

Black Coffee documentary examines rich roots of coffee in three parts

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MONTREAL (CP) - Few people think of the tales of sex, slavery and high finance behind coffee when they take their first sips of their morning java.

But Black Coffee, a new documentary premiering Wednesday on TVOntario may change that.

The three-part series reveals that coffee is the world's most widely taken legal drug and the second most widely traded commodity after oil. It helped foster the slave trade. At various times, coffee has been considered as both an aphrodisiac and a sex inhibitor.

"There is so much socially, culturally, politically in every direction you go - health, sex, I mean, who would have known?" says director Irene Angelico of the richly brewed project which took about five years to put together.

Angelico says she was always interested in coffee as a subject for a film but had doubts about taking on the project when she was approached by producer Ina Fichman. Angelico explained she had just finished The Cola Conquest, about the history of Coke, Pepsi and its competitors.

"I said, 'Oh no, I'm not going to be pigeonholed into brown caffeinated liquids,' " she laughed, adding that Fichman eventually convinced her. "It's such a rich subject. It spans centuries and it touches on every aspect of our lives in such a powerful way that I just got seduced by the subject."

Fichman says the subject is a natural for film.

"I thought it was actually an epic story and a very interesting way of looking at history," she said. "It's something that's on our tables and in our cafes and something that we take for granted. In terms of making films, finding something that's so much a part of our life and being able to tell such an extraordinary story is exciting."

Coffee provides a livelihood for 25 million people and 100 million more depend on it for their survival. About 500 billion cups of coffee are consumed every year around the world, half of them at breakfast.

The film tracks the history of coffee from its beginning, through its role in society, its manufacturers and its position as a major trade item.

One of the companies examined is Seattle-based Starbucks, which clearly maps out a worldwide strategy that at first blush resembles another aggressive retailer - Wal-Mart.

Angelico admits she thought so too at first but changed her mind.

"When I travelled in the producing areas I had a much more positive response from the farmers about Starbucks than I expected, about how they're treated," she said.

"I had to change my views quite positively in terms of how socially conscious they are in their relationship with the growers. Their globalization is also a kind of combination story. They definitely are expanding like a Wal-Mart but on the other hand they also bring coffee culture into certain areas where there's nothing."

Fichman noted Starbucks is smaller than Wal-Mart but is taking a more cautious approach.

"They're expanding but they're doing it very, very carefully."

Angelico acknowledged some mom-pop coffee houses are taken over by the chain but pointed out that with the arrival of the coffee culture, others spring up.

Angelico remembers when she was in high school and paid a nickel for diner coffee that tasted like garbage.

"The idea of spending a lot of money on coffee just was outrageous to us," she said. "We didn't know how much went into a cup of coffee. We weren't aware of the farmers that were being paid this low price because we were paying this low price for the coffee."

"We weren't aware that coffee didn't have to taste like burned rubber on top of it," she said. "I think maybe that awareness of what goes into the cup of coffee and the lives and the farmers and the families that are producing the coffee and how hard they work - I think that's the most important thing about the film. There's lots of fun stuff but I really wanted that to get across."