

Navigating Origins

UGANDA BY NEIL BALKCOM

UGANDA IS THE country Winston Churchill famously called the Pearl of Africa. In his 1908 book *My African Journey*, Churchill wrote, “My journey is at an end, the tale has been told... what message I bring back. It can be stated in three words: Concentrate upon Uganda!”

After nearly a century of neglect, it seems as if the Ugandan coffee sector is getting what Churchill prescribed. As members of the European, Japanese and American specialty coffee community start concentrating on Uganda, we are seeing regions of this country emerge as producers of premium coffees. Within this emergence, there has been a shift in the way farmers and exporters think about their coffee—a shift away

from rewarding quantity and toward rewarding quality. This is happening in both robusta and arabica sectors. With higher standards comes a greater need for traceability, something not necessary for commodity coffee, but vital for quality control or certification.

BIRTHPLACE OF ROBUSTA

Whereas Ethiopia is known as the birthplace of arabica coffee, Uganda is the likely home of robusta. This lowland varietal was cultivated heavily by the British, and today Uganda remains the world's

second-largest exporter of robusta.

Considered by many as an inferior bean, robusta has long had a stigma attached to it. With the proper husbandry, robusta can produce a stellar cup and many in the industry recognize it as a valuable, though limited, ingredient in espresso blends.

Certain groups are trying to make sure that the husbandry of Ugandan robusta is proper and consistent. Spearheading this effort are groups such as LEAD (Livelihoods and Enterprises for Agricultural Development), a USAID project charged with improving coffee quality and farmer incomes in Uganda. The Coffee Quality Institute (CQI) is also involved; in August 2009, CQI hosted a conference in which one task was to establish protocols for grading the quality of robusta. Ted Lingle, executive director of CQI, believes Uganda robusta will soon come out of the shadows. “In my opinion Uganda is going to end up a major supplier of high-quality robusta coffees due to their history, tradition and experience in producing washed robusta

coffees, just like Colombia is a major supplier of high-quality arabica coffees,” Lingle says.

About 85 percent of Uganda's coffee is robusta, as *Coffea canephora* (robusta) trees have a higher yield than *Coffea arabica* species coffee.

In addition to challenges at the farm level, hurdles such as replication exist in the marketplace. “The greatest barrier to introducing robusta coffees in the U.S. market is finding reliable sources,” Lingle says. “Roasters won't develop markets for coffee offerings that can't be repeated. The underlying idea behind our robusta workshops is to develop the

standards for 'fine robusta coffees' that will define the product and facilitate the trading of these coffees.”

By inserting differentiation into the process and having certified graders categorizing robustas, we are bound to see not only an increase in exports to specialty markets, but in quality as well. Now robusta farmers will have incentives—just as arabica farmers do—to produce better coffee.

THE ARRIVAL OF ARABICA

Arabica was first planted in Uganda about 100 years ago. Today, most of the country's arabica is grown on the foothills of 4,321-meter Mt. Elgon in the southeast, along Uganda's border with Kenya. The Bugisu district, the powerhouse of the country's arabica production, nearly covers Mt. Elgon. Thought to be one of the oldest volcanoes on the continent due to the expansiveness of its base, Mt. Elgon provides rich soil to the producers along its slopes. The lush landscape of coffee is inter-cropped with matoke (a type of banana), beans, maize and avocados, creating bio-diverse environments.

There are several sub-regions

within the country that are working to stand out as the premier cultivators of premium coffees. The Kapchowra area on the north side of Mt. Elgon, abutting the Bugisu region, is one of the most developed. The farmers of Kapchowra are actually of a different tribe, the Sebei, whose culture and language are shared more with the ruling tribe in Ethiopia than with the Bugisu tribe of Uganda.

Producer groups here are making a concerted effort to distinguish themselves with their own region, as traditionally the Kapchowra-grown coffees have been pooled in under the larger Bugisu name. Recently, the Uganda Coffee Development Authority (UCDA) has modified export approval rules allowing for mixed containers and new names for emerging sub-regions. Washing stations are being built and farmer groups are also well structured and unionized. In addition to Kapchowra, other emerging sub-regions include Okoro in West Nile on the Congolese border, as well as Banda in the southwest, which is a front-runner for washed robusta.

Average smallholder arabica farms of about .36 hectare (about .9 acre) each produce the country's fine arabica coffee (mostly typica and kent varieties), which totals 15 percent of the nation's coffee crop.

GROWING PAINS AND TRANSFORMATION

The challenge for Uganda's producers is to improve the quality of their beans, despite poor transportation systems and infrastructure issues. Exporters and importers of Ugandan coffee are now placing a greater emphasis on traceability, which will help identify successes and pinpoint areas where improvement is needed.

Traceability, anywhere, is a mammoth struggle: think about the task of tracking hundreds of thousands of beans across hundreds of miles back to thousands of farmers, every day. However, without traceability you cannot know who produces the good coffee, you cannot separate the bad coffee and you cannot provide supply-chain

accountability. Tracing coffee back to the producer is a simple concept in theory (*I know that this coffee I'm buying was grown by this farmer processed this way, this long ago*), but in practice, it is a difficult chore that can be expressed with this adage: “If you love law and sausage, never watch either being made.”

In Uganda, the issue and importance of traceability has typically been last to reach the farmer, who is paid by the kilogram regardless of where that kilogram came from. While the proof that accountability can pay is new to farmers, the separation of weekly lots—even daily lots—and micro-regions is becoming more common, particularly in the harvest season of 2009. Export groups that may have seen traceability as unimportant in the past are now discussing and implementing it seriously on the ground and view it as intrinsically tied to quality. Great headway is being made as exporters and importers place a stronger emphasis on traceable coffee and as Uganda itself cultivates a culture of coffee consumption, not just production.

Coffeehouses like Café Pap, Café Mocha and 1000 Cups Coffee House are making great efforts to bring a cafe culture to Kampala, Uganda's capital. At 1000 Cups, nearly all of the growing regions of Uganda are represented, with arabica and robusta offerings sharing the menu. The 1000 Cups Coffee House has had some acclaim as well, winning an international award for its work in supporting farmers in Mukono, just east of Kampala.

This fall, the annual Uganda Barista Championship was held. The event was sponsored by the East African Fine Coffees Association (EAFCA) and the UCDA, two organizations that are at the helm of quality improvements from the farmer level to the barista level. Robert Mbabazi of Flavours Coffee Bar in Jinja—a city at the source of the Nile on the north shore of Lake Victoria—took the prize for the second year in a row. This championship is relatively new, but it is also a barometer of coffee culture and quality in Uganda. This nation of tea drinkers is now consuming its own coffee, and taking it seriously.

CONCLUSION

We are seeing positive changes in Uganda's coffee industry, and the changes are coming with increased frequency: Coffee in Uganda is just over 100 years old, specialty coffee is barely 10 years old, and the Uganda Barista Championship is just three years old. There has been a fundamental shift in the coffee industry in Uganda, and this shift did not come easily. These advancements on the ground

UGANDA FACTS

POPULATION 32 million

AREA 241,038 square kilometers

LOCATION Situated in the Great Lakes region of Africa, Uganda is bordered on the west by the Democratic Republic of Congo; the north by Sudan; the east by Kenya; the south by Lake Victoria, Tanzania and Rwanda.

CAPITAL Kampala

LANGUAGE Officially English. Also Ganda or Luganda, other Niger-Congo languages, Nilo-Saharan languages, Swahili, Arabic.

MONETARY UNIT Shilling

in Uganda were borne out of challenges and people pushing back against inequity, complacency and mismanagement. This movement toward high-quality arabica and fine robusta involves legions of actors: those striving for quality, transparency, education and equitable livelihoods. Specifically, the effort between importers and exporters has been central to improved quality.

Challenges hinder many industries, including coffee, in Uganda. But as a lawyer friend from northern Uganda recently told me: “The challenges are why we are here.” The lesson? Quality of life, just like quality of coffee, is more of a process than a destination.

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Photo by Alexis Grossman

