



Your breakfast is more global than The United Nations

How a plate of toast, a cup of coffee and a bowl of cereal quietly stitch together more countries than any treaty ever has.

Breakfast without Borders

A BREAKFAST THAT QUIETLY SPANS THE GLOBE

It is 7:20 on a Tuesday morning, and somewhere a kettle is coming to the boil.

On the table: a mug of coffee, milky and unremarkable. A slice of toast, buttered, with a smear of jam. A banana, slightly bruised. Sunny-side up eggs. Perhaps a square of chocolate, sneaked in before the day gets serious. Nothing here looks like an international incident. It looks, if anything, like the least interesting meal imaginable, the one eaten half-asleep, scrolling a phone, thinking about anything except where any of it came from.

That is precisely what makes it extraordinary.

The United Nations has 193 member states and, on a good day, struggles to get a simple majority to agree on very much at all. Your breakfast, by contrast, has quietly assembled contributions from perhaps thirty countries across five continents, without a single summit, resolution or translator. The coffee beans may have been picked in the Ethiopian highlands or Brazil's Minas Gerais. The sugar might trace back to a mill in Guatemala or Mauritius. The banana was almost certainly grown in Ecuador or Costa Rica and picked green a week ago. The cocoa in your chocolate probably came from a smallholding in Côte d'Ivoire. The wheat in your toast may have grown on the Ukrainian steppe or the Canadian prairie. The butter, if it isn't local, might be Irish or New Zealand-made, having crossed an ocean in a refrigerated hold set to precisely -1°C.

Nobody voted on any of this. Nobody needed to. It happened because of something more durable than diplomacy

: price signals, shipping routes, colonial legacies, climate, and two centuries of people discovering, sometimes brutally, what the rest of the world wanted to eat.

This is the story of how that happened, and why the humble breakfast table is, quite possibly, the single best place on Earth to watch how globalisation actually works.

Coffee's long walk from Ethiopia to your kitchen



Legend has it that coffee was discovered by an Ethiopian goatherd named Kaldi, who noticed his goats dancing with unusual enthusiasm after eating red berries from a certain shrub. Whether or not Kaldi existed, the plant did, and it began its journey out of the Ethiopian highlands sometime in the fifteenth century, travelling first to Yemen, where Sufi monks brewed it to stay awake through long nights of prayer.

From there it moved with astonishing speed: Mecca, Cairo, Istanbul, Venice, and by the 1650s, London, where coffee houses became so central to commercial life that Lloyd's of London, now one of the world's great insurance markets, began as a coffee shop where merchants swapped shipping news.



Centuries later, coffee's centre of gravity looks very different. The drink that first emerged from the Ethiopian highlands is now grown on an industrial scale thousands of kilometres away. Today, world production of green coffee has reached 11.1 million tonnes in 2023, with Brazil responsible for nearly a third of the total and Vietnam producing almost a fifth. That is one of the great, under-appreciated plot twists of agricultural history: the country most associated with coffee culture, cafés, connoisseurship, "third wave" pour-overs, barely grows the stuff, while Vietnam, a country better known for rice paddies, has become a robusta superpower almost by accident.

The Vietnamese story is a textbook case of comparative advantage in action. In the 1980s, coffee was a minor crop there. Then the government, hunting for export earnings after the devastation of war and central planning, pushed farmers in the Central Highlands to plant robusta on the region's rich volcanic soil. Vietnam is now the world's second-largest coffee producer and the leading producer of robusta coffee, accounting for roughly 40% of global robusta output. That robusta is the backbone of the instant coffee in your cupboard and the crema on a cheap espresso, proof that the "best" coffee-growing country and the "biggest" coffee-growing country can be entirely different places, because comparative advantage rewards cost and climate, not romance.

Coffee is grown almost exclusively within a narrow band around the equator known, only half-jokingly, as the Bean Belt, the zone between roughly 25°N and 30°S, where altitude, rainfall and temperature align. Nearly every developed, coffee-drinking nation sits outside it. This single fact of geography— that the people who want coffee most cannot grow it, is the entire reason coffee is one of the most heavily traded agricultural commodities on the planet, changing hands on exchanges in New York and London every second of the trading day, its price rippling out to a café in Manchester within minutes of a frost warning in Paraná.

Tea, empire, and the art of rebranding a monopoly



If coffee's story is one of accidental comparative advantage, tea's is one of deliberate imperial engineering.

Tea began in China, where it had been drunk for over a thousand years before Europeans had any idea it existed. By the seventeenth century, the British East India Company was importing it in such quantities that tea became not just a drink but a fiscal obsession, taxed, smuggled, and eventually the trigger for the Boston Tea Party, an entire revolution partly ignited by a beverage.

There was a problem, though: China held a near-monopoly, and Britain was haemorrhaging silver to pay for it. The solution the East India Company reached for was not subtle. It began exporting opium grown in India into China to balance the books, precipitating the Opium Wars and one of the more shameful chapters of imperial trade history.

But the more consequential move came later, when the British realised they didn't need to buy tea from China at all; they could grow it themselves. Botanist Robert Fortune smuggled tea plants and Chinese growing expertise out of China in the 1840s, and the East India Company began planting tea across Assam and later Darjeeling and Ceylon (now Sri Lanka), using land seized under colonial rule and labour drawn from indentured and often coerced workers.

Within decades, India had gone from producing essentially no tea to rivalling and then surpassing China as the world's dominant supplier.

That colonial architecture never really disappeared; it just changed owners. Kenya, another former British colony, is now one of the world's largest tea exporters, its Rift Valley highlands producing the bright, brisk black tea that ends up in supermarket teabags across Britain and Ireland. The plantation model, large estates, smallholder outgrower schemes, auction houses in Mombasa and Colombo setting global reference prices, is a direct descendant of a system built to extract value from colonised land for consumption in the coloniser's parlour.

Your teabag, in other words, is a small artefact of empire, still following trade routes drawn up under conditions of conquest, just repackaged as a 5-dollar box from the supermarket.



Bread and the world's most geopolitical grain markets

Bread feels like the most local thing on the table; surely, of all foods, this one is made nearby? Sometimes. But the wheat in it is playing a much bigger game.

Wheat is grown across an enormous range of climates, from the Canadian prairies to the Ukrainian steppe to Punjab, which is precisely why it has become one of the most geopolitically sensitive crops on Earth. Russia and Ukraine together have, in a typical year, supplied close to a third of the world's wheat exports, with Ukraine's fertile "black earth", chernozem, among the most productive farmland on the planet.

When Russia invaded Ukraine in February 2022, and its navy blockaded Black Sea ports, the effect on breakfast tables from Cairo to Lagos was almost instantaneous.



Egypt, the world's largest wheat importer, sources the majority of its bread wheat from the Black Sea region; bread there is so politically sensitive that it is subsidised for tens of millions of people, and price spikes have historically preceded unrest. Wheat futures on the Chicago exchange jumped by double digits within days of the invasion, and it was ironic how a war fought a continent away from any bakery instantly repriced the flour in it.

This is the strange power of grain markets: they are simultaneously hyper-local and immediately global, because wheat, unlike coffee, is grown almost everywhere but traded as though it were one single, fungible pool. A bad harvest in one bread-basket nation doesn't just hurt that nation; it reallocates scarcity across the whole trading system within hours, via futures markets that most breakfast-eaters have never heard of and never need to.

The surprising economics of the humble banana



The banana on your plate performs a magic trick every single day: it travels, on average, thousands of miles, through a tightly refrigerated cold chain, and still costs less than almost anything else in the shop. Economists have a name for this oddity: the banana is possibly the most under-priced fruit in history relative to the distance it travels, and the reason lies in one of the more uncomfortable chapters of corporate and colonial history.

In the early twentieth century, American companies, most famously the United Fruit Company, later Chiquita, built entire private economies around banana cultivation in Central America: their own railways, ports, telegraph lines and, in some cases, effective control over national governments. The term "banana republic" was coined precisely because of this: countries whose politics were shaped, sometimes through outright intervention, around the interests of a single fruit company.

Modern banana trade is less lurid but structurally similar: it remains dominated by a handful of firms- Chiquita, Dole, Fresh Del Monte, that control growing, shipping and ripening, giving them enormous bargaining power over smallholder growers. Ecuador is now the world's largest banana exporter, its plantations feeding an extraordinary logistics operation: bananas are picked hard and green, cooled rapidly, shipped in refrigerated containers at a precise 13.3°C to slow ripening, then gassed with ethylene in warehouses near their destination to ripen them to order, arriving in shops at exactly the perfect yellow you expect, on a schedule tuned almost like clockwork.



There is a hidden vulnerability baked into all of this: nearly every banana traded internationally is a single variety, the Cavendish, cloned rather than grown from seed, which makes the entire global banana supply genetically almost identical, and dangerously exposed to disease. A fungal blight called Panama disease wiped out the previous dominant variety, the Gros Michel, in the mid-twentieth century, and a new strain is now spreading through Cavendish plantations across Asia, Africa and Latin America. The banana on your plate this morning may be, quite literally, a fruit racing against its own extinction event.

Chocolate and the turbulent legacy of cocoa



Switzerland has never grown a single cocoa pod in its history, and yet it is synonymous with chocolate. That paradox is the whole story: chocolate is where the gap between who grows and who profits becomes stark.



Cocoa originated in Mesoamerica, prized by the Maya and Aztec as a bitter, spiced ceremonial drink, sometimes even used as currency. Europeans sweetened it, industrialised it, and by the nineteenth century had relocated its cultivation almost entirely to colonised tropical territories, first the Caribbean and Latin America, later, decisively, West Africa.

West Africa collectively supplies about two-thirds of the world's cocoa crop, and within that, Côte d'Ivoire alone accounted for around 38% of global production in 2022, with Ghana contributing a further 19%. In Côte d'Ivoire, cocoa accounts for over 40% of the country's export income and employs roughly 600,000 farmers directly, with some six million people depending on the industry in total.

And yet almost none of the world's famous chocolate brands are West African. The value in chocolate is captured overwhelmingly downstream, in processing, branding and retail, concentrated in Switzerland, Belgium and the Netherlands, while the raw material is grown by roughly five to six million smallholder farms of under five hectares, which together produce around 90% of the world's cocoa supply.

The result is one of agriculture's starkest value-chain imbalances: many West African cocoa farmers earn less than a dollar a day, with some female farmers earning as little as around thirty cents, even as chocolate remains a multi-billion-dollar global industry.

This imbalance has driven the rise of "fair trade" and "direct trade" certification schemes, which guarantee farmers a minimum price above the volatile commodity-market rate, and of government interventions like the 'Living Income Differential' introduced by Côte d'Ivoire and Ghana, an export premium designed to push more value back to growers. It has also become entangled with deforestation: cocoa expansion has been a significant driver of forest loss in both countries, prompting a wave of EU regulation requiring chocolate sold in Europe to be certified deforestation-free, a rule now rippling all the way back through the supply chain to farmers who may never have heard of Brussels but must now prove, satellite image by satellite image, exactly which plot their beans came from.

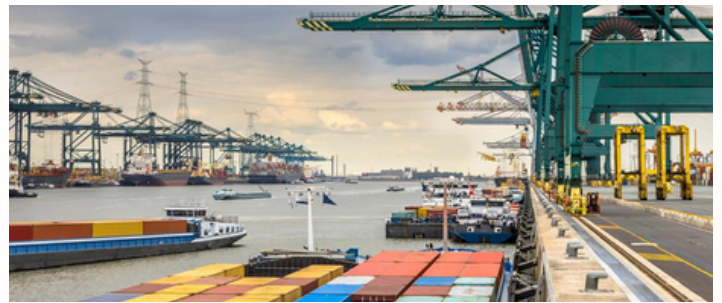
Your chocolate, in short, carries an entire unresolved argument about global fairness inside its shiny foil wrapper.

When geopolitics reaches your cereal bowl

It is tempting to imagine trade as something that happens quietly, insulated from politics, guided only by supply and demand. It isn't. Breakfast is buffeted by geopolitics as much as anything else in the global economy.

Tariffs are one obvious channel. When major economies impose duties on agricultural imports, as has happened periodically with everything from sugar to dairy, the effects show up not in headlines about "trade policy" but in the price of a family's weekly shop, several steps removed from the original dispute. Sanctions work similarly: when countries are cut off from international financial systems, their agricultural exports can be stranded even when food itself isn't formally sanctioned, because shippers, insurers and banks become unwilling to touch the paperwork.

Currency movements matter just as much, if more invisibly. Coffee, cocoa and sugar are priced internationally in US dollars. When the dollar strengthens against a producing country's currency, farmers in Brazil or Côte d'Ivoire can find themselves earning less in real terms even if the dollar price hasn't moved, while a weaker dollar can suddenly make it cheaper for importers, quietly nudging the price of a jar of instant coffee up or down before most shoppers notice the exchange rate has shifted at all.



Then there is climate change, which is fast becoming the single biggest wildcard on the breakfast table. Coffee-growing regions in Brazil and Central America are already being pushed to higher, cooler altitudes as lowland areas become too hot for quality Arabica; some models suggest that up to half of the world's current coffee-growing land could become unsuitable by mid-century. Cocoa belts in West Africa are being squeezed by erratic rainfall and rising temperatures, contributing to the recent price spikes that pushed a kilogram of cocoa beans above \$10 for the first time in decades. Banana plantations face both disease and, in low-lying coastal areas, the encroaching threat of saltwater intrusion.

This uncanny phenomenon has a way of making itself felt in the most ordinary places. It arrives not only as headlines about heatwaves or floods, but as a moment's hesitation in the supermarket aisle when a familiar chocolate bar suddenly costs more than it used to. Behind that price tag is a chain of events stretching halfway around the world: failed harvests, a warmer hillside, a disrupted rainy season, or a harvest that falls short by just a few percentage points.

Why breakfast proves globalisation is personal

There is a version of the globalisation story told in GDP figures and trade-balance spreadsheets, and it is, frankly, hard to love. It is abstract, bloodless, and easy to tune out.

But breakfast makes the abstraction concrete. It puts a human face- a Vietnamese farmer in the Central Highlands, an Ivorian cocoa grower, a Kenyan tea picker, a Ukrainian wheat farmer, a docker in Rotterdam, a refrigeration engineer in Guayaquil, onto every mouthful. It shows that comparative advantage isn't a diagram in an economics textbook; it's the reason Vietnam grows your robusta instead of your rice being grown in Brazil. It shows that colonialism isn't only a chapter in a history book; it's the reason a British teabag still traces routes first drawn by the East India Company two centuries ago. It shows that a war on the other side of the world can, within days, change the price of a loaf of bread in a country that isn't even involved in the fighting.



The United Nations exists because 193 sovereign governments decided, after catastrophic wars, that they needed a forum to coordinate deliberately. Your breakfast needed no such forum. It assembled itself, unplanned, through millions of decentralised decisions made by farmers chasing better prices, companies chasing efficiency, and consumers chasing flavour, a system so vast and so intricate that no single government, let alone any individual, actually designed it or fully controls it.

That is either faintly terrifying or quietly miraculous, depending on your mood.



It means the food on your table is extraordinarily efficient, astonishingly cheap by historical standards, and available in a variety no monarch in history ever enjoyed. It also means that table is exposed to frosts in Paraná, wars in the Black Sea, fungal blights in Southeast Asia, and shipping accidents in the Egyptian desert, in ways almost nobody sitting down to eat has any reason to think about.

So tomorrow, when the kettle clicks off, and the toast pops up, take a moment before you reach for your phone. Look at the coffee, the banana, the chocolate, the jam. You are not looking at breakfast. You are looking at a map of empires that no longer exist but whose trade routes persist, of climates that determine who grows what, of ships and ports and exchanges working, mostly invisibly, in your favour.

It is, in its own understated way, the most successful piece of international cooperation on the planet. It just never bothered to hold a summit about it.

~Avika Kapoor

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