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RULING THE ROAST

Rocking the Cradle of Coffee

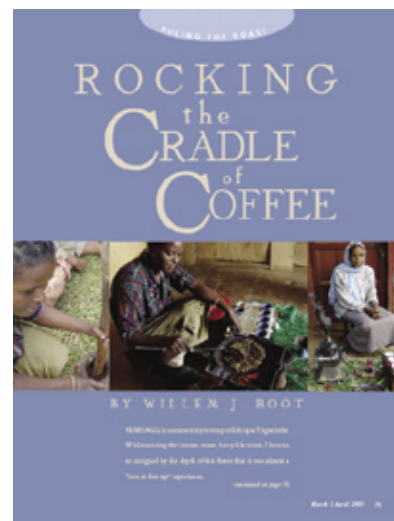
by Willem Boot

YEARS AGO, I consumed my first cup of Ethiopia Yirgacheffe. While savoring the intense, sweet, berry-like notes, I became so intrigued by the depth of this flavor that it was almost a “love at first sip” experience.

Last year, I traveled as a Coffee Corps volunteer to Ethiopia to assist in delivering training programs for the three unions of coffee cooperatives in this country. My trip was truly unforgettable; after visiting the cooperatives in Sidamo and Yirgacheffe, I was determined to return to Ethiopia with more volunteers to organize a coffee competition for all cooperatives in this country. As a result, I helped found ECAFE Foundation, a non-profit organization that will assist in the coordination of the competition and the upcoming internet auction in May 2005. The “E” in ECAFE represents our mission: exemplary coffee quality through education.

The Birth of Coffee

The various legends surrounding the discovery of coffee in the mountains of Abyssinia, the area now known as Ethiopia, are intriguing. This area has gained a reputation as the cradle of coffee, and rightfully so. Coffee is strongly linked to the history and culture of this country, where the traditions surrounding the product stem back to the 10th century. The term “coffee” is thought to mean “the land or plant of God.” The name is derived from the Kaffa region, where the indigenous trees were called *Kafa*, a word inherited from the hieroglyphic nouns “KA” (the name of God) and “AFA” (the name



of earth and of all plants that grow on earth).

In the 10th century, coffee was also considered a food; the Ethiopian nomadic mountain peoples of the Galla tribe collected coffee beans from the trees and then ground and mixed them with animal fat to form small balls that they carried as rations on long journeys. Other indigenous tribes of Ethiopia prepared a wine created from the fermented crushed coffee beans.

By the 13th century, coffee’s glorifying effects were well known in the Islamic world and the product was considered a potent medicine, as well as a religious stimulant that helped people pray all night long. Coffee spread throughout the Middle East with the help of Islamic pilgrims, and by the end of the 15th century, coffeehouses became more popular meeting places than the local mosques. From the 16th century, Ethiopian coffee spread throughout the world, to the Middle East, India, Europe and the Americas, making Ethiopia the birthplace of coffee. As a result, “Ethiopia” became a widely recognized brand name for premium and specialty coffee.

Ethiopia is located at the crossway between the cultures of Arab Africa, East Africa and the Arabian peninsula, which has created a mesmerizing diversity in daily life. While driving towards the famous coffee region of Sidamo, I was amazed by the

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scenes in the local villages. Playing, singing, jumping kids and herds of animals walking a random pattern over the street. Our driver did the best possible job to avoid the criss-crossing goats, buffalos and cows. In the villages, straw houses were constructed on thin, wooden stakes and built around a circle. When we traveled to the southern provinces of Ethiopia's coffee areas, we spent the night in the bustling town of Awassa. During my Sunday morning walk through town, my attention was drawn by the beautiful gate of an Orthodox Christian church. Just before I entered the gate, I heard a loud "Allah Akhbar" (Allah Is Great) coming from the loudspeakers of the minarets from a nearby mosque. This example illustrates how Christianity, Islam and Judaism exist in harmony and, as a result, these religions had a great influence on the development of the country.

The Ethiopians are, in general, very proud, honest and inquisitive, and they rarely feel embarrassed to look you straight in the eyes, followed by a disarming smile, which—more than once—made my heart melt.

My first real cup of coffee in Ethiopia was an espresso served with an herb called *Tena Adam*. The fragrance of this herb is very intense and it also has a deeper meaning. My Ethiopian friends explained, "It is healthy for the man," as they believe it improves male virility. The smell is between

floral and spicy and it is dipped in the coffee, which adds a very interesting aroma (see picture A.).

The Coffee Ceremony

While in Ethiopia, I was the speechless spectator of a unique coffee ceremony. We were invited by a coffee cooperative in the Alta Wondo district of the Sidamo coffee area to enjoy a cup of *tukke*, as it is called in Sidamo. (In other parts of Ethiopia, coffee is called *bunna*). In Ethiopia, it is not uncommon to organize a coffee ceremony three times per day: in the morning, at noon and in the evening. The ceremony is an important social event within the village or in the household, and it offers a good opportunity to discuss gossip in the community, talk politics or reflect on life.

Upon our arrival, most of the cooperative members and their families had gathered to welcome us, and we were presented with a precise explanation of the financial and economic performance of the organization.

Then the coffee ceremony was performed by a young lady who craft-roasted the coffee using a flat pan above a glowing charcoal fire. While the beans gently cracked during the first "pop," the invigorating aroma of freshly roasted coffee overwhelmed me. I always feel elated by the enticing smell of freshly roasted beans, and I thought, "Wow! If this coffee even remotely tastes like it smells, than I'm a very lucky man."

After roasting, the beans were ground using an old-



Picture B. Coffee Ceremony

fashioned mortar and pestle, and we enjoyed the rhythmic sound of crushing beans. The finely ground coffee was then filled into a shiny clay black Ethiopian coffee pot, called *jebena*, which is round at the bottom and narrow at the top with a straw lid. This shape serves an excellent purpose; it effectively locks in the coffee's aroma. Soon the room was filled with an exquisite perfumy coffee aroma. After brewing, some incense was lit as a sign that the most meaningful part of the ceremony was about to commence. When the smoke mingled with the coffee aromas, an electrifying genuine atmosphere developed.

We were sitting in a half circle and I observed how the young woman gently smiled while she gracefully poured us all a precious cup of sacred coffee that we savored almost silently. I took a sip from the fragile, blue demitasse, and the syrupy coffee extract engulfed my palate, leaving a tantalizing trace of jasmine, berry and fine chocolate.

Coffee ceremonies have three rounds, called *Abol*, *Tona* and *Baraka*. By completing them, a transformation of the spirit takes place. So, if you ever have the honor to be invited into a home for a coffee ceremony, remember to have the courtesy to not say goodbye until you have consumed at least three cups! (Picture B.)

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Picture A. Cup of Espresso with Herb

Growing Coffee

More than 90 percent of all Ethiopian coffee is grown in forests, semi-forest conditions or in gardens. A few larger farms exist, but their average size is too small to be considered large from a worldwide coffee perspective.

Garden coffee is normally grown in the vicinity of the farmer's residence and is usually mixed with other crops, such as bananas or vegetables. Usually, the coffee is fertilized with composted organic waste from the household.

Forest coffee is found in southwestern Ethiopia, for example the area of Kaffa, which is where arabica coffee originated. Forest coffee grows in wild conditions, the trees are not planted by humans, but they are self-sown and planned by Mother Nature; shade is provided under the full coverage of a natural forest canopy. Forest coffee is widely diverse in varieties and quality grades and is generally highly resistant to disease.

In semi-forest coffee-growing conditions, farmers utilize the forestland and thin the trees to develop the correct balance between sunlight and shade. In the Sidamo coffee area, the typical model for small growers is the semi-forest farm where coffee trees grow under a canopy of shade trees. Overall in Ethiopia, 90 percent of the

coffee farmers do not use any agro-chemicals at all, and ongoing efforts are being made to have coffee farms and cooperatives properly certified as organic. Due to the traditional sustainable approach to coffee farming, coffee trees are resistant against many more diseases than in other coffee-growing countries. Mother Nature apparently has the ability to improve coffee varieties by letting new coffee types evolve under natural conditions. (Picture C.)

Ethiopian Coffee Types

In Ethiopia, we can find all-important elements for growing coffee: favorable altitudes, ample rainfall, a suitable temperature and fertile soil. These ideal conditions have enabled coffee to grow throughout the country. About 400,000 hectares of land in the regions west, south and east of Addis Ababa are planted with arabica coffee only, at elevations above 3,600 feet. About 80 percent of Ethiopia's exports are natural (sun-dried) arabica coffees, the remainder is washed. The coffees in Ethiopia are all named after the geographic location where they grow.

The most important regions include:

Sidamo is the southern, and most productive, region bordering Kenya, where all coffee grows above 5,000 feet. Both washed and unwashed coffees are produced here. Washed Sidamo offers pleasant acidity and sweetness, as well as lingering fruit tones in the aftertaste. Natural-processed Sidamo can offer the distinct, intense flavors that are



Picture D. *Yirgacheffe Bean*

so common for high-quality dry-processed coffees: intense and pungent fruit with a long, lingering aftertaste.

Yirgacheffe, famous for its washed coffee with bright, pointed acidity and floral, berry-like aftertaste, is surrounded by the Sidamo region. Despite its small size, this area has developed a grand image among coffee aficionados. (see Picture D.)

Limu coffee grows in the southwest of Ethiopia between 3,600 and 6,200 feet. Limu coffee (all washed) generally has a milder acidity than Sidamo and Yirgacheffe; the flavor is generally characterized by a balanced and clean cup.

Harar coffee (all natural) is produced in the eastern highlands and is grown at an altitude of over 4,000 feet. The best Harar coffees have intense fruit notes (blueberry to black currant) and can offer a fantastic, floral aftertaste. Unfortunately, like most other natural types, Harar coffees have the tendency to be variable in quality; not only from lot to lot, but sometimes from bag to bag.

Ghimbi, or **Lekempti**, coffee is a natural bean produced in western Ethiopia. The coffee is known for its large bean size, and the flavor can have a pronounced perfumy aftertaste.

Djimmab coffee (all natural) is produced in the southwestern region of Ethiopia. This area has a multitude of different indigenous varieties that can be quite variable in quality

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Picture C. *Coffee Blossom*

and flavor. (Pictures E. and F.)

In general, washed coffees will cup more consistently than the natural-processed beans. When buying natural coffees, my recommendation is to relentlessly cup as many samples as possible before approving a shipment. Natural coffees from Ethiopia can be truly amazing. The best cleanly processed Harar beans will easily overwhelm you with distinct blueberry notes. Try, however, to obtain a Sidamo grade 3 coffee, which can blow you away with the intense fruit notes and firm, round body. And, I shouldn't forget to mention the Ghimbi or Lekempti coffee, with its perfumy aroma and aftertaste.

While preparing this article, I had the opportunity to cup some freshly processed Ethiopian samples, and some of the coffees were truly impressive. I would like to share with you some of my cupping notes (see chart on next page).

The classification system of Ethiopian coffee recognizes 5 grades, of which grade 1 and 2 are reserved for washed coffees and grades 3, 4 and 5 for natural-processed coffee.

Until recently, coffee roasters had hardly ever seen the *crème de la crème* of Ethiopian washed coffee: grade 1 (0–3 visual defects). Even some Ethiopian exporters told me that this special grade only exists in our imagination and, as a result, exporters were trading grade 2 beans (4–12 defects).

About five years ago, the coffee industry in Ethiopia was reformed and, as a result, coffee cooperatives can now sell green coffee directly to foreign buyers. The cooperatives in Ethiopia are working under the umbrella of so-called “unions,” of which there are four in the country, representing at least 140 cooperatives and thousands of coffee



Picture E. Washed Ethiopian Beans



Picture F. Natural Ethiopian Beans

farmers. In the turbulent political history of Ethiopia, cooperatives have enjoyed for many years a special status, and it did not come without surprise that cooperatives are now allowed to bypass the national auction so that they can sell to importers and roasters directly. Some of the best qualities, including certified organic and fair-trade lots have been exported by these organizations. Recently, the Ethiopian cooperative unions have decided to make small lots of meticulously selected grade 1 beans from Yirgacheffe and Sidamo available.

The ECAFE Gold Competition

My passion for Ethiopian coffee inspired new ideas that were born over a lengthy conversation during a car ride between the Sidamo region and Addis Ababa. My

vision became clear: to help Ethiopian cooperatives organize a competition and auction so that these subsistent farmer communities would have an opportunity to showcase their exemplary coffee quality. With a group of coffee professionals, we founded ECAFE Foundation to promote exemplary coffee quality by educating coffee farmers and producers.

The pre-selection started in January of 2004. In February of 2005, I traveled back to Ethiopia with an international group of at least 12 volunteer coffee professionals from Europe, Japan, New Zealand and the U.S. to coordinate the ECAFE Gold competition. At least 120 coffee cooperatives, representing thousands of coffee farmers, participated in this unique coffee tasting event, which had the objective to select exemplary-quality coffees from more than 220 submitted lots

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CUPPING NOTES: ETHIOPIAN WASHED COFFEES SAMPLES

	YIRGACHEFFE GRADE 1	SIDAMO GRADE 1	LIMU GRADE 2
Green coffee sample review	Specially selected grade 1 lot. Translucent blue-green color. Beans have unusual uniform size. Absolutely zero defects. Moisture: 11.6%	Specially selected grade 1 lot. Oval beans with even, consistency of green color. No visual imperfections. Odor: freshly cut grass and slightly floral. Moisture: 11.8%	Clean preparation with less than six visual imperfections. Somewhat too many silver skins left on green bean. Moisture: 12.1%
Aroma	Blueberry with tangerine peel. So floral... I smell the roses!	Lemon and citrus notes with a hint of strawberry.	Clean citrus with hint of light chocolate.
Acidity	Vibrant, lively and totally clean.	Intense and citrus-like.	Pleasant and clean.
Mouthfeel	Silky, soft and smooth.	Slightly sharp but very consistent from hot to cold.	Smooth and resonant.
Flavor	Balance of intense fruit notes and delicious sweetness.	Subtle tones of tangerine and chocolate.	Clean washed coffee with excellent sweetness.
Aftertaste	Seems to linger forever! Blackberry and bergamot.	Lingering tones of sweet grapes, berry and lemon.	Cleanly disappearing.

and to educate all participating cooperatives about the steps that lead to quality improvement. These objectives serve the mission of ECAFE: Exemplary Coffee Quality Through Education. The winning lots will be auctioned on May 10th through the SCAA auction platform.

Additional information can be found at the ECAFE website: www.ecafefoundation.org.



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