



# Producing Coffee in an Uncertain World

## Challenges and Solutions for Coffee Farmers

by Willem Boot

**T**he value chain of coffee includes countless actors who share responsibilities in the production process of coffee. Millions of mostly smallholder farmers try to sustain their livelihoods by producing coffee cherries in often dire conditions. Together with coffee processors, intermediary traders, service providers, exporters, importers, and roasters, they make up the gigantic family of participants in the global market that produces our beloved coffee.

The focus of this article is to review the diverse challenges that coffee producers face in this turbulent world which has created such uncertain conditions for the entire coffee industry. The current COVID-19 crisis has caused game-changing challenges for farmers around the world. On top of that, coffee producers in a growing number of countries are also dealing with staggering problems related to violence and the lack of personal security that is caused by it.

Last but not least, the continuing economic crisis among coffee producers caused by depressed coffee prices and the impact of climate change create overall unprecedented chal-

lenges for the community of coffee producers and their families. How are producers dealing with the complex responsibilities they face to manage both their business as well as their family obligations? What possible solutions do they seek to mitigate the onslaught of difficult situations presented by what seems to be a perfect storm of hardship? Which innovative concepts, technologies, and marketing platforms have been emerging to deal with the situation at hand?

### **Panama: Finca La Mula and La Cabra**

I consider Panama as my second home country. Ever since 1995 I've been a frequent guest of this beautiful country with its amazing coffees. Initially I came to Panama as a coffee buyer and then in 2004 I fell in love with the flavor profile of Geisha coffee during the Best of Panama coffee competition. That experience had a profound impact on the course of my life and on my work as a coffee professional. Less than two years after tasting the phenomenal flavor of Geisha, I ventured into an exciting farming experiment by



*Measuring the sugar concentration of freshly harvested coffee cherries at Finca La Mula, Panama*

purchasing five hectares of mostly forested land on the steep slopes of the Baru volcano. I named the farm Finca La Mula; literally translated this means 'Farm The Mule' recognizing the fact that I first visited this remote forest on the back of a mule. The farm is situated at 1,700 to 1,800 meters and some parts are very steep and overgrown by the rainforest which we left intact. We planted about 6,000, mostly bronze tip Geisha, on the more open, exposed parts of the farm and since 2012 La Mula has been producing limited quantities of exquisite tasting coffee. Over the years we were able to win various awards, among others the first place at the Best of Panama and two Good Food Awards.

Like most coffee producing countries in Latin America, the government in Panama has taken extensive preventative measures to stop the spread of the coronavirus. Citizens aren't allowed to go outside except for limited hours for the purchasing of necessary supplies and food. Fortunately, coffee-producers and other farmers of agricultural products are allowed to leave their houses and work their farms in order to take care of ongoing business. Panama counts 4.2 million inhabitants and the indigenous people make up about 12 per

cent of the total population; the Guaymí and Ngöbe-Buglé comprise half of the native people of Panama. At Finca La Mula and at our nearby Finca La Cabra (the goat) we employ six fulltime Ngöbe-Buglé workers who continually live at the farms in order to take care of the ongoing maintenance. We have been taking extreme care to protect our workers against the potential onslaught of the virus by teaching sanitary and hygiene protocols and by ensuring that they stay healthy. As a farm owner I consider it my responsibility to take all possible measures to protect our indigenous workers from the threat of the potentially disastrous virus. Fortunately, the farms are located in a relatively remote section of the Boquete Valley. To get there, you'll need to conquer the highly treacherous unpaved road that leads from the town of Portrerillos Arriba to the rainforest that covers the southeastern section of the Baru volcano. Overall I can say that in times like these, the remoteness of the farms proves to be a blessing; it helps our efforts to protect our staff against the spread of the virus. At Finca La Cabra we are planning this year the official opening of our brand new workers housing, which provides ample space to all workers and which is large enough to facilitate social



## COFFEE FOR PEACE IN COLOMBIA

distancing protocols. At the outbreak of COVID-19, most of Panama's coffee had already been collected. Fortunately the pandemic didn't impact the harvesting of coffee cherries to the same degree as it might affect the crop in some of Colombia's most productive regions, like the department of Cauca where the main harvest will start in June of this year.

### 'Coffee For Peace' in Colombia

From the mid 1960s until recently, Colombia was entrenched in a horrible civil war between the Colombian government, paramilitary groups, and armed guerrilla rebels like the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) and the National Liberation Army (ELN). To make things worse, the internal conflicts were aggravated by the onset of senseless violence caused by the production and trade of illicit drugs. Infighting between the cartels from Medellin, Cali and Norte de Valle and ongoing conflicts caused by the rebels led to the migration of more than five million Colombian citizens between 1985 and 2016. Since the signing of a historic peace agreement, the FARC rebels agreed to disarm in 2017 and since then programs have started to sustain the peace process by providing sustainable sources of income for coffee producers.

In 2017 I co-wrote an economic plan to develop incentives for specialty coffee producers in some of the more infamous regions of Colombia that were affected by violence. In that same year, our proposal was fully accepted and funded by the United States Agency for International Development (USAID). More than 10 thousand coffee farmers fall under our mandate. My first fact-finding exploration led us by express riverboat over the mighty Magdalena river towards the hidden and bustling town of Santa Rosa, in the northwest of Colombia. The renowned writer Gabriel Garcia Marquez became fascinated by the magic of Colombia's greatest river, which he described in several books. Upon arrival I sensed a feverish atmosphere. Until recently, Santa Rosa in the department of Bolivar, was considered a Sodom and Gomorrah of Colombia. During the time of our visit, the circumstances

### Coffee For Peace

Coffee for Peace in Colombia is an alliance of coffee farmers and market allies created to develop, facilitate, and promote the trade of traceable coffees from historic conflict zones in Colombia. Sponsored by the United States Agency for International Development (USAID), Coffee for Peace works in the departments of Antioquia, Bolivar, Caqueta, Cauca, Meta, and Valle, seeking to make specialty coffee a key driver in the transition to peace.

[coffeeforpeace.org](http://coffeeforpeace.org)

had improved considerably and fortunately the peace process was already bearing fruit.

At the warehouse of a local trader I saw a young woman delivering a few bags of 'pergamino' coffee beans (unroasted coffee in parchment skin) for which she collected a receipt to be exchanged around the corner for cash. An intermediary trader would sell her coffee to an exporter, and then through an importer to a coffee roaster, who would supply the beans to customers thousands of miles away. Usually this type of trade is completely anonymous; the origin is basically untraceable and the farmers lose out financially. We concluded that this had to change radically. To reinforce our mission, an innovative new brand called 'Coffee For Peace in Colombia' was launched in 2019 with additional funding by USAID. To garner a national Colombian platform we collaborate closely with the FNC, the National Federation of Coffee Farmers. Internationally we started collaborations with various formidable trading partners like the Dutch company Trabocca and the North-American based RGC Coffee.



*Best of Cauca Competition winner Rafael Pedrero Suns (center) with Laura Roshanian (left) and Afshin Roshanian of Romania's CTS - Artisan Coffee.*

The strategy for Coffee For Peace includes the promotion and sales of fully traceable specialty coffee. Through quality improvement and a targeted export campaign, in which negotiations are conducted directly with importers and roasters, we aim to significantly improve the income of coffee farmers.

Coffee For Peace has already been proving its success. Since its launch, the program has facilitated more than US\$ 2 million in export revenues at an average price which is at least 25 per cent higher than the price for regular non-traceable coffee.

Together with the Austrian technology company Cropster an innovative online trading hub was launched for specially selected Coffee For Peace micro-lots. Through this online market place, buyers can establish long-term, direct relationships with farmers and their primary farmer organizations, all without having to travel, nor require an importer representative to travel internationally. Especially with the major threat of COVID-19 this online trading model is resistant to disruption; farmers and their cooperatives can continue to produce micro-lots and share them with the global specialty-coffee community through the new platform.

Not too long before the outbreak of COVID-19, we organized and co-hosted with our Colombian allies two major coffee competitions and auctions in the departments of Antioquia and Cauca. The events featured the combined participation of more than 40 cuppers and buyers who tasted the carefully-selected coffee samples with special COVID-19 safe cupping protocols which aimed at preventing any possible spread of the virus which had already been looming in other parts of the world. The newly introduced safe cupping protocols involved the use of a small, intermediary tasting cup which is partially filled using the cupping spoon. The cupper only tastes from this personal intermediary cup and never from the cupping spoon.

To contain the spread of the virus, the Colombian government has been implementing major restrictions on the mobility of its people. A recent survey, executed by coffee trader Caravela Coffee, showed that in some coffee regions a significant drop in production might be expected, simply because of the lack of available labor to harvest the crop. Despite these challenges faced by coffee growers, the survey concludes with an uplifting message: “It is amazing to see how communities and families in Colombia are coming together to overcome the scarcity of labor that they are facing. We can see a huge increase in family members helping with the pickings, and people uniting for a common good and help coffee farms, to prevent community members from losing money or coffee.”

### **Ethiopia: Micro-mills for Creating Micro-lots**

Some years ago, I read the wonderful book *Where The Wild Coffee Grows* by the American author Jeff Koehler. For his research, the writer lived for quite a while in the Kaffa area of western Ethiopia, which is presumed to be the true birthplace of coffee within the Motherland of coffee. I felt enthralled by Koehler’s beautiful description of the special connection felt by the people in Kaffa towards ‘buna’, as coffee is called locally, and towards coffee trees in general. The book also inspired me to reflect on the merits of an innovative concept for Ethiopia. Having learned from my experiences producing micro-lots in Panama, I started thinking about the possibility to launch

a new concept for the production of specialty coffee in Ethiopia. Why not produce Ethiopian micro-lots in specially designed micro-mills that can produce as little as 50 bags or 3,000 kgs of specialty beans up to 500 bags or 30 metric tons? Traditionally, coffee processing mills in Ethiopia facilitate the production of relatively large volumes of coffee, usually 50 metric tons or much more annually. In the case of a micro-mill, the locally-produced coffee is processed close to the place where the cherries are harvested which provides superior opportunities to separate the coffee on a farmer to farmer basis. On top of that, the key-benefit of the micro-mill is also the ability to guarantee absolute traceability of the coffee, which is nowadays a highly appreciated feature by specialty buyers.

Our micro-mill proposal was accepted and fully funded by the USAID-financed Feed the Future program which is designed to improve the livelihoods of thousands of coffee farmers in western Ethiopia. The program has a prime focus on Western Ethiopia and extends from the highlands of Agaro and Limu, and the semi-forest farms of Kaffa, to the remote areas of Bench Maji.

More than 50 candidates were selected to receive support for the development of value-added micro-mill coffee processing sites. At least 30 micro-mill stations for washed coffee and about 20 sites for sundried natural coffee were built for the program. Qualified producers were not only selected for their motivation to participate in the production of specialty coffee lots but also for their ability to co-invest



*Majestic view from Finca La Mula, Panama from the southeastern slopes of the farm. Elevation 1750 meters asl.*



### Willem Boot

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in the upgrade of their production sites. The micro-mill program was launched in early 2019 and specifically for this initiative we incorporated innovative concepts for the design of the drying beds and for the selection of the ecologically friendly pulpers. A comprehensive training and start-up program was launched by our brilliant Ethiopian partners from Coqua Consulting. Together with our wonderful colleagues from USAID, who went above and beyond to facilitate the micro-mill initiative, we were able to build at least 30 micro-mills in record time. The remaining micro-mills will come online during the next harvest.

The onset of the COVID-19 pandemic took all coffee producers in Ethiopia by surprise. Fortunately, all coffee had already been harvested and secured in the country's coffee warehouses. I interviewed two coffee producers about the impact of the pandemic on their livelihoods. (see next section).

### Micro-mill Producers: Impact of the Pandemic

*Demek Wana Basha*

*Bench Sheko zone, Debub bench woreda, Miya kebele*

I started learning about coffee farming and coffee production as a child. Now I am 32 years old and own a micro-mill. I have a wife and four kids: Two sons and two daughters. They all go to school. The coronavirus has affected our business a lot. We haven't been able to transport our coffee and there are hardly any workers to clean and select the beans. Hand sanitizers, masks, and soap are very expensive. It's a terrible situation for all of us. I'm praying for a brighter future.

*Nejib Hajji Sadik Abakoyas*

*Jimma Zone, Gera Worda, Sedi Kebele*

I have six children: Five boys and one girl. My wife helps out in our micro-mill and she does the accounting. So far we haven't encountered any problems due to the coronavirus. We are organizing prevention awareness training and we protect ourselves. Fortunately, we have been able to face the challenges by working hard and by keeping faith in our ability to succeed.

### FINAL COMMENTS by Author:

While I'm hunkered down in the comfort of my own home, I'd like to express my deepest respect to the coffee producers around the world. For that reason, this article is dedicated to the millions of coffee farming families and their workers who continue harvesting and producing our precious coffee beans despite all these ongoing challenges. Cheers to you all!

*Willem Boot*



*Unique geisha-hybrid coffee cherries at Finca La Mula, Panama*

Photo / Willem Boot



*Harvesting coffee cherries in Cauca, Colombia*

Photo / Coffee For People