

Review: Bob-o-link Coffee

Plainspoken Coffee. A [Coffee Review](#) for Ordinary People by Ordinary People, #48.

The backstory

I first heard about [Bob-o-link Coffee](#) on a local birding listserv. My first thought was, “Why would anyone use a grassland bird species to represent coffee?” The answer is sort of a practical one: the owners have an Illinois home on Bob-o-link Road. And the area where the producing farms are located, the Mogiana Region of São Paulo and Minas Gerais, Brazil, is so far south that few North American migrant birds spend the winter there. [Bobolinks](#) (*Dolichonyx oryzivorus*) do travel there: these small songbirds have one of the longest journeys of any North American songbird — each year they make a 20,000 km round trip! They are strictly grassland and agricultural field birds, and never found in forests*. But given their very steep population declines (in part due to pesticide exposure on rice farms in winter), they do make good ambassadors for the problems facing Neotropical migratory birds.



Tenuous link aside, Bob-o-link Coffee comes from a [group of small farmers](#) practicing sustainable production techniques, including reforestation, organic methods, protection of water resources, and careful post-harvest quality control. The effort is spearheaded by [Fazenda Ambiental Fortaleza](#) (FAF), an organic (though not USDA certified) coffee farm in the region just outside the town of Igarai. FAF also produces “[natural](#)” coffee. Not so much in the sense of a [natural \(dry\) process](#) coffee, but apparently coffee planted by merely scattering beans under a shade canopy and providing no further intervention: no chemicals, no fertilizer (not even organic compost), no pruning. Honey, vegetables, cheese and other products are also produced on the farm. FAF provides support and instruction on organic and sustainable agriculture to local farmers and volunteers from the organization [World Wide Opportunities on Organic Farms](#).

The other farmers that produce Bob-o-link Coffee are located at 900 to 1300 meters, and grow a number of arabica [varieties](#): yellow and red Bourbon, yellow and red catuai, and Mundo Novo, to name a few more common ones. What’s in a



bag of Bob-o-link Coffee might vary by crop year, so check with your roaster. Like many Brazilian coffees, this is typically dry processed. Note that this coffee is sometimes labeled as “bird-friendly,” but it is **not** certified by Smithsonian Bird-Friendly at this time (and the term “Bird-Friendly” is trademarked by Smithsonian; you must see the [Bird-Friendly seal](#) on the coffee to assure that it is certified). Bird-Friendly certified coffees must also be certified organic. Not all of the supplying farms are, which is an impediment for BF-certification.



Review(s)

We have tried this coffee in two crop years from three different roasters. Last year, we purchased it from [Klatch Roasting](#); the Bob-o-link Coffee was a regular offering. Recently, Klatch announced that it is discontinuing its relationship with FAF and will no longer carry Bob-o-link Coffee. We also bought it from Portola Handcrafted Coffee Roasters, which has since morphed into [Portola Coffee Lab](#) and no longer has online sales. This year, we were contacted by [Peter Asher Coffee and Tea Company](#) in Champaign, IL, who sent us a 12-oz bag to try. Peter Asher has been carrying this coffee for two years, the buyers have made trips to FAF. They are so impressed with the mission of FAF that they also support student visits there through the University of Illinois Office of International Programs.

Of course, as an agricultural product, coffee quality and taste can vary widely from year to year, even from the same farm(s). Further, every roaster will treat beans differently. It's hard to tell what contributed to the dramatic contrasts we experienced between crop years and roasters with the Bob-o-link Coffee, but here is what we found.

The Portola version was sold as organic, and we found it sweeter than expected, a little spicy, with a pleasant tobacco-essenced finish. However, it was always the first few sips that were most interesting, then the coffee faded a bit and veered into monochromatic territory. In general, folks were ambivalent about the coffee, so we sought it out again. We were even more disappointed in the Klatch batch. Whether prepared as a drip, Chemex, [Aeropress](#), or French press, it had a persistently tinny taste. Personally, I often tend to find a metallic aspect in many Brazilian coffees, but I wasn't alone in detecting it this time. Knowing this was a coffee with a strong backstory working toward a sustainable “brand,” we decided to wait another year before publishing a review. Indeed, the current crop year roasted by Peter Asher is barely recognizable as the same coffee.

The Peter Asher Bob-o-link Coffee was a blend of dry and pulped natural processes. From the dry aroma to the last sip, this is a coffee loaded with cocoa and chocolate, not normally what I associate with Brazilian coffees. In addition to chocolate, tasters reported (each of the following qualities more than once)



caramel, French vanilla, nuts, and butterscotch. I think you're getting the idea: this coffee was like a candy bar. The only time we picked up the metallic taste was when it was prepared in a [Chemex](#). Brewed, it was pleasantly sweet and smooth, balanced but subdued, and unremarkable. As a pourover, using a [Clever coffee dripper](#) with a longer-than-usual extraction time (5 minutes), it was fuller and more interesting. But preparation in a [French press](#) was when it had the richest chocolate tones along with a medium-bodied but creamy mouthfeel. Please start with one of these manual brewing methods to get the most out of this coffee.

Since the Peter Asher version is the current crop year and the only one of the three roasters which we tried which has the Bob-o-Link Coffee available, it is the one we rated here. At 3.75 motmots, it is one of the higher-rated coffees we have reviewed in some time. Bob-o-Link Coffee is gaining traction in the U.S. and not too hard to find online. While it would be interesting to see how it fared from other roasters, we found a winner at Peter Asher, and thank them for reaching out to us so we could give it another try!

*The [bird list from the supplying farms](#) does not, in fact, include Bobolinks.

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Revised on November 30, 2011

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