

M A L A W I

BY ALECO CHIGOUNIS



MALAWI FACTS

Name Republic of Malawi

Capital City Lilongwe

Location South Central Africa, bordered to the East and South by Mozambique, to the West by Zambia and to the North by Tanzania.

Area 365 miles long and 52 miles wide

Geography Contains three lakes, the largest of which, Lake Malawi (also known as Lake Nyasa) is the 3rd largest on the continent and 9th largest in the world.

Population 13,000,000

Climate Sub-tropical with a rainy season ranging from November to June.

Agricultural Exports Tobacco, tea, sugar, cotton, coffee, peanuts, wood products



Flag of Malawi

I'M NEVER EXACTLY sure what to expect on my first visit to a new coffee-producing origin and on my first Malawi visit, I was even more uncertain of what I would encounter. In some origin countries, like Central America and even South America, there are many similarities when it comes to coffee production—many of the varieties are the same, the process is fairly standard and the terrain, cultures and bureaucratic roadblocks are somewhat manageable. But in Africa, each country, each region, feels completely different. One must wade through the thick, diverse cultural barriers and trade bureaucracies before even getting the opportunity to potentially impact the quality. I had little knowledge of Malawi before my visit, only what I had researched.

We arrived at Lilongwe around mid-day and embarked on a five-hour journey north to coffee country and the town of Mzuzu. The change in landscape along the way was fantastic as we progressed out of arid Central Malawi into the greener northern provinces. Rocky plateaus and tumbleweed quickly turned to verdant hills and lush, tropical vegetation. We could feel coffee country upon us.

Malawi has a long history as a coffee origin—the first coffee seedlings were introduced there by the British in 1891. Despite being a land-locked country, Malawi has managed to create an agriculture-based economy, with its main exports being tobacco, tea and, of course, coffee. Part of the reason for its success in coffee is that it's



one of the few African coffee-producing countries that is able to trade its coffee directly, away from government-controlled auction systems.

However, Malawi has traditionally only differentiated its coffee quality as grade 1 or grade 2 without any importance given to cup quality. This is, of course, traditional in our industry and will likely change in Malawi as it has elsewhere. Already in recent years, the Malawian coffee industry has adopted the more typical African system of classifying coffee by bean size. AAA, AA and AB are now the common grades found for differentiating coffee in the country.

Malawi is an interesting origin in that production is comprised primarily of two varieties: Ethiopian Gesha and catimor. The Gesha varietal seeds were brought to Malawi several decades ago due to its resistance to fusarium wilt, a disease which dries out the main vertical, or orthotropic, stem.

SL28, a Kenyan Bourbon mutation developed by Scott Laboratories decades ago, is also of outstanding quality and is being offered to producers around the producing regions of the country.

Production of SL28 has yet to reach any significant levels though. Catimor, a robusta/arabica hybrid is of inferior quality but very high yield. Producers are now being monetarily encouraged to plant the higher quality varieties of Gesha and SL28. Gesha and SL28 cherry receive higher premiums at the washing stations as opposed to catimor seeds. Unfortunately with a much higher yield, new catimor seedlings are still being planted around Malawi.

Still, the future of the country likely lies in its Gesha varietal. In fact, it was my interest in this varietal that landed me in Khanga and the Mzuzu Hills. As we wound through the dusty hills of Khanga, our guide stopped the pick-up truck and pointed us towards some Gesha trees. I'm used to the tall, dangly armed Central American varieties but what I was looking at was much shorter, thicker and rounder. It was reminiscent of the Jember varietal found in Indonesia. Closer inspection revealed excellent nodal spacing on the branches, which is a good indication of top quality producing varieties.

All Malawian coffee is traditionally fermented, meaning the mucilage is removed, and then fully washed of any remaining solids that would potentially create rot and, therefore, destroy the integrity of the coffee. After being harvested, the coffee is depulped and transported to fermentation tanks. The mucilage-laden coffee is left in these tanks anywhere from 24 hours to several days, depending on weather conditions, to allow bacteria to develop on the beans which decomposes the mucilage from the beans. The coffee beans are dried on raised beds and stored at the mill before being prepared for shipment.

In the future, varietal separation of ripe cherry at the siphon, along with meticulous processing, will be crucial to Malawi differentiating itself in the specialty coffee marketplace.

As always, we'll have to wait for truth to show itself on the cupping table. Gauging expectations from the cupping table in Mzuzu, I expect the top lots to be fairly reminiscent of washed Ethiopian Yirgacheffe coffees with a floral fragrance, lemon-lime acidity, some stone fruit flavor and clean, milk chocolate finish.

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MALAWI COFFEE AT A GLANCE

Coffee Arabica-Gesha, Catimor, SL28, Caturra, Population 3 (Malawian hybrid)

Cup Profile Medium acidity, medium body, good sweetness

Flavor Range Sweet citrus, berries, fleshy fruits, floral, tea, chocolate

Main Growing Regions Blantyre (south), Mzuzu (north)

Altitude 900–1,500 meters

Flowering Dec.–Feb.

Harvest May–Sept.

Ports Dar Es Salaam, Tanzania; Beira, Mozambique; Durban, South Africa

Grades AAA screen 19+, AA screen 18+, AB screen 16+, C, PB, E, TT

Processing Wet

Fermentation Traditionally done primarily in tanks, but also with some mechanical demucilagers

Plant Density 900 to 8,000 trees per hectare

Biggest Challenges Getting coffee to port (logistical and financial), unripe picking, over-drying