

CoffeeLovers

MAGAZINE

Issue **26**



Saving
Yemeni
Coffee

Coffee at its Origin

*The journey of one
man trying to save
Yemeni Coffee*





Ummah Wide Interviews

**Mokhtar Alkhanshali
of Mocha Mill**



UMMAH WIDE: *We are with Mokhtar Alkhanshali, the President and Founder of Mocha Mill—Yemeni Speciality Coffee, a company with a powerful social mission that is bridging the worlds of coffees roots in Yemen with the speciality coffee industry in the United States. One of the incredible things about this project is that you stand at the intersection of two amazing histories, on one side you come from a family who has been growing coffee for hundreds of years in Yemen, the first place to cultivate and commercialize coffee in the world. On the other side you are the first Arab/Yemeni certified speciality coffee Q grader. What can you tell us about these two worlds and how you came to this moment in your life founding Mocha Mill and bringing some of the first single origin coffee's from Yemen to the United States.*

MOKHTAR ALKHANSHALI: I was recently talking to one of my childhood mentors, Nasseam Elkarra, and he was reminding me that when I was in High School I was always talking about coffee in Yemen and the history of coffee in Yemen. In particular he said I was talking about the issue of Qat, the locally consumed stimulant in Yemen and how it's taken the place of coffee in agriculture and someone needs to do something about it. Stephen Ezill, one of my friends at Boot Coffee said that his brother called me a hero of a thousand faces because there are so many different ways of looking at what I am doing and different routes that guided me to this point here.

My family has been growing coffee for at least nine generations. Coffee cultivation has been around for over 800 years in Yemen, and the oldest area to grow coffee is my family's home province of Ibb in central Yemen. These ancient coffee varieties in my home province are the oldest cultivated coffees in the world. Going back to Yemen as a kid I used to pick coffee cherries with my grandmother. She would take them to the local mill where they would hull them, process them and she would then take it to them roast, grind and mix them with spices like cardamom, and ginger and sugar, making it smell and look different than coffee. I just thought that those cherries were some weird Yemeni kind of tea that my grandmother would make me. We call it bunn, the same word as in Amharic bunna, meaning the bean.

One of the things I hear from a lot of coffee people in the U.S. and in Yemen is how was I able to accomplish so much within a year's time? For me there were a lot of guiding factors. First my family's ancient history in coffee cultivation, my love for history, the strong passion I have for coffee and how I wanted to help my people but it's safe to say that I wouldn't be here if it wasn't for my mentor Willem Boot. His family has been involved in coffee for so long. It's like history is repeating itself because in the early 1600's the Dutch were the first Europeans to open a company in the port city of Mocha in Yemen, it's like we have another Yemeni-Dutch intersection in coffee 400 years later. He's a master roaster and his father invented the Golden Box coffee roaster. Willem's geisha

farm, la Mula, in Panama produces some of the world's most expensive coffee. Willem Boot is really an ocean of knowledge in coffee. I asked him recently why he chose to work with me and train me and he said that "a lot of people come to me and want to be the next Starbucks or Bluebottle but they don't have the passion and never end up lasting very long but with you I saw how much passion you have and now

UMMAH WIDE INTERVIEW: MOKHTAR ALKHANSHALI



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MOKHTAR ALKHANSHALI
IS PRESIDENT OF MOCHA MILL,
SPECIALIZING IN YEMENI COFFEE:
MOCHAMILL.COM





you've proved yourself beyond any doubt." When I first started with him I wanted to take off as fast as a rocket, he slowed me down and took out some green coffee beans and said "first you have to start here by learning the fundamental basics about coffee". He is like my Mr. Miyagi, I also call him my coffee Shaykh. His whole team that include Jodi Wieser, Stephen Ezell, Marlee Benefield and his wonderful wife Cathrine Cadloni have been with me every step of the way pushing me, giving me much needed advise and becoming in many ways my coffee family.

A few years ago I worked as the front desk person across the street from the Hills Bros. Coffee building in San Francisco. The Hills Brothers were the first people to invent the art of cupping. That is to do qualitative analysis of coffee based on different categories of smell and taste.

San Francisco was a very important port for coffee. When coffee would come through the Panama Canal from Columbia and Brazil, they needed to find a way to figure out the quality of the beans so they came up with this method that we now call cupping. In cupping you take coffee and you slurp it and you vaporize it over your tongue and all over your mouth to get these flavor notes. It's sort of a language that people use throughout the world to identify the quality of coffee and the price point.

The decline of coffee production in Yemen is so scary, in 1857 Yemen was exporting 57,000 tons of coffee from the port city of Mocha, and now in 2014 Yemen as a whole produces 18,000 tons a year. It has declined at such a rapid pace that if something is not done quickly then Yemeni coffee will quite simply cease to exist.

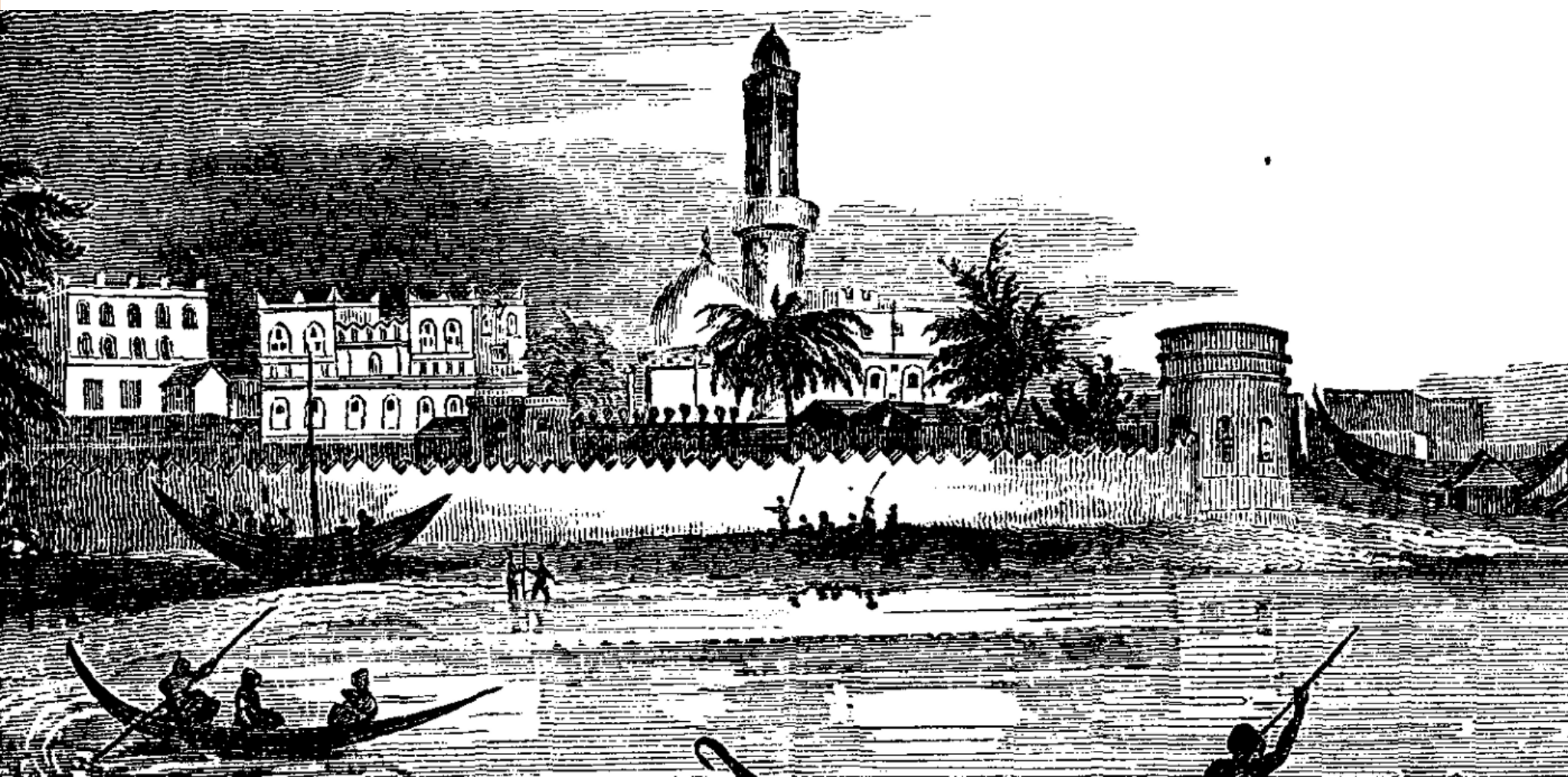
Coffee's Origins in Ethiopia and Yemen

UW: *That is truly scary to hear because Yemen is so important to the history of coffee as the first place in the world to commercialize it and cultivate it. Can you tell us a bit about the origin story of coffee between Ethiopia and Yemen?*

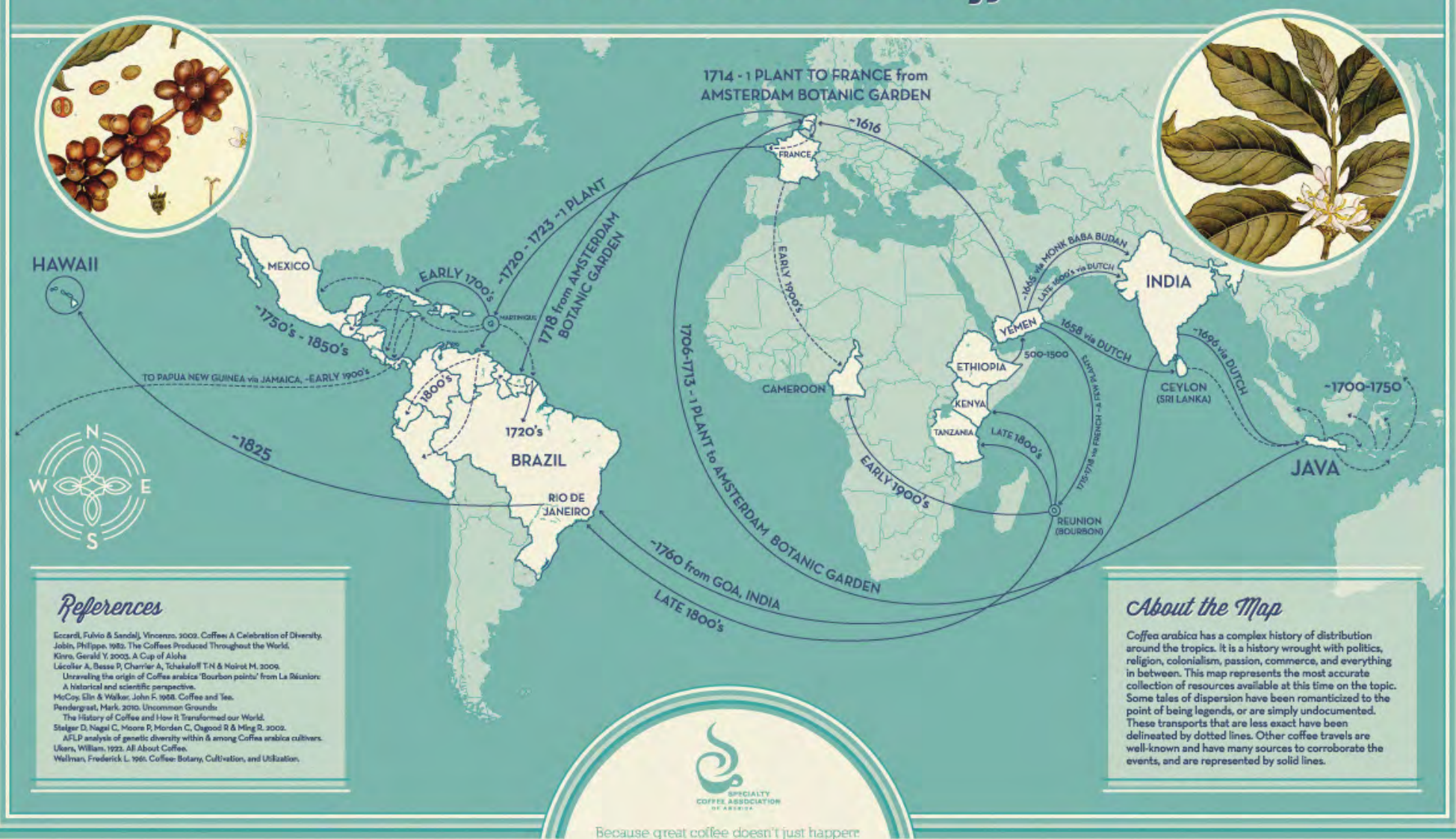
MA: It was very difficult trying to find the history of Yemeni coffee in the English language. Yemen is mentioned in a one liner whenever you read about the history of coffee. It goes from Ethiopia, to something about Yemen and Mocha and then straight to Europe. Before coffee came to the European continent, the drink of choice was alcohol so when coffee came out of Ethiopia, and into Yemen and then to Europe, you see an incredible change in the world. Coffee houses sprung up like wildfire in places like Vienna, Italy, Paris and England. In them the first newspapers, ideas and exchanges of free thoughts occurred. People came together and had this amazingly intellectually stimulating brew and talked. The American,

the French and the Russian revolutions were all sparked in coffee houses.

So going back, the history between Ethiopia and Yemen and the history of coffee, you could write a book about it. For me I was fortunate to have met scholars in Yemen, read old books in Arabic, and met with farmers and heard the stories of their forefathers and their grandparents. I also recently went on an incredible coffee adventure deep into Ethiopia to trace the origins of coffee. There is a bit of a debate about where coffee starts between Ethiopia and Yemen, I think I'm probably the only Yemeni who would say that the coffee plant originated from Ethiopia. Outside of Ethiopia there are about thirty or so species or varieties of coffee, in Ethiopia there are five to ten thousand species of coffee that grow wild. I have a theory that Muslim scholars who were known to make pilgrimages to saints and scholars in neighboring Ethiopia, brought this plant back with them. When going to the Harar



The Historic Distribution of *Coffea arabica*



region in Ethiopia I discovered that in the city's oldest mosque that dates back 800 years, they recite the same supplications and holy chants that were written by Yemeni scholars from Hadramout and Mocha.

The first to take that bean, intentionally cultivate it, roast it and to brew it as a drink were Yemenies. In Ethiopia warriors prior to going into battles would eat the coffee cherries with animal fat. In Yemen it was brewed as a drink by Muslim sufi monks in the port of Mocha. One of the first scholars to write about coffee, was Shaykh Ali Omar Al-Shadhili. He was called by many the Monk of Mocha. I have

a really cool newspaper article from 1836 that talks about this monk. One of his students wrote one of the first books on coffee called, *The People of Purification in the Breathes of Coffee*.

For them, they saw coffee as something to help you become more alert and conscience, to be awakened, to stay up for night prayers and to become conscience of yourself and the society you live in.

When coffee first came on the scene many people in power were afraid of coffee, the idea that people got together and were

intellectually stimulated and talked about social issues and the problems of the people, is something that frightened the powerful and the elite. That's the history of coffee in Yemen, in the port of Mocha. The word coffee itself is short for the word *qahhwat al-bun*, which means the wine of the bean. The word coffee literally means *Al-Khamr al ladi yutiherin nashwa*, which means the invigorating wine that raises you to a state of ecstasy and to help fight the ego. The other word for coffee or qahwa is qaha which means it satiates you or makes you not want to eat. So really it's seen as something that helps you fight your carnal desires of hunger and lust and to help one fight

you ego and control yourselves. The turks they couldn't say *qahwa* they couldn't say that letter *waw* in Arabic so they called it "Kahve," that was eventually taken by the Dutch who called it "Koffie," and in 1582 it entered the English language as we know it today as Coffee. The other part of the history of coffee is how it left Yemen. There are different narrations, one says that an Indian named Baba Budan 17th century Indian Sufi Saint who is today revered by both Muslims and Hindus, took seven beans to grow in India. It wasn't really successful in India in the beginning, but then the Dutch took it to Indonesia and the island of Java and it grew successfully there. This is of course where



we get the famous Mocha Java blend. Mocha and Java were the first ports in the world to have coffee. Mocha was interesting because it was really the only port where the colonial powers were engaged in trade but were never able to colonize. The “dark side” of coffee’s history is that when it left Mocha, wherever it was grown local inhabitants were exploited and enslaved to grow it. The dutch signed a peace treaty with the king of France and they gave the king of France one coffee plant as simple gesture of friendship. The king of France built the first green house in the world for that coffee plant. Shortly after a man by the name of Gabriel Mathiew de Clieu convinced the French king to let him take that coffee plant to the new world.



On the voyage there they got lost at sea and began rationing their own water supply and this guy Gabriel de Clieu he actually rationed his own water supply with the plant.

People thought he was crazy, but he made it to the island of Martinique and coffee grew successfully there. From there coffee made it to Haiti and at one point Haiti was producing half of the worlds coffee and when the enslaved population of Haiti revolted and got their liberation, the French burned everything. From that point coffee went to Columbia and Brazil and Central America, and now Brazil produces almost a third of the worlds coffee. From Brazil and Latin America, it originally came from Haiti and Martinique from France, by way of Java, by way of India by way of Mocha and Yemen, and then originally in Ethiopia. So that’s a very brief timeline of coffee to show you how the journey started.





Coffee in Yemen Today

UW: *I was recently reading an article where it listed the top 10 coffee countries in the world in terms of coffee quality and taste and Ethiopia ran away with the competition with nearly twice as many points as any of the other countries including: Kenya, Panama, Columbia, and even the United States (meaning Hawaii) following. Unfortunately even with Coffees roots being in Yemen, Yemeni coffee doesn't show up on any of these lists. Can you talk about what has happened to the coffee industry in Yemen in more detail and the role that Qat is playing in all of this, the issue of water and how your company is responding to this set of circumstances you all are facing in Yemen today.*

MA: That was one of the first questions I had coming into coffee. I remember I walked into Blue Bottle roasters in Oakland and I spoke to Stephen Vick, their green coffee buyer, and I mentioned Yemen. He said, 'There was a time ten years or so ago when Yemeni coffee was known and it was great, but unfortunately the quality has gone down dramatically, it's very inconsistent and it's extremely hard to get.' I kept hearing these same things from different people. So clearly over the last ten years something happened. The only way to really get to the bottom of this was to go to Yemen on what would become a trip that changed my life.



It was a three month long coffee exploration and I did an in depth analysis of the supply chain, as I was able to go to 32 different areas that grow coffee in Yemen. I used old Arabic books on the history of coffee and the old Mocha route paired with USAID and United Nations reports on coffee, and every place I went I got a piece of the puzzle to help me understand what is going on with coffee in Yemen.

Really you have to start at the beginning with coffee, from the farmer him or herself. The first issue I noticed in Yemen is that they would pick all the cherries together, the green, the yellow, the reds. As coffee ripens it goes from green, yellow, orange and when it's fully ripe it's red. It takes an extra 3 months of labor to get full red

cherries. The red cherries have the highest amount of sugar contents, so collecting red cherries is critical in reaching a specialty coffee. For them, Saudi Arabia buys 60% of Yemen's coffee and they have no quality standards, meaning that they don't really care how the coffee is made as long as it is from Yemen. In Saudi Arabia the wilder it is the better, if they come with a bag of coffee and it has a round of ammunition in it from an AK-47, they consider that great Yemeni coffee, and I actually saw some coffees like that. They know that the red cherries are the best but when they are selling the red cherries for the same price as the green cherries, why should they put in the extra labor?

*Nobody knows where in Yemen
most Yemeni coffee comes from.
They mix all the regions and sell it
as some ambiguous name...*



As they began to understand the Western speciality coffee market they began to see that they could be paid premiums for the extra labor. The other issue was that the way they dried it was incorrect, the way they stored it. Sometimes they stored coffee for up to five years, treating it like a form of currency, something they can hold onto like gold or silver, and in times of need take it out and sell it. One of the descriptors that people give about Yemeni coffee in the west is that it is very spicy or very exotic, it has cardomom or a tobacco flavor. When I visited the mills that process these coffees I saw that they were using the same machines to process the coffee as spices. So those spices people were tasting were really the residue from spices, it's not a descriptor.

By the time the coffee makes it to the exporter it has been mixed from different regions, it is very old, no one has any idea where it comes from. That's why a lot of people don't want to buy Yemeni coffee. It's more expensive than any other coffee and often times the quality is really bad. For me part of my work is starting right at the beginning with farmers. I only work with farmers and cooperatives. This helps us control the quality of the coffee and traceability. Nobody knows where in Yemen most Yemeni coffee comes from. They mix all the regions and sell it as some ambiguous name like Arabian Mocha, or Arabian Mocha Sannani. When I came back to the US I brought with me 21 different samples of coffee from 21 different areas. The majority of these coffees have never been brought to the US before as single origins, they are always mixed. So it's been incredible to taste these coffees and the results of some of them have been amazing. We really never expected to get such high scores right away like this, it has really been an incredible journey so far.

The Journey to Save Coffee in Yemen

UW: *Lets talk more about that journey, there has been some buzz about these single origin Yemeni coffee's that have come to the United States now that a number of roasters have tasted them and sampled them. But few people know the true story of what you actually went through to bring these coffees back to the US, can you talk about some of the places you visited in this trip and some of the obstacles that you faced?*

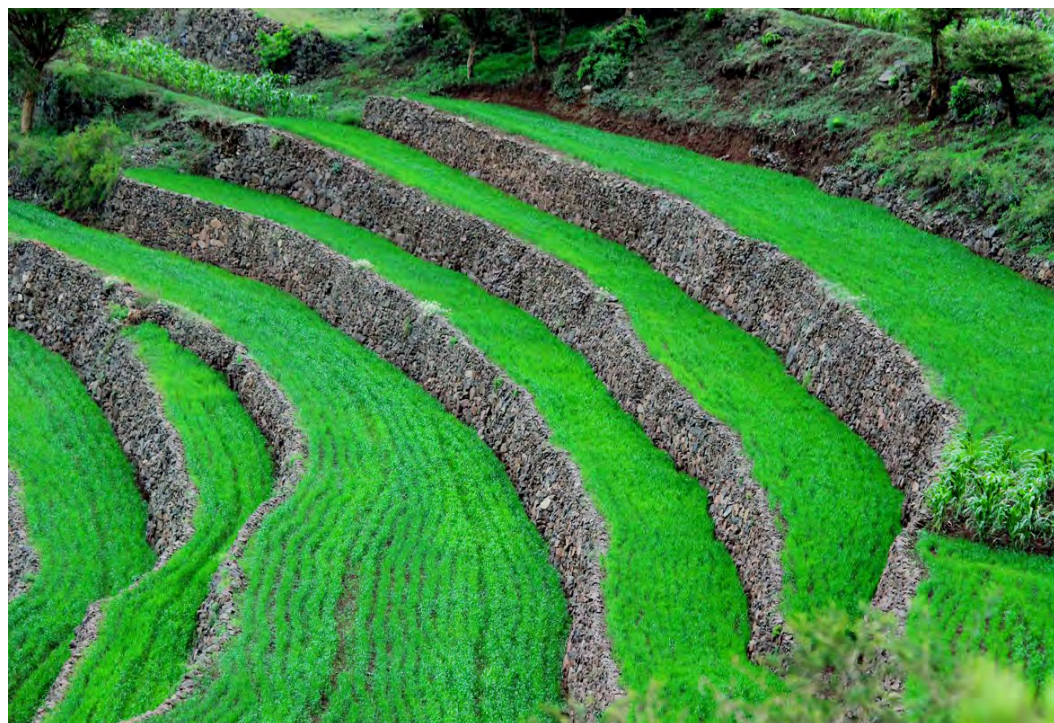




MA: I left for Yemen in the first week of May, my consultant Willem Boot from Boot Coffee came with me along with Camilo Sanchez from the Coffee Quality Institute. We were in a hotel in Sann'a and unfortunately we came on the eve of the US/ Yemeni offensive against al-Qaeda in Southern Yemen. 66 people were killed by drones, unfortunately a lot of them were civilians. It was a very difficult time, Yemen is going through a very difficult transitional period after the revolution they had in 2011 when they disposed of their dictator who had ruled for 33 years. There is also an armed militia (the Houthis) in North-Eastern Yemen who recently entered the capital Sana'a, set up check points and took control of many of the government buildings. Then you have a movement in the South that wants to succeed from the country and you have this radical extremist group, al-Qadea of the Arabian peninsula (AQAP) also there. So it was so difficult at this time that US officials would not let Willem or Camilo leave their hotel, and after two days they forced them to leave the country.

After they left I decided to go through with my plan of visiting all these coffee growing areas and doing my research and exploration. When I went to these areas I was under a lot of stress and a lot of danger.

I was ambushed eleven times by tribal ambushes, groups that have issues with different tribes or with the government. They will come out of nowhere with their rifles and RPG-7 Rocket Launchers and ask you for your ID to see where you were from. If you happen to be from a tribe





that they have an issue with they will take you as a hostage. Unfortunately during these ambushes there were a lot of close calls.

On top of that, the physical difficulties of hiking up these mountains and mountain ranges for days at times to get to these coffee areas was crazy. Sometimes I would spend a whole two days or three days going somewhere to find out they don't have coffee there. Maybe 100 years ago there was coffee there according to this book I was reading, but also I found places that I could have never imagined in my wildest dreams. Coffee paradises, whole mountain ranges and terraces full of coffee. Seeing the people and meeting these farmers, living with them was so incredible, they were so generous, so beautiful and so simple. I saw coffee farmers who didn't know how to use currency, they have lived their entire lives just bartering for wheat, or barley, or whatever they need.

uw: *What's incredible to me about this story is not only is this some of the best coffee in the world but*

it is also some of the most difficult coffee to get. Like you said there very few people in the world who can even get to these coffees, let alone bring them back to the United States. Some of these stories about the farmers you are working with are really amazing, I was wondering if you could talk a bit more about the farmers you're working with, who they are, and the women's cooperative you're working with.

MA: There are eleven cooperative that I've met with in Yemen so far. The women's cooperative is in central Yemen in an area called Ta'izz its completely run by women. The leader of the group, her name is Faatimah, is a really incredible and amazing woman. My goal is to help them access western markets and help them improve the quality of their coffee.

A cupping score of 80 points and higher means its specialty grade coffee, anything above 85 is extremely good and 90 + is rare and expensive. I cupped my 21 samples with Willem Boot and his team and the some of the scores were completely unexpected. 10 of the coffees scored 80 plus, 5 of them scored 85 plus and there were 3 that were really exceptional and hit 88-90+.

Cupping Mocha Mill Coffees at Boot Coffee One Importer from Michigan told me that he wouldn't sell these coffees for any less than \$30 a roasted bag. Another from Australia said he would sell it higher then his Jamaican Blue Mountain. A well-known roaster from the Bay Area told me "What you have with these coffees is an incredible story, they are extremely rare and they just taste amazing." Wilfred Lamastus,



owner of the Elida Coffee estate in Panama and one of the leading specialty coffee farmers in the world said after one of my cupping events “I am a coffee farmer from Panama, and this is incredible work what Mokhtar is doing. We all have to support him.” To hear the buyers tell me that, it really was incredible. To know that these coffees that I brought back were some of the rarest coffees, but also objectively they taste really amazing.

uw: *They are some of the best coffee’s I’ve ever had in my life. I know you are deeply connected to your farmers, when this news that you have become a Q*

grader went on Facebook it went from Facebook to making news all over Yemen. Can you talk about how you heard this story from your farmers?

MA: This entire coffee journey its been something I’ve kept kind of secret, most of my friends didn’t even know I was doing this and only a few family members knew. When I passed my exam one of the NGO’s that has been supporting my work in Yemen, SMEPS, The Small and Micro Enterprise Promotion Service, they wrote a press release and the story was picked up by different news outlets in Yemen. So when I called one of my cooperatives



in Yemen, I touch base with them regularly to see how things are going, the head of the cooperative said “Congratulations on passing your exam” and I was like “Wow, what? How do you know?”

He said what do you mean how do I know it was in the different newspapers and it was on the national TV news, there was a picture of you and the Dutch guy next to you (which is Willem) and he told me something that really just struck me at my core. He said when you passed that exam we as the farmers we felt like we passed that exam, you really give us hope and we’re so proud of what you’re doing.

I actually had to hang up and pretend that the phone cut off because I got really emotional to think that there are hundreds of thousands of farmers, these cooperatives that looked at that, that saw that.

Millions of people saw that on TV and I started this journey 10 months ago by myself, and I didn’t know a single coffee farmer. That was incredible to hear them say that and to feel that way. Cause when I took that last exam I did feel like I am taking this exam for the farmers. I thought, I need to pass this for the farmers because otherwise I won’t be able to sell their coffee at a higher price. Being a Q

grader gives you credibility in the coffee world and for good reason, to become a licensed Q-Grader you must be prepared to pass a 3 day 20 part exam. In this exam you must identify 36 different types of smells, various tasting defects, 5 organic acids, different roast profiles, blind “triangulations,” 16 green bean defects and last but not least, you must be ready to have some “interesting” coffee descriptions. You aggressively and intensely slurp a spoon full of coffee—the more your mother would disapprove, the better. You vaporize the actual flavors inside of your mouth, then you have an instant reaction to those flavors and write down your notes. Coffee cupping is a language you learn to speak that allows you to analyze flavor profiles, write down this information, and share them with people all over the world.”

UW: *Again with your farmers in mind, at the core of Mocha Mill is your social mission, can you talk more about the plans you have and what you want to do to serve the farmers and the communities that you are working in?*

MA: Our primary goal and mission is to produce traceable, specialty grade Yemeni coffee at their origin by radically improving and streamlining the supply chain. To do this, we are working directly with farmers and cooperatives by establishing “Coffee Collection Centers” (CCC) and a state-of-the-art processing mill. We believe that if we give the coffee farmers the knowledge and the tools necessary, it will improve the quality of their coffees and lives because they will be able to sell their coffees at a higher price through our company, which will give them access to Western markets and Asian

markets. This will put money in their hands that they can actually use in their cooperatives, to build schools, to build hospitals, to feed their families because, like I said if something is not done coffee is declining at such a rapid rate it will be gone.

UW: *This coffee that we are drinking here tonight can you tell us what is the name of it and what is each of the steps that you took to bring this coffee here?*

MA: This cup was actually one of the highest 90+ scores for my coffees. Its from an area in Northwestern Yemen and part of the province of Sana’a, its called *Al Hayma al kharijiyya*. Their cooperative is called *jamiah al ruwaad* or Ruwaad Cooperative and I had to go through three armed ambushes to get this coffee. When I came back from Yemen someone recently asked me how can i go and get Yemeni coffee?

I said if you really want to get single origin Yemeni coffee you have to go through what I went through and he said what did you go through? I went through drones, shoot outs, explosions, malaria, tape worms, and hiking up mountains with extremely high elevations. You have to get there and then dealing with all of this to also bring it back. Do all of that and then you can get single origin specialty grade Yemeni coffee. Its not that easy.

So this coffee was one of the most difficult coffees for me to get and I’m so happy this coffee cupped high. This was the first area I went to and I told them what I was looking for in coffee, how to pick red cherries, how to

dry them and then after that 3 months, before I left the country I asked them for the samples and he sent me 50 kilos of dry red cherries. When you look at dried cherries you can tell if they were red or if they were green when they were picked—they were all red cherries, so that was the first good sign. When I milled it and processed it and hulled it and took the beans out they came out beautiful, but looks can be deceiving. You can't tell until you cup them so I brought them with me, I had 7 luggage bags of coffee from 21 areas, I went through 6 security screenings at the airport in Philadelphia (that's a whole other story) but I made it back here, we cupped them and they were just incredible.

Some of the descriptions I got from this coffee were—fire cracker taste, explosion of fruits, flavors in your mouth, passion fruits, marmalade. It was just incredible, the

brightness to it. Yemeni coffee has the most phosphoric acid, it gives a certain brightness to it. The beans are really small but they are compact with so much flavor and it was just something incredible.

Stephen Vick, the green buyer from Blue Bottle said that “I cannot believe this coffee is dry processed.” When I heard those scores and those descriptors I was amazed and I was very happy because this farmer's cooperative was one of the ones that was really opened to listening to new ideas, to adapt and understand what I was trying to tell them about specialty coffee.

UW: *When can we look forward to seeing Mocha Mill coffees on the shelves at some of the top roasters in the US and in other speciality markets throughout the world?*



MA: The harvest season starts in October, until the end of December. Then I have another area where the harvest is in January and February, so my goal is to come back with my first containers of coffee after that. Then I'm going to travel throughout the world with our samples and work with some of the best roasters to produce some of the finest and rarest coffees on the planet.

It took me a long time to figure out what to name my company. I wanted to reclaim "Mocha." I wanted to reappropriate it for my people. I wanted people to know that there is a place called "Mocha," it's not a coffee drink, and it's an important place because it changed the world. Coffee right now is the second most traded commodity after oil, the second drunk thing after water. Before coffee came to Europe, before Mocha allowed the world to experience coffee, the drink of choice was alcohol. When coffee entered the European continent, in these coffee houses, it was the first time people were being intellectually stimulated and the free flow of ideas was happening. We owe something to the people of Mocha.

I want the farmers to understand I want to sell their coffee in their name. So when I sell the coffee, I don't want to call it "Arabain Mocha Sanani," I want to give the name of the location, the name of the area, even the name of the farmer – where it's from. When I tell farmers this, they look at me, they're like "I never thought about that idea." With a look of immense pride in their eyes.

Part of my journey outwardly is to help these farmers make money but inwardly, I want

a country to believe in themselves and their heritage and regain that confidence and feel good about something they produce. The way I see Mocha Mill is that I'm a tool to help these farmers access these [specialty] markets. These collection centers, eventually within a year or so, I want the farmer cooperative to own it. [And I] would move to other areas. It's just helping them make more money. They need to be supported; they need to feel like someone is supporting them for there to be real change in coffee production in Yemen.

I see myself as a bridge, between two worlds, helping one side with the opportunity to taste these amazing beans and helping the other side to uplift their economic and social conditions by teaching them the demands of a new market.

UW: *Such an incredible story, such amazing work thank you so much for taking the time to meet with us and to tell your story. We pray for your continued success and safety as you journey back to Yemen and we look forward to following up with you as your journey continues and when Mocha Mill coffees are on the shelves throughout the world.*



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