

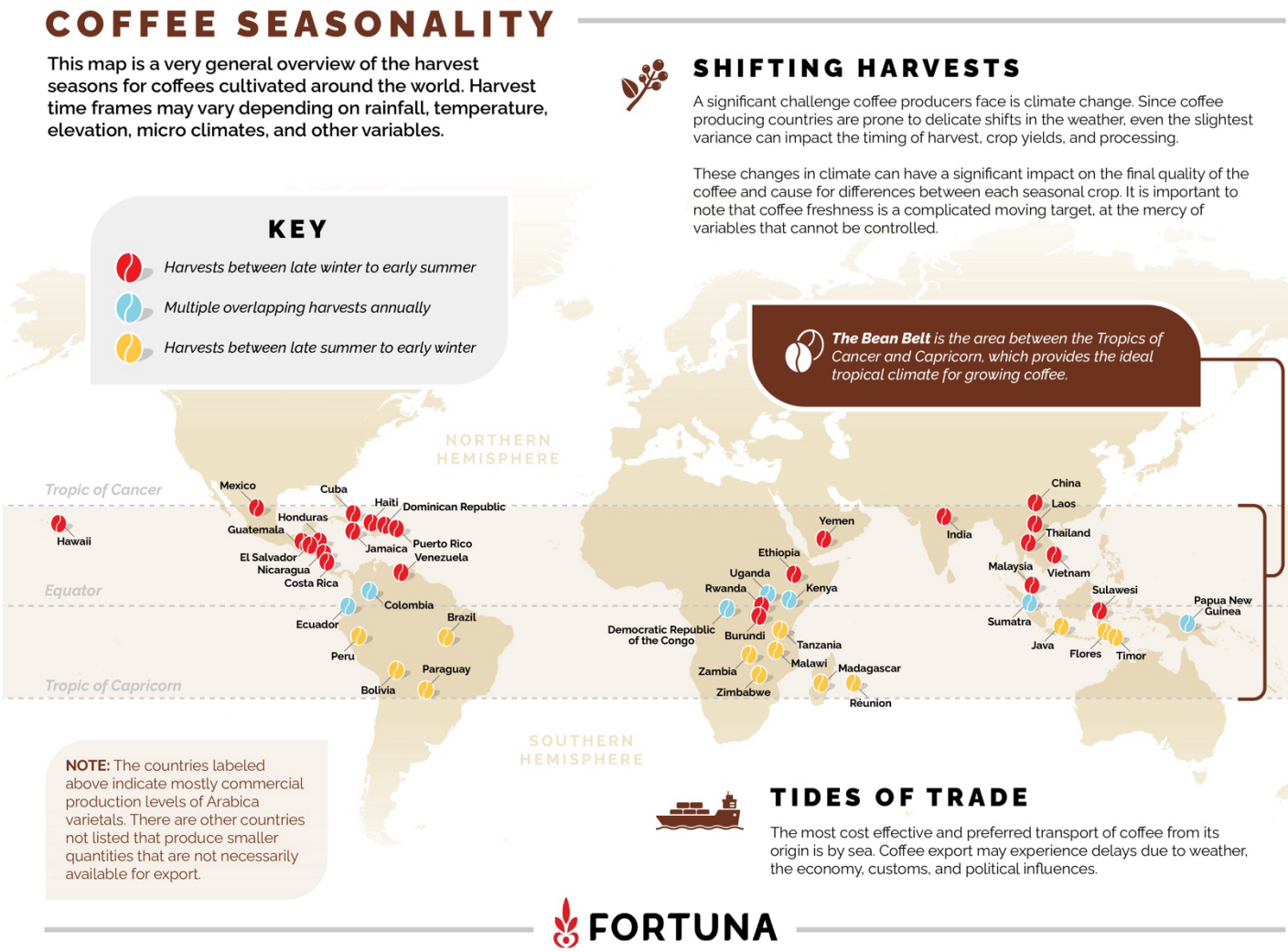
UNDERSTANDING COFFEE SEASONALITY

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Take a quick cruise through the coffee aisle in any grocery store, and it's hard to overlook the selection of what seems like an endless supply of caffeine. In contrast, just passing through the local farmer's market, one can observe a limited showcase of fresh, in-season produce. Seasonality is not a term immediately associated with the daily morning brew, but those in tune with these mostly predictable and recurring cycles understand the distinct characteristics of peak season. In-season produce comes with much anticipation for the fresh taste and enjoyment, and coffee should be no exception. Just like the ripening tomatoes on summer vines, coffee cherries also have certain times when they are ready for harvest. These periods of peak freshness vary based on country of origin, weather, and a whole host of other contributing factors.

Location, Location, Location

Depending on where the country of origin lies within the "Bean Belt" – the area between the Tropics of Cancer and Capricorn – harvest periods can be completely opposite of each other. Coffee cherries in the Northern Hemisphere are picked between late-winter to spring, whereas the Southern Hemisphere harvests ramp up in late-summer to fall. For countries located on or near the Equator, there may be fly crops, known as *mitacas* or "mid crops," along with the main harvest. There are also areas with extended harvest periods where there are multiple cycles overlapping. Colombia is a unique example where the topography allows for different harvest times depending on the regions and varying elevations. Take a look at a harvest chart to compare the different periods based on the location of coffee production countries. It is important to note that these projections are subject to change depending on variables like varietals, rainfall, climate change, elevation, micro-climates, processing methods, and more.



Freshness

As soon as the coffee fruit is picked, the race to maintain the freshness of the harvest kicks off. Processing and drying coffee is crucial, as it keeps the crop from spoiling while in holding and transit. Coffee is dried to the desired moisture content, then placed in a 30-60 day (about 2 months) resting period. This is a crucial step where green coffee can age out of its under-ripe characteristics before being bagged, loaded, and shipped. Depending on geography, economic climates, politics, and weather, months may lapse before green coffee makes landfall in the States. The moment the coffee arrives on the mainland is when optimal freshness – at least in this end – can be experienced. By the time coffee has finally arrived at the local roaster, months have passed since the cherries were plucked from the branches. Optimal freshness in the coffee sector is complicated and a constantly moving target. The best strategy is to maintain transparency in communicating the information to make more informed decisions when buying green or roasted coffee. Paying attention to both coffee harvest and arrival time estimates will develop a better coffee projection. With the climate shifts, however, some of these timelines have also changed.

Storage

Whether it is green coffee in a warehouse or roasted coffee in a cabinet at home, storage environments will impact the quality and flavor of the final brew. Just like any product, exposure to oxygen and subsequent oxidation of the crop contributes to the loss of freshness. In green coffee's case, the complexity loses out to the dull, baggy, and woody characteristics because of the dropping moisture content. Green coffee, which has been sitting around for 6-12 months since harvest, will naturally degrade. The highlighted flavor profiles, signature to the origin, will be lost and translate into a woody and paper-like brew. Freshly roasted coffee should be stored in an airtight container in a cool, dark place, like the kitchen cabinet or pantry. Roasted whole beans will maintain freshness for a month before the flavor quality diminishes. If the coffee is ground, that time is shortened to 2 weeks. Do not be fooled into thinking that storing coffee in the freezer will extend the freshness window though; roasted coffee is porous, which invites moisture into the bean from the surrounding refrigerated environment. This exposure will also diminish the flavor significantly and introduce foreign notes to the roasted seeds. However, if there is a surplus of coffee that cannot be consumed before the freshness diminishes, putting the coffee into a vacuum sealed airtight bag before storing in the freezer is an option. When ready to use, be sure to take the coffee out and store it in a cabinet. Overall, though, we highly recommend purchasing coffee as needed instead for optimal freshness and flavor clarity.

Availability

Timing is always tricky with so many moving parts and variables at play. So how do we meet the expectations of our customers, who have developed an attachment to a certain coffee, when it is no longer available? Coffee availability is one of the main potential pitfalls when it comes to consistent service for customers. It is important to remember that most coffee-growing regions have only one harvest annually, making for limited quantities. Most coffees retain their core characteristics from year to year, but realistically, it is unlikely that they will be identical. Availability is at the mercy of uncontrollable variables within the entire coffee production line, and it is important to be transparent in communicating that information to customers. Embrace the new harvests by nurturing the excitement in exploring and enjoying new coffees. There is something special in experiencing an "aha" moment when tasting anything in season and at peak deliciousness.

There is a lot of information to absorb when it comes to coffee seasonality. We know all too well that good things must come to an end eventually. We learn to accept and move on until the next opportunity presents itself. Develop anticipation for new experiences yet to come by getting to know the local roaster and finding out what is new in their lineup. Don't be afraid to try something new and discover other options. Sometimes there are coffees that are more suited for hotter months and others that are better for sweater weather. There is no right or wrong way to enjoy coffee, so take the time to find something that fits the needs of the current season.

Still curious? Here are some additional resources to continue down the rabbit hole in the world of coffee.

Cafe Imports Harvest
Counter Culture Coffee Seasonality
La Marzocco Home: Coffee Seasonality
Arbor Day: Coffee Seasonality
Nordic Approach Coffee Calendar
Coffee Hunter Seasonality Chart
Sweet Maria's Coffee Production Timetable
World Coffee Research