



Navigating Origins

E A S T T I M O R



EAST TIMOR FACTS

Location An independent republic in Southeast Asia, located northwest of Australia in the Lesser Sunda Islands at the eastern end of the Indonesian Archipelago. In addition to the eastern half of the island of Timor, East Timor includes the Oecussi region on the northwest portion of the island of Timor, and the islands of Pulau Atauro and Pulau Jaco.

Area 15,007 sq. km., slightly larger than Connecticut

Capital Dili

Languages Two official languages: Tetum and Portuguese. Also Indonesian, English and 16 indigenous languages including Galole and Kemak.

Monetary Unit US dollar

Population 1,040,880

Terrain Mountainous, reaching its highest point on Mt. Tatamailau at 2,963 m.

Climate Tropical, with monsoons from December to March. The north coast is arid, with a severe dry season. Floods and landslides are common, as are earthquakes, tsunamis and cyclones.

Agricultural Exports Coffee, rice, maize, cassava, sweet potatoes, soybeans, cabbage, mangoes, bananas, vanilla.

Coffee

East Timor's coffee is not a household name by any stretch of the imagination. And the truth is, the day when the average consumer walks up to the counter and asks for it is probably a long time coming. But East Timor's coffee has a story that is unlike any other; it is this story, coupled with the passion of those who believe in the coffee's—and the growers'—future, that has the potential to bring the country's coffee to consumers.

A relatively young country, East Timor (formerly known as Portuguese Timor) was invaded and occupied by Indonesia beginning in 1975. It wasn't until 1999 that Indonesia relinquished control of the territory, allowing it to achieve its full independence in 2002. But the country's occupation is only part of the story when it comes to coffee.

"The history of coffee in Timor is that Portugal forced everyone on the island to plant coffee in order to make money," says Scott Reed of Royal Coffee. "But the growers' only involvement was to harvest the coffee. That's it. Historically, the coffee has been pretty poor out there just because it wasn't considered worthwhile and the coffee was poorly processed afterwards."

Now that East Timor has gained its independence, though, changes are happening within its coffee industry. Much of that change is coming from USAID programs, which are helping farmers form co-ops, introducing wet mills to the area and providing vehicles to deliver coffee to the mills more quickly.

Sam Filiaci, director of the SE Asian Program of the National Cooperative Business Association (NCBA) first traveled to East Timor in 1993 at the request of USAID. His job was to explore the potential of several economic development activities, including coffee. "After researching several different, primarily agricultural sectors there, we found that the smallholder coffee production sector had very high potential for development

into specialty organic production grades," he says. "If properly developed, the income gains for more than 100,000 farmers and family members—nearly one-seventh of the population—could be substantial."

There are two other facts that make East Timor's coffee story even more interesting. First, it has its own coffee hybrid. "The main variety, *hybrido da Timor*, dates back to the coffee planted in the Portuguese pre-World War II colonial period," says Filiaci. "Very little coffee has been planted in the country since the 1930s."

The second fact is that East Timor is one of the rare producing countries whose citizens actually consume their own coffee.

"They roast it right there at the market," says Reed. "It's very much Ethiopian style, in a pan out in the open."



Cultivation

Most origin countries have all the elements necessary to grow great coffee. Poor processing might take its toll on quality, but most at least start with the basics: good soil, great altitude, the right weather conditions. Not East Timor. With its arid climate and short rainy season, East Timor is actually the antithesis of a good coffee-growing region. "Soils are very marginal and of low fertility," says Filiaci. "The coffee-growing areas, mainly in the Ermera, Liquica, Aileu and Ainaro districts, are located on very steep terrain and are mostly found between altitudes of 1,000 to 1,600 meters above sea level."

Despite these hurdles, both geographically and politically, there is much hope for East Timor's coffee industry.

Part of that hope rests on East Timor's passive coffee-growing process. Cultivation is the definition of rustic: most coffee is allowed to grow untended on small, one-hectare farms, partly for ease and possibly in accordance with the cultural beliefs of the growers, including animism, or the belief that "everything is conscious." Unpruned trees can reach up to



25 feet and are often shaded by first-growth shade trees. "The only farming practice is harvest," Reed says.

While this lack of structure might seem like just

another hurdle to add to the list, it actually has one big benefit: the entire coffee crop is passively organic, as fertilizers and pesticides were never introduced to the country. In addition, 100 percent of the coffee is shade grown; the sun is so hot that coffee plants cannot survive without shade trees. In addition, making big improvements in the country's coffee is only a shear snip away—just by pruning the trees regularly, the growers could see an increase in both yield and quality.

Moving Forward

The USAID program has played a large role in helping the country move forward. "Our project, funded by USAID since the mid-1990s, has radically changed the way coffee has been harvested, processed and sold," says Filiaci. "Prior to that, farmers, with very little water resources on the farm, would usually strip-harvest cherry of various maturity, dry process it on their farms, and sell dry parchment to traders in the capital city of Dili at very low prices and quality."

So far, the project has developed transport systems to pick up the cherry from the farms

each day during harvest and transport it to one of the two new large-capacity wet-processing stations. From there, it is wet-processed, fermented, washed, skin-dried and transported to a large-capacity solar drying facility in Dili. After about eight days of sun-drying and three weeks of parchment resting, it is then dry-processed and double-hand-sorted at modern new facilities in Dili.

Recent infrastructure improvements, as well as management upgrades, have also made big improvements. Currently, nearly 20,000 small organic and fair-trade farmers are members of the coffee cooperative. Since 2000, the project has also provided free health care to growers via 10 fixed and mobile clinics.

Still, there is much to be done. East Timor has a very short harvest season, and the two wet-processing facilities are often overloaded, handling up to 600,000 kgs. each day. "Such large capacity has often strained management and transport capacities, water resources and wastewater treatment facilities—especially during large crops," says Filiaci.

Future

So, what does East Timor have to offer the specialty coffee industry? When everything goes correctly, from the pruning and picking to the processing, what is the coffee like? Despite everything, well-processed East Timors can offer a heavy body, mild acidity and a cleaner taste than their Sumatran cousins. Some of the best include the sweet cedar finish that is common in Indonesian coffees. "East Timor coffees can have more acidity and more body than Javas and, depending on the elevation and region, you can get a really nice spiciness out of them," Reed says.

Originally used mainly as replacement coffees and as Java substitutes, East Timors are just beginning to stand on their own merit. "I think people are starting to see them as more than a replacement coffee," Reed says. "They're being used in a lot of different ways: French and light roasts, espresso blends. They're pretty versatile."



EAST TIMOR COFFEE AT A GLANCE

Coffee Washed arabica mostly typica and *hybrido da Timor*

Flavor Reminiscent of a clean Sumatra with good body, low-acidity and a bit of spiciness in the finish.

Main Growing Regions Maubesse, Aifu, Ermera, Liquica, Aileu and Ainaro

Elevation 1,000–1,600 meters

Farms Slightly larger than one hectare; 100 percent passive organic and shade-grown.

Harvest May–October

Processing Wet-processed and sun-dried

Shipping July–November

Main Buyers The U.S. purchases about 80 percent



Photos of East Timor courtesy of David Boyce