

An aerial photograph of a winding road in San Francisco, California. The road is paved and curves through a residential neighborhood with numerous houses and trees. The word "DRIFT" is overlaid in large, bold, yellow, sans-serif capital letters across the top of the image. The road continues to curve downwards and then to the right, eventually leading to a steeper, more densely wooded area. The overall scene is captured from a high angle, looking down on the city.

DRIFT

SAN FRANCISCO

A Catalyst for Quality: A Brief Story on Willem Boot

WORDS Eduardo Perez Varona
PHOTOGRAPHS Daniela Velasco

"I mean, fuck man, can you imagine?! He was standing six feet tall." Willem Boot's chair scraped as he stood to indicate the physicality of the tribal leader of the Ethiopian land that was under dispute. The dispute was regarding a portion of land on one of the few privately-held coffee estates, Gesha Village, in Ethiopia. "He was speaking Amharic, leaning casually on the stock of his AK-47, using it as if it were a stick. We were just watching, hoping it would all turn out well," recounts Boot, founder of Boot Coffee, a coffee consulting firm in the San Francisco Bay Area.

It's not unusual for Boot's stories to end this way. His memory is composed of tales that will never disappoint. Always full of color and adventure, they represent the man who tells them. In the complex and often overlooked space in the middle of the coffee supply chain, Boot has found a place to thrive.

Willem (pronounced *Villem*, in his native Dutch) began his life in coffee at the age of 14 helping out at his family's coffee company, The Golden Coffee Box. The company manufactured home-roasting machines and sold customized green and roasted coffees tailored to its customers' personalities. After finishing his studies in economics, he took a job with Probat Burns, a renowned German coffee roaster and manufacturer, to represent it in the North American market, and moved to San Francisco. His initial stint in the SFBA only lasted a few years before he returned to Holland in 1992 and took over his family's business and grew Boot Koffie into a successful company alongside his brother.

It was love and the founding of his new venture, Boot Coffee, that brought him back to San Francisco in 1998. What started as a consulting gig quickly grew into a full-throttle education center and specialized consulting team focused on developing quality throughout the supply chain. Some of his ongoing projects come from private and public companies that find a need for his expertise, but most are of his own design. Willem has a knack for seeing opportunities that require his skillset and pitching projects that might have otherwise never happened.



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"They were leaving money on the table by selling their coffee on the conventional market," shares Boot. He propositioned a Panamanian estate to let him take its coffee to the specialty market in the States. "Whatever margin I make on top of what you're getting for it here, we split."

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We were at the Specialty Coffee Expo in Seattle, one of the few events that gather so many people from the industry at the same time. Boot had his buddy Raymond Suiter, a coffee entrepreneur in Hawaii, join us. Raymond's curiosity proved essential in coaxing forth the remaining pieces of the stories they've shared about the past. Boot tells us about Finca Hartmann, a Panamanian coffee farm recognized for its stellar coffees, and one that Boot unwittingly put on the map. Boot met Ratibor, one of five siblings that runs Finca Hartmann, during one of his many expeditions to find projects that show potential for the increase in quality and value for farmers (he has many of these expeditions, and even gives them quirky names like "Cupping Caravans"). Finca Hartmann has since become a recognized estate by specialty green buyers and roasters. Boot has helped launch three different award-winning coffee farms in Panama, all run by Kelly Hartman, Ratibor's brother. Whether it's through negotiating land rights with armed, tribal leaders or through helping young, bright-eyed zealots realize their wildest dreams, it seems that Boot always manages to be in the thick of it.

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Mokhtar Alkhanshali is an eager character, beaming with curiosity. He was raised in the Tenderloin neighborhood of San Francisco by Yemeni parents and, as stories go, Alkhanshali was serendipitously introduced to coffee. It's not a coincidence that people like Boot and Alkhanshali find each other—it's as though their lives are spaceships going full speed towards mid-air collision.

Alkhanshali had the modest desire to share the historic coffees of Yemen with the world. This road has been paved with nothing less than conflict. If the violence wasn't enough, Alkhanshali was still responsible for getting producers to implement processes of high standards for coffee-cultivation in a region where it was easier to grow other agricultural crops. It seemed too coincidental, then, that the person who led the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) program identifying the opportunities Yemen had with coffee was none other than Boot. With both Boot and Alkhanshali living in San Francisco, it was only a matter of time before the two men crossed paths.

Boot and Alkhanshali were instrumental in helping each other accomplish their goals, but not before they both came back with the stories of navigating Yemen, a country engulfed in civil war. Fast forward four years, and Alkhanshali now works with Yemeni farmers to develop quality coffee and share the coffees of his culture with the world through his budding company, Port of Mokha.

Today, most attention in the world of specialty coffee is paid to the people participating at opposing ends of the supply chain—from coffee shops and baristas to roasters, farms, and producers. But it is rare to hear the incredible stories of the people who tie those industry ends together. These people inhabit an uncomfortable space; a space filled with social, political, economic, and climatic uncertainty. This uncertainty is Boot's fuel. It is a space often navigated alone and somehow feels like it's connected to everyone everywhere. From his student-roasters-turned-shop-owners, to the many producer groups he has worked with through the years, it is likely you've drunk a cup of coffee impacted by Boot at your favorite coffee shop. The prospect of helping others better their business, their livelihood, and their coffee is an uncertainty worth living with and even for.

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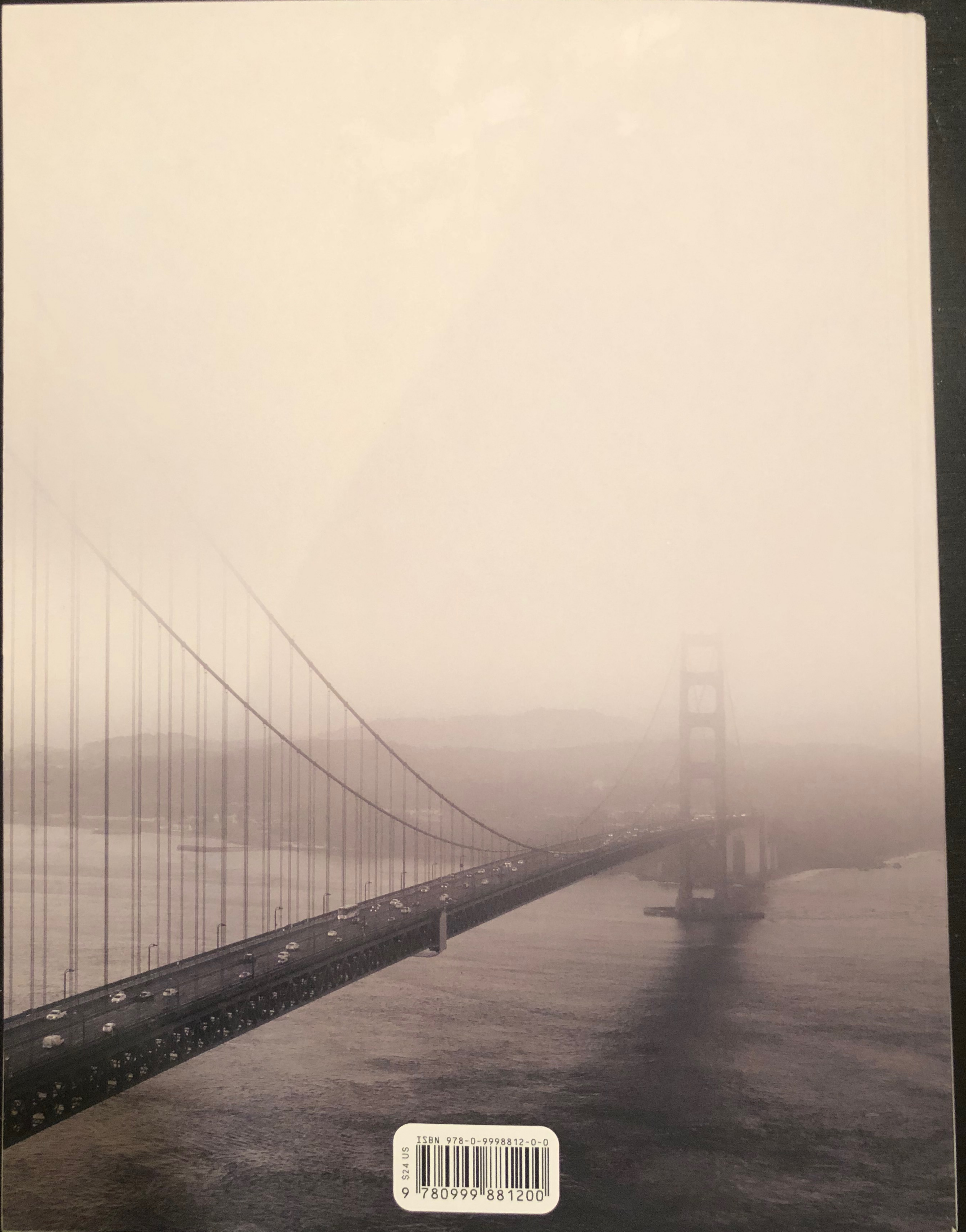
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