

# Washed and Unwashed (Natural) Coffee

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Months before the coffee harvest, coffee trees produce an abundance of small white flowers with a wonderful jasmine-like fragrance that leaves farmers' coffee parcels looking like they have received a dusting of snow. This stunning, aromatic flowering period usually lasts only about 24-36 hours. Weeks later, small green coffee cherries begin to form. The coffee bean is a seed that develops within a coffee cherry. When ripe, coffee cherries have an appearance very similar in size, shape, and color to a Bing cherry, a variety commonly found in grocery stores.

Like apples, coffee cherries on a coffee tree do not all turn red at the same time, but gradually turn from green to crimson red, usually requiring coffee farmers to return to the same coffee tree three or four times during the harvest to pick the cherries at their peak of ripeness. Once harvested, the cherries are processed, using one of two general methods to produce washed or unwashed (also known as "natural") coffees with two distinct taste profiles.

The washed method begins by separating the fruit of the cherry from the coffee bean, which is at the center of the cherry, usually within hours of harvesting. Once the bean is separated from the fruit through this wet milling process, there is still some remaining fruit or mucilage that clings to the bean that needs to be removed. If left on the bean, this mucilage will ferment and may impart undesirable flavor notes to the bean, and ultimately to the cup of coffee. To avoid this, the beans are often placed in large vats known as fermentation tanks overnight. This short period of controlled fermentation both seals in flavor and makes it easier to remove the remaining mucilage from the bean when washed in water. In many parts of the world the beans are placed in concrete troughs or channels of running water where the friction created by contact with each other and with wooden paddles removes the mucilage, leaving the exterior of the bean with a texture like that of a cat's tongue. These beans are then dried either in the sun on patios, and/or in mechanical dryers. Once dried, the beans still have a thin skin known as parchment or *pergamino* that is removed just prior to shipping.

The unwashed or natural method dries the ripe crimson red cherries fully intact (with the coffee beans still at their center) usually in the sun on raised screen beds to allow plenty of air circulation around the cherries to facilitate thorough drying. During this entire time, the coffee beans remain in direct contact with the fruit of the coffee cherry. The beans are raked regularly to turn them to avoid mold and are usually ready for final processing which removes the fruit from the beans usually after 2-4 weeks of drying.

You may ask, "**Why are both methods used?**" and "**What are the general differences in taste between washed and unwashed (natural) coffees?**"

## Washed coffees

usually require a significant amount of water, a scarce commodity in many coffee growing areas. In addition, once the coffee is washed, the water

used for washing finds its way into nearby waterways, often where it originated. Unless it is treated and cleaned in sedimentation ponds or by alternative means before it is released into these waterways, this untreated water carries with it the mucilage and other byproducts from the washing process. Once this mucilage and organic matter enters the waterways, it oxidizes and robs the waterways of needed oxygen to sustain aquatic life. Coffee has been responsible for damaging, often severely, many streams and rivers in coffee growing regions around the world. **Unwashed coffees**, on the other hand, don't require much if any water during processing, which can be a significant advantage in areas where water is scarce, and in preserving the natural environment.

While most of the world's specialty coffees are washed, taste preferences are ultimately determined by the palates of buyers at the cupping table and by consumers. Some cuppers prefer the taste profiles of washed coffees, which more directly reflect the inherent characteristics of the bean and its *terroir*, or growing conditions: soil composition, climate and elevation. *Terroir* is largely responsible for the taste differences between coffee origins — i.e., why an Ethiopian coffee and a coffee from Sumatra taste differently. Washed coffees are generally noted for their higher levels of acidity, producing clean, bright flavor notes. The taste of unwashed coffee is more influenced by the processing method, and the resulting taste is generally characterized by heavier body and a sweetness resulting from the bean's extended contact with the sugars of the coffee cherry.



**Side Note:** Lutheran World Relief's Ground-Up Investing for impact unit, has invested in Delagua Coffee Paradise, a producer of natural processed coffee in Colombia that works with small-scale farmers in the Santa Marta region.



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