



Navigating Origins

Z A M B I A



ZAMBIA FACTS

Name Republic of Zambia

Location Landlocked country in southern Africa. Surrounded by Tanzania (Northeast), Zaire (Northwest), Angola and Namibia (West), Zimbabwe and Botswana (South) and Mozambique and Malawi (Southeast).

Area 290,586 square miles, about the size of Texas

Capital Lusaka

Languages English is the official language; major vernaculars include Bemba, Kaonda, Lozi, Lunda, Luvale, Nyanja, Tonga; 70 other indigenous languages.

Monetary Unit Zambian kwacha (ZMK)

Population 11,261,795

Terrain Mostly high plateau, some hills and mountains.

Climate Tropical, with a rainy season from October to April.

Agricultural Exports Cotton, coffee, cashews, tobacco, corn, vegetables, flowers and sugar.



Zambia Coffee

If there is one African country that earns the award for being the most overlooked in the specialty coffee industry, it would have to be land-locked Zambia. The country is so overlooked, in fact, that many roasters don't even have it on their radar. Which is understandable, considering that it's surrounded by big players in the industry—Kenya and Tanzania, to name a few.

“Zambia's reputation in the United States coffee market has many opportunities to improve simply because not many roasters and importers are aware of Zambia coffee and the potential Zambia offers as a single origin,” says Willem Boot, an international coffee consultant, a connoisseur of Zambian coffee and one of the founders of the East African Fine Coffee Fest. “Buyers in North America, Europe and Japan hardly have any image of Zambia as a coffee producer and supplier.”

Zambia has the potential to move out of the shadow and into the limelight sooner rather than later. The country boasts good elevation, solid bourbon cultivars, high quality standards and well-developed processing techniques.

“Almost 50 percent of all coffee produced in Zambia is bourbon and this makes the coffee highly attractive to specialty coffee consumers,” says Boot. “Coffee professionals that are familiar with Zambia coffee know how clean and consistent it is. This is because the Zambian industry has one of Africa's most advanced centralized coffee milling operations.”

Quality Zambia coffee shows classic East African characteristics, including a medium to high level of acidity, medium body, sweet aftertaste and good balance. The fragrance is clean and bright fruit, often with floral, fragrant, citrus notes. Flavors lean toward lemon, chocolate, vanilla, apple, apricot and honey. The mouthfeel is syrupy and creamy.

“I have often said that Zambian Coffee is Africa's best kept secret,” says Bagie Sherchand, senior agricultural economist for Development Alternatives, Inc. “Zambian coffee offers a soft and smooth body, wrapped in an almost ephemeral lemony flavor. It enjoys good to excellent acidity, creates a very clean cup and imparts a good level of balance.”

Cultivation

Coffee was introduced into the northeastern areas of Zambia by missionaries in the 1950s, with seed stock from Tanzania and Kenya. The country's coffee production began in earnest in the early '70s, thanks to funding by the World Bank and the Food and Agricultural Organization. Today, total coffee production stands around 8,000 tons.



Growing conditions are similar to Zimbabwe and Malawi, and somewhat comparable to Kenya. Coffee regions in Zambia are defined by geographical location, as well as by rainfall and elevation. However, the regions are not well defined, other than by general terms

of southern, central, copperbelt and northern. Traditionally, the cultivar of choice was bourbon, until bouts with insects and diseases forced the country to begin switching to catimor. However, in the last two and a half years, the Coffee Board began to reintroduce bourbon varieties.

Coffee is grown in full sun, often with sophisticated methods for irrigation, fertilization and other chemical application. Because of the country's late start in the coffee industry, it has been able to apply the newest technologies to its cultivation practices, including composting coffee pulp, bio-diversity, and chemical and biological control of pests.

Although various efforts have been made to increase Zambia's smallholders, the majority of coffee is grown by larger producers,

most of whom cultivate coffee plantations of 500 hectares or more. In the northeast, coffee production is dominated by African Plantations Corporation, an Austrian-owned company. The majority of the larger estates are well-organized, and often have good systems and equipment in place for cultivation and production. Trees are healthy and well-managed.

These large farms also have production down to a science—weed control, fertilization, water management and other practices are sound, as are harvesting and processing practices. Much of this is thanks in part to the help of World Bank, which has not only helped provide this technology, but has also sponsored travel and education for Zambian farmers.

Smallholder farms, on the other hand, are not as stable. They typically measure .25 to .5 hectares. Trees are grown in the traditional manner of full sun, late-field burning and without sufficient fertilizers to produce consistent specialty-grade coffee. A lack of water is still a major concern, but intercropping methods are beginning to be used to alleviate the problem. Quality control at the processing level lacks some of the sophistication and techniques of the larger plantations.

Hurdles & Progress

Like most African coffee countries, Zambia is facing some major obstacles as it tries to move

forward in the specialty industry. First, there's the image problem. Being off most roasters' radar screens, Zambia doesn't need to improve its image so much as it needs to actually create one.

Zambia also needs to overcome problems with consistency and quality, many of which are due to transportation issues. “There are major challenges for Zambia since it is a land-locked country and all coffee must be transported by truck or train through the neighboring countries,” Boot says. The increased use of varieties catering to pest and disease issues instead of flavor could also become a problem as the quality bourbons are replaced with catimor varieties.

However, in other ways Zambia is well ahead of its time for being such a young coffee country. Much of this progress is due to organizations at work within the country. The Zambia Coffee Growers Association (ZCGA), which represents the private sector, and the Coffee Board of Zambia, which represents the public sector, worked together to bolster the coffee industry.

In addition, a young non-profit organization called the Zambia Agribusiness Technical Assistance Center (ZATAC Ltd.) works to provide organizational, enterprise and financial support to Zambia's smallholders so that they are able to better participate in specialty

coffee production. All three organizations are currently collaborating on an initiative funded by the USAID so that smallholder producers are able to participate in and gain from specialty coffee production.

“Zambia is a new exciting African origin for specialty coffee,” says Sherchand. “Because it is a young entrant to the specialty coffee world, its coffee culture is not too deeply embedded, but this is rapidly beginning to change. Zambia is taking heed and beginning to develop a specialty coffee culture in earnest.”



ZAMBIA COFFEE AT A GLANCE

Coffee More than 50 percent Bourbon, although much of this is being replaced by catimor varieties, due to concerns about Coffee Berry Disease.

Flavor Clean and bright, well-balanced. Fragrance and aroma often have floral and citrus notes with hints of berry, nut and vanilla. Good coffees can show flavors of lemon, apple, apricot, cucumber, maple syrup, vanilla and butter.

Main Growing Regions Coffee is produced primarily in the country's high rainfall regions, primarily in the central, northern and copperbelt provinces. Coffee is also grown in the hills of the southern province.

Elevation 900–2,000 meters

Farms The majority of the industry is run by large coffee producers, most of whom have farms of 200 hectares or more. Smallholders make up a very small percentage of the farms, but are growing in numbers.

Flowering Oct.–Nov.

Harvest April–Sept.

Shipping June–March

Processing 90–95 percent wet-processed.

Main Buyers Germany, Switzerland, the Netherlands, Belgium.



Photos by Willem Boot