Its aroma is unmistakable. Its rich, full-bodied taste is sweetness to the lips. Blue Mountain coffee is as mellow as a cool, misty morning in the famed mountains.

Is it really the best in the world? Author Ian Fleming who lived part-time in Jamaica thought so. His literary hero, James Bond, a.k.a 007, drank no other. As Bond sits down for breakfast in “Live And Let Die,” he declares: “Blue Mountain Coffee, the most...delicious in the world.” That sentiment is shared far and wide, but it may come as a surprise to the uninitiated that in the U.S., coffee aficionados pay as much as US$50 a pound for the pleasure.

Why so much? Because supply is low and demand is high. Blue Mountain tastes like no other. Its taste is inexorably tied to geographic and climatic conditions found only in a tiny part of Jamaica. In the realm of

AS JAMES BOND SITS DOWN FOR BREAKFAST IN “LIVE AND LET DIE,” HE DECLARES: “BLUE MOUNTAIN COFFEE, THE MOST DELICIOUS IN THE WORLD.”
this exclusive land, an almost-perpetual cool mist wafts over well-drained peaks. Prime acreage in Jamaica is hard to come by. It is said, less than 30,000 acres of land is devoted to coffee production. But, only 9,000 acres between Kingston and Port Antonio are legally within the boundaries of the Blue Mountains. Only these few acres lie above the minimum requirement of 2,000 feet. Only at these higher elevations can superior beans be produced.

Jamaican coffee comes from the arabica bean, a bean far more fragile and flavorful than the robusta bean commonly grown in South America. It also has much less caffeine than ordinary coffee.

To get the best taste, Jamaican growers germinate the seeds for one to two years. They then cut off one of the two root systems before planting. Such a method makes for slow growth (five years to first harvest), but it ultimately produces a high-yield crop with optimum acidity.

The high mountain mist keeps the plants damp and cool. The average
Cloud patterns tint the mountains a misty blue. Coffee grows in the higher elevations where superior beans can be produced. The high mountain mist keeps the plants damp and cool — an average of 70 degrees, which is ideal for growing. Photo by Robert Ulrich.

temperature (70 degrees) is ideal for coffee plants. Cool, but not cold. The harvest of Blue Mountain coffee is laborious and occurs only when the beans — or cherries as they are properly called — are ripe. They are hand-picked, one at a time.

Coffee is not native to Jamaica, or the Caribbean. Its origins lie in Yemen and it was carried across the globe by Europeans. Folklore says Louis XV of France sent three plants to Martinique in 1723. Two plants died en route, the lone surviving plant ended up in Jamaica. To that, the coffee industry now owes its heritage. Coffee quickly spread through the islands.

In 1973, the government decreed that only coffee grown in a specific region of the mountain range, and processed by four estates (Mavis Bank, Silver Hill, Moy Hall and the Government Station at Wallenford), could be certified as 100 percent Blue Mountain coffee. Any other Jamaican coffee would be graded as Blended Blue Mountain Coffee (minimum 20 percent Blue Mountain), High Mountain Blend, or Low-Land coffee.

Jamaican coffee held a solid niche in the gourmet coffee market. But, in 1989, Jamaica was pounded by a violent storm. Hurricane Gilbert, packing 150-mile-per-hour winds, damaged 70 percent of the fields and factories, practically shutting down production for two years.

Identifying marks on all Blue Mountain coffee packages, assuring the premier quality, are part of the quality-control system established by the Coffee Industry Board. Package labels indicate if it is a blend or 100 percent. Because of its cost, you will not find Blue Mountain coffee served in all the island’s hotels and restaurants. However, you can buy 100 percent Blue Mountain Coffee in most local shops for considerably less. Among the most popular labels are Country Traders, Jablum and Wallenford Blue.

Is it truly the world’s best coffee? Savor a cup of your own. Surely you’ll agree with 007.®