



Navigating Origins

C A M E R O O N



CAMEROON FACTS

National Name République du Cameroun

Location Sometimes referred to as the hinge of Africa, Cameroon is located in Western Africa, surrounded by Chad, Central African Republic and Gabon. The southwest coastline borders the Bight of Biafra. Cameroon, which covers 183,567 square miles, has areas of thermal springs and indications of current or prior volcanic activity.

Capital City Yaoundé

Languages French and English, plus 24 major African language groups.

Monetary Unit Communauté Financière Africaine franc

Population 16,063,678 in 2004

Climate Varies with terrain, from tropical along the coast to semi-arid and hot in the north.

Agricultural Exports Coffee, cocoa, cotton, rubber, bananas, oilseed, grains, root starches, livestock and timber.

Characteristics

Rich volcanic soil, high altitude, adequate rainfall—all of these things make Cameroon an ideal place for growing great coffee.

“Cameroon coffee probably has the most going for it of any country in the world,” says Rob Kramer, roaster and founder of Island Coffee and one of the founders of Farmers Cooperative Initiatives, a program designed to help Cameroon farmers improve the quality and marketability of their coffees. “It has the perfect environment, great soil conditions and a good labor market.”

However, as is true of many origin countries, Cameroon struggles with a poor infrastructure, corrupt governing bodies and a lack of quality-control—all of which make it difficult to consistently produce the level of coffee that the terrain would suggest.

A large percentage of Cameroon’s coffee is robusta, grown in all provinces except the north, while arabica is mainly produced in the high altitudes of the west, northwest and east. The western highlands of Cameroon, where much of the coffee is grown, averages about 5,000 feet above sea level and has two distinct seasons, the rainy season (April–Oct.) and the dry season (Nov.–March)

Farms

Most of Cameroon’s coffee is grown by small landowners on plots of two to 10 hectares, and nearly all of it is grown in mixed-cropped farms. “Cameroon arabica is largely grown by small-scale farmers, often in multi-crop farms,” says Matti Foncha, one of the founders of Mutana and Farmers Cooperative Initiatives. “Its unique profile comes from the rich volcanic soil as well as from the benefits of growing in a diversified crop environment.”

In order to sustain themselves and provide food for their families, many coffee farmers in Cameroon grow other crops as well, often planted among the coffee trees.

“Shade-grown would be a silly word to describe this coffee,” says Kramer. “Coffee is free-range, meaning it grows with whatever else is grown in the area. So they’re not susceptible to fungus or pests, because they’re not close together, but it is hard to pick because a lot of the trees are eight to 10 feet tall.”

Typically, the coffee is farmer-washed

and organically grown (although only a few farmers, such as Hill Top Mixed Farming and Agro Forestry Farms, are certified-organic—the rest are passively organic). “Ripe cherries are picked from trees by hand and loaded in water drums from which poor cherries are removed,” says Foncha. “Coffee is immediately de-pulped using small hand-cranked de-pulpers.”

The de-pulped cherries are then fermented for 24 to 36 hours, rinsed and sun-dried on woven mats. Once the coffee is dry, it is delivered to the mill where the export processing and bagging takes place.

History

By most accounts, coffee was introduced to Cameroon by the Germans in 1905, but it wasn’t until 1929 that arabica was cultivated effectively, thanks to the introduction of a Jamaican variety that was raised by an experimental station at Dschang.

After that, coffee took off within the country. Arabica was produced by small growers in the Dschang, Bamenda and Foumban regions, while robusta was grown at experimental stations at Ebolowa.

However, in the late 1980s, low coffee prices caused farmers to abandon coffee production. It wasn’t until higher prices returned in the mid-’90s that farmers again began to see coffee as a sustainable crop.



Changes were happening inside the country during that time as well. “The most significant recent change in the Cameroon coffee industry happened in the early ’90s with the ending of government direct help to farmers in the form of subsidized fertilizers,” says Foncha. “This, coupled with the decline of the price of coffee, forced many coffee farmers to abandon or destroy their coffee trees and to diversify their farms.”

Now, 10 years later, the majority of farmers grow their coffee “naturally,” and some have organized themselves into small cooperatives. Others have collaborated with groups such as Farmers Cooperative Initiatives and Mutana to have their coffee certified organic and presented to the world markets. “Recently, multinational food companies, such as Kraft Foods and Sarah Lee, have made attempts to set standards to meet their specific requirements,” Foncha says.



Future Steps

Despite these improvements, there is still a long way to go. “Benefits of liberalization of the agricultural sector of the economy are offset by continued rampant corruption in government and administrative services,” Foncha says.

In addition, Cameroon’s farmer-level processing is seen as both a strength and a weakness within the coffee industry. On one hand, when it is done properly, this individual processing allows the flavor of the bean to come through. On the other hand, it makes it difficult to maintain consistent quality and appearance.

“Access to funding will allow small farmers’ groups to construct centralized washing stations and will overcome the problem of the non-uniform appearance of the green coffee from farmer to farmer,” says Foncha. Some of the coffees, such as Cameroon Boyo, have shown significant improvements in bean appearance and cup profile over the last six years thanks to the direct collaboration between the farmers and facilitators such as Farmers Cooperative Initiatives and Mutana.

Programs such as Farmers Cooperative Initiative, which was started in 1998 by Matti

Foncha, Bill Harris and Rob Kramer, are designed to create a solution to the financial difficulties of growing coffee in the country. The goal is to improve the quality of the coffee by standardizing the processing and thus demand a greater price on the market. “We’re trying to get them to make a better product so it’s worth more on the world market,” says Kramer of his work with Farmers Cooperative Initiatives. “What’s going to help the farmers is to have them make better coffee so they can market it to a broader audience.”

Since the program started, Kramer says he can already see an improvement in the quality of the coffee that arrives at his roastery. In the beginning, he says, the coffee was often over- or under-fermented or over- or under-dried. “The first year the coffee came in it looked like dried corn,” he says. However, each year the quality and consistency have continued to improve and he has high hopes for the future of Cameroon coffee and its farmers. “The coffee is getting better, and it’s a place where we feel that we can really make a difference—if we can in fact create a \$200 to \$300 increase in a farmer’s income for the year, we make a huge change in someone’s lifestyle.”

Taste Test

When properly and consistently processed, Cameroon coffee has it all: a full-bodied, earthy, chocolaty flavor profile, along with a well-rounded finish with hints of red berries.

“Cameroon used to be considered a filler coffee,” says Kramer. “But it has a great body, a nice snappy acidity and a real earthy, volcanic profile. There are some chocolate tones as well and a finish that is slightly fruity, reminiscent of currants. You don’t have to ‘kill’ this coffee by over-roasting it to get a great flavor profile out of it.”

Cameroon also offers a unique coffee: longberry, the country’s version of a peaberry. “They’re called longberries because they look more like footballs than peaberries,” says Kramer. “And they offer a milder cup because they roast differently on the outside than they do on the inside.”

“We love to take our longberries and dark roast them,” adds Kramer. “You get all this great complexity because the interior is modestly roasted, while the outside is black.”



CAMEROON COFFEE AT A GLANCE

Coffee Nearly 85 percent of Cameroon’s coffee is robusta, with the remainder being mostly arabica and arabusta.

Export Countries France, Germany, Italy, Belgium, Japan, the United States and the Netherlands

Farms The majority are smallholder farms averaging two to 10 hectares. Nearly all of the coffee is grown in mixed crop farms.

Flowering December–January

Harvest September–February

Processing Ripe cherries are picked manually and loaded into water drums where they are sorted. Coffee is de-pulped by hand and then fermented, rinsed and patio-dried.

Shipments Almost year-round, with the majority of coffee being shipped in May, June and July.

Flavor Cameroon coffee is a full-bodied, fine acidic coffee with an overall earthy flavor and dried chocolate tones. It offers a well-rounded finish with hints of currants.



Photos courtesy of Matti Foncha