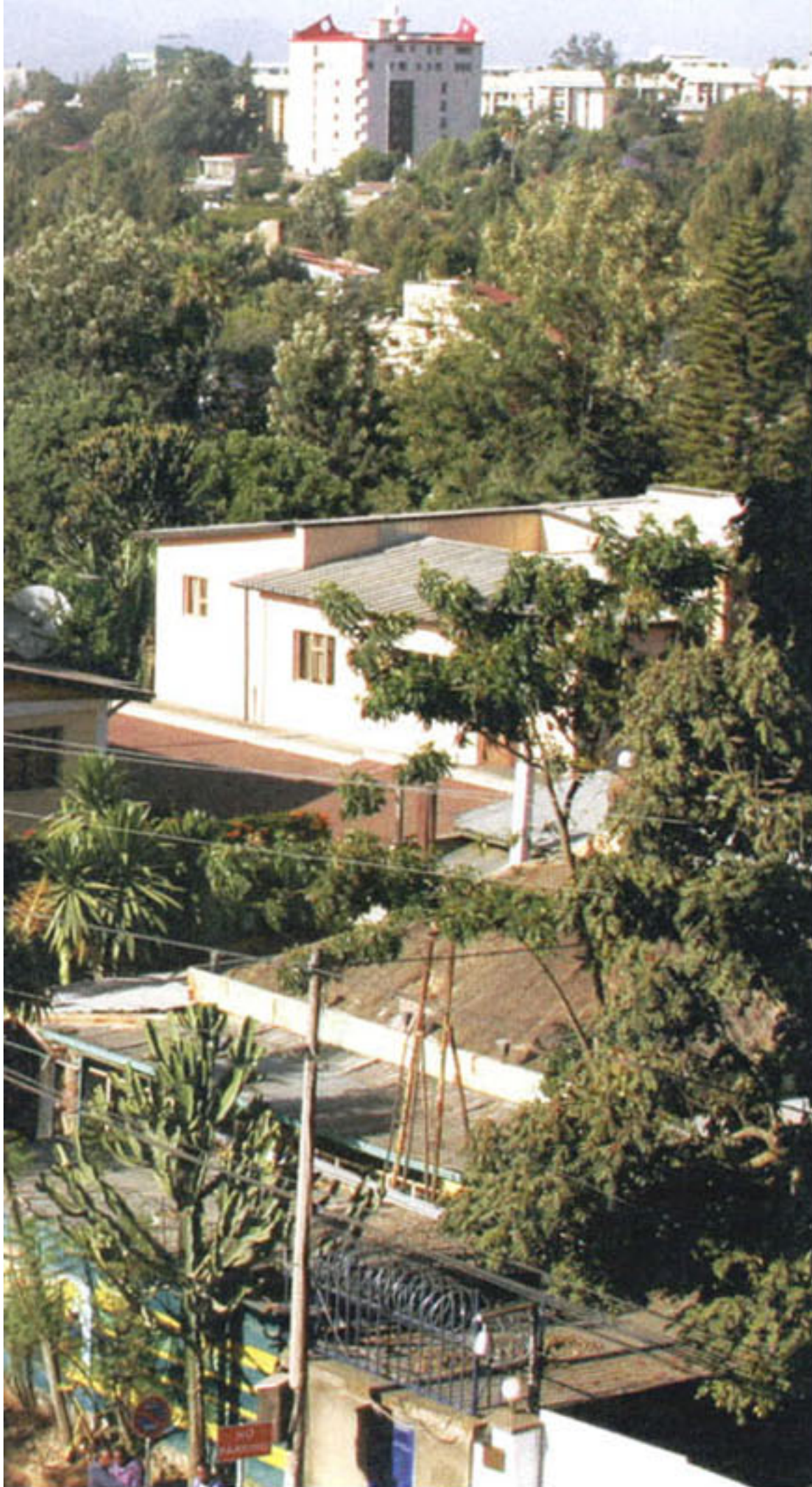


Ethiopia's Coffee Growers Eye the Specialty Market



The birthplace of *Coffea Arabica*, Ethiopia's coffee has a unique place in the market. Specialty roasters will have at least one or two different coffees from regions such as Sidamo or Yirgacheffe among their offerings to all those coffee lovers desiring a spectacular cup of Joe. Yet for all the fame, these beans are highly underpriced in the market compared to most other specialty grade coffees. In Part IV, the last article of our special series on Ethiopia, we analyze the steps Ethiopia's coffee industry is taking to seize a bigger share in the specialty market. [By Maja Wallengren](#)

The endemic poverty that marked Ethiopia for nearly 30 years is declining, and political and economic growth are becoming the norm.



Coffee in Ethiopia grows in nature so wild that white-tailed Colobus monkeys, baboons, buffalos and leopards roam farms on a daily basis.



The world's oldest coffee grower is getting back in business. Since coffee was first discovered growing in the wild of the Ethiopian forests of what constituted Southern Abyssinia in the 6th century, coffee cultivation keeps evolving. Through changing dynasties, English occupation and Italian colonization, coffee growing has always continued to grow and expand. But it wasn't until a

little over 10 years ago that the combination of new market-friendly reforms and private investments started to inject fresh life into Ethiopia's coffee industry. "Ethiopian coffees have two major advantages over all other coffees in the world: the incredible genetic diversity and the near-perfect growing conditions that are found there," said Geoff Watts, vice president of coffee at Intelligentsia Coffee, a

Chicago-based roasting company.

"The environment here plays a role as it has to be ideal for coffee production, which Ethiopia is endowed with. Ethiopia is one of the few producing countries in the world that nature has gifted in this way to produce some of the best qualities, a large share of which easily qualify as specialty," said Jemal Ahmed, chief executive at Horizon Plantations, part of the

MIDROC Group, which owns and operates a total of 25,000 hectares of coffee across Ethiopia. With the national production up over 50 percent in the last 10 years and continued growth projected for the next years to come, from growers to exporters the debate is increasingly centered on the future of Ethiopian coffee in the specialty industry.

“Ethiopian coffee is special by definition, not only in its uniquely placed Appellation Controllee, but also in its unique taste profiles that are achieved despite bad practices of agronomy,” said Heleanna Georgalis of Moplaco Trading, specialty exporters in Ethiopia. The notion that Ethiopian coffees are simply “too cheap” is a phrase often heard among buyers in the global coffee industry, especially compared with top-priced specialty grades from countries such as Guatemala and Costa Rica, both foreign and local traders agree.

“Ethiopian coffees are certainly undervalued for what they are worth. This has to do with many things including poor promotional work and marketing efforts to make the already existing special and diversified coffees that the country produces known,” said Ahmed, adding, “The

Geisha story is a good example in that countries like Panama manage to attain the highest return from this coffee whereas it was Ethiopia that gave this variety to the world but has not properly used the marketing advantage it has over the Geisha or other varieties.”

An Abundance of Coffee

Travelling through Ethiopia’s abundance of specialty coffees is a never ending journey of fascination names and regions with an almost mythical edge in the world of coffee. Extraordinary and rare coffees are

vide brilliant insight into how coffee farmers really fair in this country,” said Lucy Ward of Proud Mary Coffee roasters in Melbourne, Australia. “It is amazing to look at how much coffee that comes from Ethiopia is really just from small family backyards, trees that are grown on tiny plots of land and sold on to bigger farmers or companies for export. Up to as much as 90 percent of the total production that actually comes out of Ethiopia is from these farms and the quality that comes out of Ethiopia really is something special,” she said.

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everywhere; from the unique cupping profiles of southern Sidamo and Yirgacheffe, across the central coffee highlands of Jimma and Limmu, to the isolated northern Lake Tana home to what is known as the Monastery island coffee. “Yirgacheffe, Guji and Sidamo are for me the big three regions of Ethiopia that any coffee addict worth their salt should visit. These areas are not only in the central heartland of coffee origins but also pro-

Driving straight east from the capital of Addis Ababa, visitors arrive in Harar near the border with Somalia. This is where East meets West, where Africa meets the Arabian world and where Arab traders first started to cultivate coffee on a commercial scale. The inner center of this famed walled city is a labyrinth of tiny souks and according to the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization,

Many consumers start their love affair with Ethiopian coffee through the introduction to the beans from Sidamo or Yirgacheffe. Adventurous coffee lovers quickly move on to beans from Harar.





Nearly 90 percent of the total production that comes out of Ethiopia is from small farms—small family backyards or trees grown on tiny plots of land.

UNESCO, is considered the fourth holy city of Islam and dates back to the 7th century. The coffee here is rare in all aspects from flavor to the history it embodies. While many consumers start their love affair with Ethiopian coffee through the introduction to the beans from Sidamo of Yirgacheffe, the more adventurous coffee lovers quickly find themselves moving on to Harar. Famed for its cupping profiles with notes of blueberry and wine, this region is still stuck deep into mountains where farms literally are found in valleys carved out of dense rock. “The Harar sundried coffee is the Queen of coffees for us, it’s grown at altitudes between 1,800

and 2,200 meters and the beans has this distinct Mocca flavor of red wine and red fruits with a full body and medium acidity,” said Georgalis.

From the 13th century city gate of Harar to the deep wild forests of the Southwestern Kaffa region, Ethiopia’s coffee industry has today completed the circle with most of the new production and investment now being directed back to the roots of coffee. It was here in the Kaffa province that legend has it a goat herder named Kaldi discovered coffee after observing his flock’s rising energy levels upon eating the red cherries of the green bushes. “Do you want to stop for some Buna,” asked Addisu Beyene Tifferi, a coffee grower who *Tea & Coffee Trade Journal* accompanied to the forests where coffee still grows in nature so wild that white-tailed Colobus monkeys, baboons, buffalos and leopards roam farms on a daily basis. “The government was really eager to attract investors to the coffee sector and most of the land available was generally here in the Kaffa zone, and I wanted to do something on a more permanent basis, not just for me but for the people who live here,” said Addisu.

A businessman turned coffee grower, Addisu was one of the first to set up a private-run coffee estate in Kaffa in 1998 following the government reforms that then started opening up for private investment into the sector. Stretched out on 250 hectares, he has slowly been planting the lands run under the LemKeffa Coffee and Spices Agro Company. Today, production is picking up with most of the 220 hectares planted with coffee in production and visitors to the farm are in for a unique experience. Still a bit of a novelty in the specialty industry the name of Kaffa cof-

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fee has rapidly grown over the last few years and for good reasons: this is where scientists and researchers say the source of *Coffea Arabica* can be traced beyond evidence based on the reasoning that the source of origin for a species is defined according to where the species is found in its widest extension. The sheer amount of genetic material available in Kaffa is beyond fascinating, even to veterans in the coffee industry as Ethiopia continues to stumble upon new varieties of Arabica coffee at a pace that is mesmerizing to industry officials and scientists alone. With only a fraction of what Ethiopian coffee researchers say are some 6,000 different Arabica varieties cultivated commercially, this is where Ethiopian specialty coffee in the coming years is expected to stand out above the rest of the world's origins.

"We have 23 indigenous varieties planted in our farms all among those varieties that in the last few years have been released by the Jimma Agricultural Research Center, including Geisha and Aba Buna—the father of coffee. Most of them are so new that they still only are named by numerical codes," said Horizon's Ahmed. He said that the Southwestern forests in Ethiopia are critical for ecological purposes in protecting the environmental dynamics such as water quality and wildlife species. "Most importantly, it is the last remaining forest coffee that contains the only genetic base of Arabica coffee. Preservation of this rich biodiversity is highly significant for the well being of the wider Arabica production that is found grown in the world," Ahmed told *Tea & Coffee Trade Journal* during a



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recent visit to Kaffa. By acknowledging Ethiopia's genetic contribution to the world of coffee and the importance of preserving the source of origin and biodiversity, he said the cultivation practices of sustainable coffee farming applied in all the seven Horizon estates already are starting to be recognized. "Our first commercial micro lots of the indigenous Ethiopian Geisha was presented to the world market in the last 2013-14 crop and fetched premium prices of up to USD \$15 a pound," he said, adding that the variety obviously has to be supported by good agricultural practices in order to yield the top qualities that buyers are looking for in a specialty grade bean.

This is where the still recent arrival of private cash injections into the renovation of Ethiopia's vast formerly state-owned estates are playing a crucial role. Horizon's USD \$80 million-dollar purchase of these farms in 2013, resulted in large scale, much-needed investment in not just replanting and renovation with new Arabica varieties but, perhaps more importantly, in processing equipment and the development of modern agricultural practices, which has allowed for greater traceability and certification. "Since Horizon took over the privatized state farms, we have made considerable investment in the areas of pre and post-harvest improvement. Our main focus has been on enhancing productivity and producing coffees of high quality. This is complemented by certification programs such as Rainforest Alliance, UTZ, 4C Association, Starbucks C.A.F.E. Practices or organic that clients worldwide ask for," said Ahmed. "In order to ensure the traceability and consistency of the coffees supplied to the end client, Horizon coffee plantations have become vertically integrated from the varietal selection at the planting stage through the final export. This creates a long-term sustainable relationship for the mutual benefit of all involved and, ultimately, is helping increasing the volume of high quality traceable and certified coffees exported from Ethiopia," he said.

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Ethiopia continues to find new varieties of Arabica coffee at a pace that confounds both industry officials and scientists.

A Bountiful Future

Africa's biggest coffee producing country has gotten bigger and the world of coffee has been rejoicing around the growing volumes not only of Ethiopian coffee available in the market, but the improvements starting to show for the specialty grade beans also expanding in both lots and quality. And as the attention to improved agricultural practices is growing, Ethiopia's coffee industry is setting its sight firmly on making sure that most of its beans will reach the specialty markets across the world. "A good majority of the Ethiopian coffees have the potential to be sold in

the specialty market, where it rightfully belongs. This is not only because of the marketing story as the birthplace of coffee, but also because of the ideal growing environment and the dedicated farming community which has sustained the production of coffee from the beginning until now," said Ahmed.

The endemic poverty that marked Ethiopia for most of the last three decades is starting to come down and political stability and economic growth are becoming words that define normality rather than an exemption. Kaldi's goats can still be found roaming in the streets of Addis Ababa and even if there is still a long road ahead for Ethiopia as a country as well as for its coffee growers the country is beyond doubt on the right track. As the Ethiopian coffee industry grows along with the newfound economic opportunities for the nation's people, there is little doubt that specialty coffee will become a major part of this boom in the nearby future. "Ethiopia has so much to gain, from promoting its unique Appellation Controllee, and in encouraging good agronomy, drying and processing practices. If Ethiopia puts just half the effort into processing as Central America does, the premium will not be so difficult to obtain and no one will buy any other coffee," said Georgalis. ☕

Maja Wallengren has been writing about coffee for more than 20 years from over 40 coffee producing countries across Southeast Asia, East and West Africa and across Latin America. She may be reached at: mwallengren@outlook.com.

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