



CUBA'S COFFEE

REVOLUTION



By **PATRICK
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OUR MAN IN HAVANA

CUBA conjures up images of big cigars, classic American cars, revolution, rum and Fidel Castro. What the Caribbean island is less well known for is coffee. Once one of the world's biggest producers, coffee growing has slumped since US President John F Kennedy imposed an economic embargo on Castro's pro-Soviet regime in early 1962 – but there are hopes of a revival.

Britain's many lovers of a morn-

ing coffee will soon have a chance to judge for themselves whether Cuba's product still has the famed chocolate and nutty flavours, complemented by overtones of tobacco, that gained it a world-class reputation before the embargo.

Italian coffee giant Lavazza has just struck a deal with Sainsbury's and Waitrose to bring Cuban coffee to the UK market for the first time. It will be available under the Tierra label.

It is part of wider plan to kick-start the Cuban coffee sector which, under the embargo, has virtually disappeared. It produced 50,000 tons a year at its peak in the 1950s. The latest annual production total is just 8,000 tons.

The grinding US sanctions continue to exact a huge toll on all





aspects of economic life in Cuba, making it a Cold War relic which is seemingly frozen in time.

Cuba imports most of the food and fuel it consumes. Power cuts are common as the cash-starved economy nosedives. Inflation is a startling 45 per cent and the currency is in freefall.

Tourists have failed to return in significant numbers since the pandemic, depriving Cuba of foreign currency and spending power.

But resurrecting the coffee industry would be an important step for Cuba, as coffee is one of the world's most traded commodities.

The revival is centred in the Sierra Maestra mountains of eastern Cuba. Steeped in history, it was from this thickly forested range that Castro and his revolutionaries launched a series of guerilla attacks on the country's government.

The military dictator Fulgencio Batista was eventually overthrown in 1959.

As the US sanctions make it difficult for businesses to operate there, Lavazza has been working through its charitable foundation for several years in this region to kickstart the industry.

Hefty subsidies from the Cuban government to plant coffee in the forests are also bolstering efforts. Lavazza has been busy teaching farming techniques and marketing nous to around 170 farmers in the area in a campaign to revive the coffee growing industry.

'The project is about creating the environment for Cuban coffee to be sold,' says Veronica Rossi, senior sustainability manager with the foundation. Rafael Antonio Infante,

also known as 'Tony', is one of the farmers working with Lavazza.

Tony used to rear cattle but has turned over a third of his 37 acre farm to growing organic, hand-picked coffee. And he is looking to expand. Why?

'Because the market is secure – and coffee is more profitable than cows,' he laughs.

Lavazza's foundation – which works in 20 countries on three continents to improve coffee crop

yields – has taken a leading role following a partnership with Oxfam in Cuba in 2018.

Oxfam later closed all of its Caribbean offices as part of a cost-cutting drive after donations dried up during the pandemic, so the foundation was left to deal directly with the Cuban government.

'This is the first time we've partnered with a government and turned it into a joint venture,' Rossi explains. 'It's a very good experiment for us.'

All the profits made from exporting Cuban coffee will be reinvested in the 20-year project, she adds.

Cuba's coffee comeback will take time and scaling up will be hampered as long as sanctions remain.

Only last month the UK was among 187 countries that backed a United Nations resolution to lift the blockade on Cuba. But it remains in place after the move was vetoed by the US, which still describes Cuba as a terrorist state.

Perhaps Vietnam – another one-party, centralised communist country – provides a template. In just four decades it has come from nowhere to be the world's second largest coffee producer.

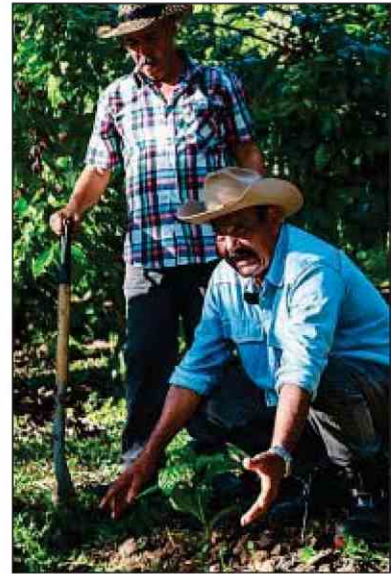
The difference is that Vietnam cleared its forests to make way for coffee plantations.

Cuba has gone the opposite way, re-foresting on a huge scale. That, and the fact that it lacks fertilisers because of the blockade, bolsters Cuba's sustainable 'green' coffee credentials.

The use of blockchain technology – giving each coffee bag its own code that cannot be changed – enhances certification.

Robeldi Nicot Terrero, president of Agroforestal, the state-owned company which manages the environment, insists Cuba can compete on the world stage again.

'Cuban coffee is the best,' he says. 'It's good, fair and clean.'



REVIVAL: Farmer Tony Infante, right, is switching over from cattle to coffee

