

Coffee and certification

When buying your coffee, you most likely have encountered some certification labels. Certification and verification systems of coffee are increasingly popular as a means for producers to obtain better and fairer prices and for consumers to help little farmers. You help to raise sustainability in the coffee value chain and to improve the economic, environmental and social sustainability of coffee production.

But if the global coffee market is about \$200 billion, and 10% of that goes to the coffee producing countries, only a very small part, \$350 million per year, goes to the labeled and certified coffees, meaning it is only a miniscule part of the total market.

Since 1995 you may have seen labels like:

USDA Organic (<http://www.ifoam.org/>): Requirements include no use of prohibited substances on the land for at least three years, a buffer between the coffee and any other crop not grown organically, a plan that demonstrates methods that prevent soil erosion, and other sustainable agricultural criteria.

Fairtrade (<http://www.fairtrade.net/>) is primarily concerned with alleviating poverty through greater equity in international trade: certified cooperatives receive a minimum price per pound, with an additional premium if the coffee is also certified organic

Rainforest Alliance (<http://www.rainforest-alliance.org/>) covers a number of ecological issues as well as community relations and fair treatment of workers, producers can use the certification to negotiate a better price for their coffee, allows use of the seal on coffee that contains only 30% certified beans

UTZ Certified (<http://www.utzkapeh.org/>) works towards transparency and traceability in the supply chain and efficient farm management, it is process-oriented certification: Certification is granted for farms working towards the criteria in the standard. RA and UTZ are in the process of merging at the moment.

Some lesser known, but very interesting certificates (if you can find them) are:



Coffee kids (<http://www.coffeekids.org/>): “Coffee Kids empowers young coffee farmers to create thriving businesses and a sustainable livelihood for themselves and their families”



International Women's Coffee Alliance (<http://www.womenincoffee.org/>): “The mission of the International Women's Coffee Alliance (IWCA) is to empower women in the international coffee community to achieve meaningful and sustainable lives; and to encourage and recognize the participation of women in all aspects of the coffee industry”



Coffee for the birds (<https://nationalzoo.si.edu/migratory-birds/bird-friendly-coffee>): “The Bird Friendly® program aims to protect the most quality habitat from the threat of deforestation under the Bird Friendly seal.”

Now, if certification really works and benefits producers and consumers is hotly debated (there are lots of studies and documents) but personally I am inclined just to say that there are pro's and contra's, but that the pro's greatly outweigh the contras and it eases my mind a little bit when I buy certified coffee.

The biggest pro is, of course, that organized farmers obtain higher returns (although we are actually only speaking of some cents per pound), they have better access to credit and we can see an increased adoption of environmentally friendly coffee farming practices. Due to the small market share of certified coffees, this benefits only a very small percentage of the farmers and several certifications only mean that producers can use them to *negotiate* better prices!

The biggest problem is that, due to its costs and strict production requirements and the necessary time to implement them (it takes some 3 to 5 years to convert a farm to organic production during which production volume drastically drops), certification isn't an option for the poorest and most marginalized farmers.

Interesting as well is to take a look at the 4C baseline verification system (see 4C Association on <https://www.globalcoffeeplatform.org/>). 4C has a step by step methodology, providing an incentive for continuous improvement of sustainable agricultural and good management practices, but this yet has to be fully implemented.

4C is reporting half of total volume of certified and verified coffees and the merged UTZ and RA (that continues using Rainforest Alliance as its name, by combining their market will count for about 30% of the certified coffee market.

The best coffees come from high altitude farms with shade management and are mostly grown by small and medium farmers, so when looking for a tasty cup, you could try out some certified coffees. However, as taste is concerned, I prefer to know not only *how*, but *exactly where*, if possible at farm level, my coffee comes from (single origin) with a certificate of origin and varieties used.