

The Best Coffee Subscription Services

Coffee subscriptions promise convenience and customization. We set out to find the best.

➤ BY VALERIE SIZHE LI ➤



Americans love coffee and are becoming increasingly curious about what they're drinking. As interest in specific coffee varieties grows, coffee subscriptions are emerging as a fun, easy means of receiving fresh, high-quality coffee beans. Some services tout that you can try unique coffees you won't find anywhere else. All allow you to reschedule, adjust, or pause your subscription.

There are two main types of coffee subscription providers. The first type source, roast, and ship the beans themselves. Those subscriptions are often run by recognizable coffee brands, such as Peet's and Blue Bottle. The second is made up of coffee clubs that partner with small-scale coffee roasters, connecting consumers with lesser-known roasters that may otherwise not be on their radar.

From Basic to Deluxe: Options Vary

Coffee subscriptions offer various levels of customization. At one end is "roaster's pick," in which the company selects the coffee and roast level for you. In the middle of the spectrum are subscriptions that allow you to select light, medium, or dark roast and then take care of the rest. At the far end are subscriptions that ask you to fill out a survey about your exact

daily caffeine intake and whether you take dairy with your coffee. They then algorithmically match you with a coffee; if you aren't happy with your match, you can retake the questionnaire to find a new one.

In putting together our lineup of coffee subscriptions, we included some well-regarded, widely known roasters as well as newer, trendier coffee clubs. When deciding which subscription to order from each company, we opted for single-origin coffees that delivered one bag per shipment. Although the term "single-origin" is unregulated, it broadly means that the coffee is grown in one country. Single-origin subscriptions are typically where companies showcase their most special offerings, and they rotate it at the most frequent pace so that subscribers can try a wide variety of coffees.

To get a sense for the range of coffee included (from single-estate to single varieties, such as Bourbon and Gesha) in each subscription over time, we asked each company to provide a list of coffees sent in the previous 12 months. We also evaluated the quality of the included educational resources. Each subscription provided a slightly different experience; some were more interesting and offered more informative materials than others. Here's what we learned.

—Edited by Kate Shannon Levine

What information can you expect in your box?

Much like wine clubs and cheese-of-the-month memberships, good coffee subscriptions consist of more than just a bag inside a box. They offer educational information so that you're able to learn about the coffee—and about your own coffee-drinking preferences. It's one of the main reasons that people seek out coffee subscriptions. Depending on the company, this information might be on the coffee packaging or available online.

HERE'S WHAT MIGHT BE INCLUDED

LOCATION: All companies indicate where the coffee beans were grown. Some even provide information about the coffee growers and their farms.

COFFEE BEANS: Arabica and Robusta are the two most common species of coffee but there are many varieties of coffee beans, such as fruity Pink Bourbon from Central America and floral, tea-like Gesha from Ethiopia.

PROCESSING: Each method lends different flavors and aromas to the finished product. Because it's such an important step, companies often tout their method and how it influences their beans.

What to Look for

➤ **ROASTED TO ORDER:** We liked subscriptions that roast their beans fresh to order and print those dates on the bags. When coffee is fresh, the nuances of flavor and aroma are most pronounced. It also shows a company's commitment to quality and freshness.

➤ **SPEEDY DELIVERY:** We were impressed by subscriptions that processed orders quickly, roasting and shipping the day we ordered or the following day.

➤ **EDUCATIONAL MATERIALS:** We preferred subscription services that helped us learn. Some subscriptions included cards detailing tasting notes and origins of the coffee. Others provided in-depth explanations of the processing methods to help us make informed decisions on our coffee preferences. These subscriptions would make especially great gifts.

➤ **RESPONSIVE CUSTOMER SERVICE:** We liked subscriptions that helped us track down bags when we couldn't locate them. It's a helpful feature to have a reachable company when paying for a subscription service.

NICE TO HAVE

➤ **FREQUENTLY UPDATED OFFERINGS:** Some subscriptions change their bean selection every two weeks whereas others rotate their coffee once a month. If your delivery cadence is every two weeks, you might prefer a company that changes its offerings more frequently.

➤ **ABILITY TO GIVE FEEDBACK:** Some coffee subscriptions followed up with us via email, asking us to rate and give feedback on the coffee we received. We liked the interactive experience, which helped ensure that we enjoyed subsequent batches of coffee; it also helped us form opinions and preferences.

What to Avoid

➤ **UNDATED PACKAGING:** One bag arrived with no indication of when it had been roasted. We reached out to the vendor, who assured us our beans had been roasted to order. However, we still think it's convenient to have the date on the packaging to help us remember and keep track of the freshness of the beans.

➤ **ROASTED BEFORE ORDER PLACED:** Two bags we received had been roasted several days before we placed our orders. Coffee beans start to gain moisture and oxidize after roasting, so it's always better to receive fresh beans, especially when paying a premium for a subscription.

➤ **SLOW SHIPPING:** One company delayed our initial shipment of coffee; we received it 12 days later. The coffee was roasted the day after we placed the order, which means it sat in the company's warehouse for five days before it was shipped.

What We Tasted

HIGHLY RECOMMENDED

WINNER

STUMPTOWN COFFEE ROASTERS Roaster's Pick

PRICE: \$23.00 for 12 oz (\$1.92 per oz), ships free

COFFEE IN OUR SHIPMENT: Medium roast from Bella Vista Farm, Antigua, Guatemala

COFFEE QUALITY: ★★★ SPEED: ★★★

CUSTOMER EXPERIENCE: ★★★

EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES: ★★★

COMMENTS: Run by an established coffee brand, this responsive subscription changes its selection every two weeks. Our Guatemalan coffee had notes of "candied nut," "apricot," and "chocolate."



PACHAMAMA COFFEE COOPERATIVE ROASTER'S Choice Single Origin

PRICE: \$20.00 for 10 oz (\$2.00 per oz), ships free

COFFEE IN OUR SHIPMENT: Medium roast from Prodecoop, Río Coco, Nicaragua

COFFEE QUALITY: ★★★

SPEED: ★★★

CUSTOMER EXPERIENCE: ★★★

EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES: ★★★

COMMENTS: Owned by a cooperative of coffee growers, this subscription service lets you sample coffee from Africa and the Americas. Ours had notes of "vanilla," "pear," and "chocolate."



COUNTER CULTURE Single- Origin Subscription

PRICE: \$19.00 for 12 oz (\$1.58 per oz), plus \$6.00 shipping

COFFEE IN OUR SHIPMENT: Light roast from Cinco de Junio Cooperative, Las Sabanas, Nicaragua

COFFEE QUALITY: ★★★ SPEED: ★★★

CUSTOMER EXPERIENCE: ★★★½

EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES: ★★★

COMMENTS: This coffee company is known for its variety of single-origin offerings, which change every two weeks. The coffee we received was "fruity" and "nutty."



MISTOBOX Coffee Subscription

PRICE: \$17.95 for 12 oz (\$1.50 per oz), plus \$5.00 shipping

COFFEE IN OUR SHIPMENT: Light roast from Emilio Lopez Diaz's farm in Santa Ana, El Salvador

COFFEE QUALITY: ★★

SPEED: ★★★

CUSTOMER EXPERIENCE: ★★★

EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES: ★★★

COMMENTS: This subscription gave us a survey to gauge our preference before algorithmically matching us with delicate, light roast with "citrus" notes, which we liked.



RECOMMENDED

INTELLIGENTSIA'S Choice

PRICE: \$21.00 for 12 oz (\$1.75 per oz), ships free

COFFEE IN OUR SHIPMENT: Light roast from West Guji, Oromia, Ethiopia

COFFEE QUALITY: ★★★

SPEED: ★★★

CUSTOMER EXPERIENCE: ★

EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES: ★★★

COMMENTS: This nationally known coffee brand rotates its selection once a month. We enjoyed the Ethiopian coffee it sent, which was "complex" and had "blueberry" and "bittersweet chocolate" notes.



PROUD MARY COFFEE ROASTERS Surprise Me! Single Origin

PRICE: \$24.00 for 8.82 oz (\$2.72 per oz), ships free

COFFEE IN OUR SHIPMENT: Medium roast of Bourbon variety from La Fany Farm, El Salvador

COFFEE QUALITY: ★★★

SPEED: ★★★

CUSTOMER EXPERIENCE: ★

EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES: ★★★

COMMENTS: This pricey subscription sent us a highly prized variety with notes of "orange blossom" and "nougat."



BLUE BOTTLE COFFEE Single Origin Assortment

PRICE: \$25.00 for 12 oz (\$2.08 per oz), ships free

COFFEE IN OUR SHIPMENT: Light roast of Parainema variety from Ana Letis Reyes Farm, Santa Bárbara, Honduras

COFFEE QUALITY: ★★★

SPEED: ★

CUSTOMER EXPERIENCE: ★★★

EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES: ★★★½

COMMENTS: Our shipment was slow to arrive but we still enjoyed the "grassy" and "tea-like" coffee.



RECOMMENDED WITH RESERVATIONS

ATLAS Coffee Club

PRICE: \$17.00 for 12 oz (\$1.42 per oz), plus \$4.95 shipping

COFFEE IN OUR SHIPMENT: Medium roast from Kilimanjaro, Tanzania

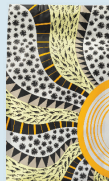
COFFEE QUALITY: ★★★

SPEED: ★★★

CUSTOMER EXPERIENCE: ★★★½

EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES: ★

COMMENTS: This subscription matched us with a Tanzanian coffee after a survey. We liked the tropical fruit notes of the coffee.



PEET'S COFFEE ROASTERS Single Origin Series

PRICE: \$19.95 for 16 oz (\$1.25 per oz), ships free

COFFEE IN OUR SHIPMENT: Dark roast from Sumatra, Indonesia

COFFEE QUALITY: ★★

SPEED: ★★★

CUSTOMER EXPERIENCE: ★★★½

EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES: ★

COMMENTS: This inexpensive box arrived 11 days past its roasted on date and little info about the coffee was provided. Also, we weren't thrilled by the taste of the coffee.



TRADE COFFEE Single Origin Subscription

PRICE: \$18.95 for 12 oz (\$1.58 per oz), plus \$1.95 shipping

COFFEE IN OUR SHIPMENT: Medium roast from Colombia and Peru, by Gimme!, a coffee roaster in Ithaca, New York

COFFEE QUALITY: ★★

SPEED: ★★★

CUSTOMER EXPERIENCE: ★★★

EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES: ★
COMMENTS: This algorithm-powered subscription matched us with a coffee with scant details and was inaccurately described as "single origin."



KEY

GOOD ★★★

FAIR ★★

POOR ★