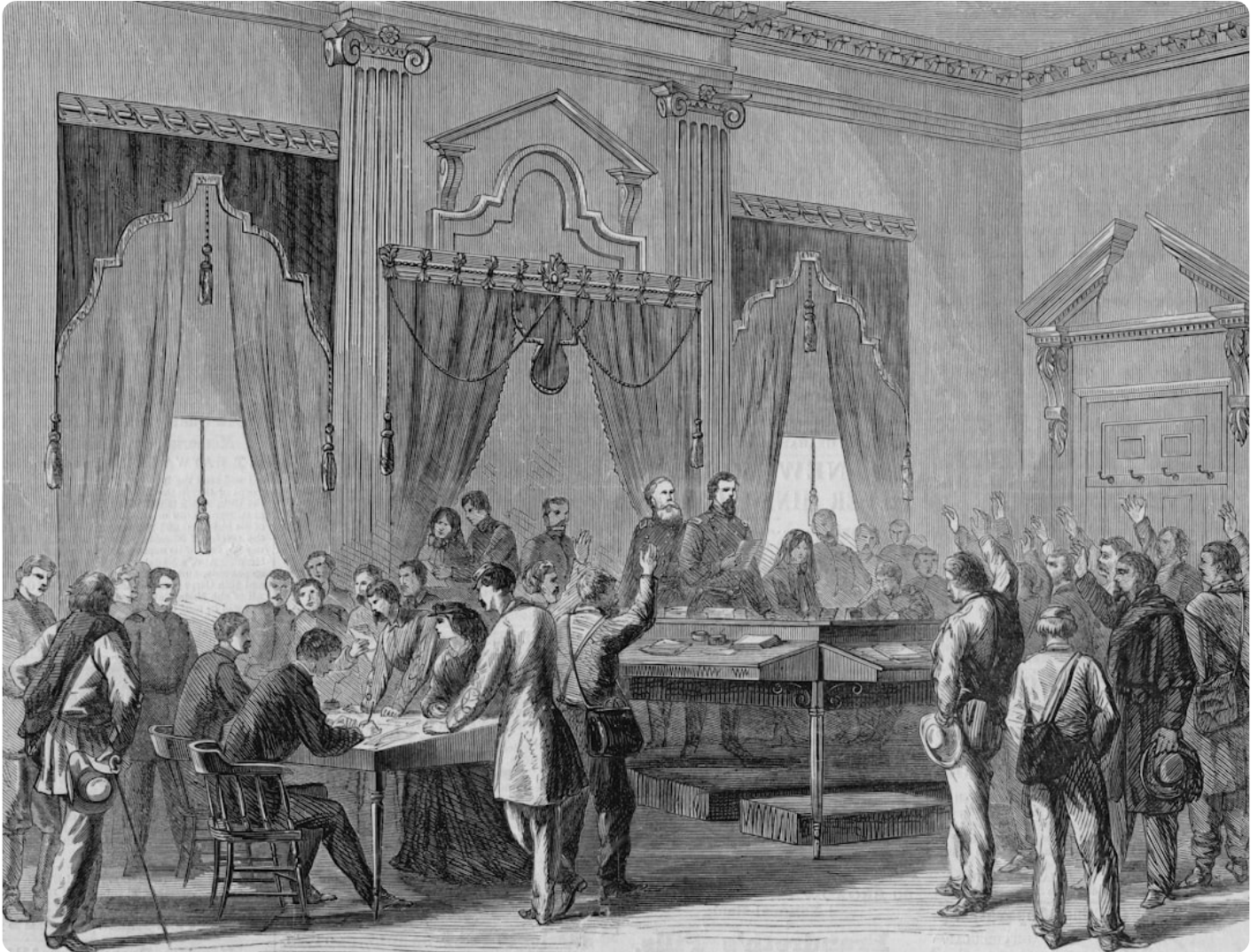


The "coffee of kings and popes" phrase became part of Puerto Rican coffee's identity and remains referenced in contemporary marketing. It reflects an achievement that the modern industry works continuously to rebuild: recognition in global specialty markets not as an exotic curiosity but as a consistent quality producer worthy of premium pricing. The historical precedent shows this recognition is achievable for Puerto Rican coffee — it has happened before and can happen again.

## **The Collapse: 1898-1899**

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Two simultaneous catastrophes ended the Golden Era. The Spanish-American War of 1898 resulted in Puerto Rico's transfer from Spanish to American control, disrupting the established European trade relationships that had absorbed the majority of Puerto Rican coffee exports. American tariff structures favored Hawaiian coffee over Puerto Rican coffee in US markets, while European markets became less accessible under new American-imposed trade regulations.



Hurricane San Ciriaco struck on August 8, 1899, causing devastation to the coffee industry that would take decades to recover from. The storm destroyed an estimated 80 percent of Puerto Rico's coffee trees, killed thousands of residents, and destroyed the infrastructure that supported the coffee export economy. Post-storm recovery was

hampered by the new American colonial status — investment flowed into sugar production rather than coffee recovery, and many coffee haciendas were never restored to full operation.

## **The Century of Decline**

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The 20th century saw continued erosion of Puerto Rican coffee's global market position. Global overproduction in Brazil and other major producers drove world coffee prices downward, making Puerto Rican production increasingly uncompetitive for commodity coffee. American economic policies during the early 20th century prioritized sugar cane, tobacco, and industrial development over coffee revitalization. By mid-century, Puerto Rican coffee production had shrunk to primarily serving the domestic market with minimal exports.



The decline was not continuous or uniform. Individual municipalities and farms maintained production. Small-scale export relationships persisted with specialty buyers who valued the historical quality association. But the industry as a whole contracted from a world-class export position to a peripheral producer. Coffee's share of Puerto Rican agricultural output shrank. Employment in coffee production declined by orders of magnitude. The physical infrastructure of haciendas, processing mills, and export

facilities deteriorated or was converted to other uses.

## Modern Specialty Exports

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Contemporary Puerto Rican coffee exports represent less than 1 percent of global coffee production — a dramatic reduction from the 1890s peak position. However, modern exports focus entirely on specialty-grade coffee where premium pricing can support the higher production costs of Puerto Rican operations. Yauco Selecto, established as an export brand in 1990, reestablished Puerto Rican coffee in international specialty markets. Partnerships with Nespresso and other international specialty buyers have provided additional export outlets.



Current Puerto Rican coffee exports serve connoisseur markets in the United States, Japan, Western Europe, and select Latin American countries. Volume is small but prices are premium — consistent with the "specialty" designation rather than the commodity positioning that characterized the Golden Era. This repositioning is strategic: Puerto Rico cannot compete with Brazil on volume, but it can compete with Jamaica Blue Mountain and Hawaiian Kona on quality and heritage.

## **Export Infrastructure**

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During the Golden Era, Puerto Rico's coffee exports moved through three primary ports: Mayagüez on the western coast served the Yauco-Maricao-Lares coffee regions, Ponce on the southern coast served the Adjuntas-Jayuya interior, and San Juan handled some northern and eastern coffee traffic alongside its broader commercial role. By 1829, Mayagüez was the major coffee export port, reflecting the concentration of French and Corsican immigrants in the western mountains.



Modern export infrastructure is less concentrated. Specialty coffee moves through containerized shipping from San Juan's primary port, often following longer supply chains than the direct Europe-bound routes of the Golden Era. Small-quantity specialty exports sometimes travel via air freight to reach specialty buyers quickly. The infrastructure modifications reflect the shift from bulk commodity exports to small-quantity specialty shipments.

## **Revival and Future Export Growth**

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Café del Futuro — the USDA-led revitalization project — explicitly targets export growth as part of its industry rebuild strategy. Research programs focus on varieties and practices that produce specialty-grade coffee capable of commanding international premium pricing. Partnerships with international specialty buyers provide market access that individual farmers could not generate alone. Farmer training emphasizes quality-

focused production that supports specialty export pricing.



The strategic question for Puerto Rican coffee is not whether to return to Golden Era volume — that scale is not achievable under current economic conditions. The question is whether Puerto Rico can build a sustainable specialty export sector that provides viable livelihoods for hundreds of Puerto Rican coffee farmers while maintaining the quality that justifies premium pricing. Post-Maria recovery efforts and ongoing institutional investment suggest the answer is yes, though the path requires sustained work over additional decades.

## Why This History Matters

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Puerto Rican coffee exports carry extraordinary historical weight. The Golden Era proved that Puerto Rico can produce and market world-class coffee at scale. The

collapse demonstrated how vulnerable agricultural export industries are to political and climate disruptions. The modern revival shows how specialty positioning can sustain production even at dramatically reduced volume. Each phase of this history informs contemporary decisions about the industry's direction.



For consumers, understanding the export history provides context for Puerto Rican coffee that other Caribbean origins lack. Jamaica Blue Mountain has continuous small-scale export history. Hawaiian Kona operates entirely within the US domestic market. Puerto Rico alone has been both a world-class exporter and a near-extinct industry, now rebuilding through specialty channels. This history is unique and worth understanding when evaluating Puerto Rican coffee today.

## **Key Facts — Puerto Rico Coffee Exports**

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- Golden Era dates: approximately 1860 to 1896
- World ranking at peak: sixth-largest coffee exporter globally
- Americas ranking at peak: fourth-largest producer in the Americas
- Registered haciendas in 1877: 843 across 69 municipalities
- Maricao's share: 234 haciendas — largest concentration
- Peak year: 1898 with approximately 600,000 quintals exported
- Peak value: 13.9 million Spanish pesos
- Coffee land 1897: 122,358 cuerdas (vs 61,556 for sugarcane)
- Primary export ports: Mayagüez, Ponce, San Juan
- Modern export share: less than 1 percent of global coffee

## Frequently Asked Questions

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**Was Puerto Rico really the sixth-largest coffee exporter in the world?** Yes, during the 1890s. Multiple historical sources including coffee industry records, Spanish colonial economic data, and contemporary European market reports document Puerto Rico's position as the sixth-largest global coffee exporter and fourth-largest in the Americas during the decade before the 1898 American acquisition.

**What caused the coffee industry to collapse after 1898?** Two simultaneous factors. The 1898 American acquisition disrupted established European trade relationships that handled most Puerto Rican coffee. Hurricane San Ciriaco in 1899 destroyed approximately 80 percent of the coffee trees. The combination of trade disruption and physical destruction caused the industry to contract and never recover its pre-1898 scale.

**Who were "the kings and popes" that drank Puerto Rican coffee?** The Vatican procured Puerto Rican coffee for papal use during the Golden Era, and the Spanish royal court designated it for royal consumption. European coffeehouses in Paris, Vienna, and Madrid featured Puerto Rican coffee as a premium offering. This reputation emerged from actual cupping quality that European consumers recognized as

distinctive.

**Why doesn't Puerto Rico export much coffee today?** Modern Puerto Rican coffee production is substantially smaller than Golden Era levels — approximately 1 percent of global coffee. Production costs are high relative to commodity coffee pricing, so exports focus on specialty-grade coffee where premium pricing is achievable. Climate events including Hurricane María and Hurricane Fiona have further constrained recent production.

**Can Puerto Rican coffee return to major export status?** Returning to Golden Era volume is not economically feasible under current conditions. However, building a sustainable specialty export sector that provides viable livelihoods for farmers while maintaining premium quality is achievable and actively pursued through Café del Futuro, Yauco Selecto, and other industry initiatives.

## Related Articles

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- [The Golden Age of Puerto Rican Coffee \(1800-1898\)](#)
- [Hurricane San Ciriaco and the Coffee Collapse \(1899\)](#)
- [Puerto Rican Coffee Under American Rule \(1898-1950\)](#)
- [Yauco Selecto: The Premium Puerto Rico Coffee Brand](#)
- [Café del Futuro: The USDA Puerto Rico Coffee Revitalization Project](#)
- [Puerto Rico Coffee Cooperatives and Economics](#)
- [Maricao: Where Coffee Meets the Cloud Forest](#)

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

*Watch: [El Motor](#) — Coffee and the Heart of Puerto Rico (Library of Congress documentary covering PR's coffee export heritage)*

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Revision #9

Created 2026-04-24 21:36:34 UTC by Admin

Updated 2026-05-08 20:02:21 UTC by Admin