

ETHIOPIA BY MARK MCKEE

RECENTLY, as I walked down the cool, damp streets of Seattle, looking into the various coffee shops filled with individuals enjoying their favorite specialty drinks and coffee, I stopped a number of consumers and asked them: where did coffee originate? Nearly all looked at me, laughed a bit, and said, "Seattle, of course!" Not one of the people I talked to was aware that coffee originated in far-off Ethiopia. A country where one can still walk through the rolling hills and mountains and see coffee growing wild. A country that is not only rich in coffee history and pride but that is making tremendous efforts to improve the quality of its coffee.

HISTORY

Most of us have heard the story of Kaldi and his dancing goats, but many never look further into the way coffee actually became part of the Muslim culture. The story goes that Kaldi, after discovering the coffee cherries and the effects that they had on his goats, immediately brought the cherries to the imam, the religious leader of the mosque. The imam, after hearing Kaldi's story, threw the cherries into a nearby fire. Immediately the entire mosque was filled with a wonderful aroma. The imam removed the grains from the fire, placed them in a ewer and covered them with hot water. That evening, the men coming for evening prayer enjoyed the beverage and were amazed how it kept them awake. Thus, it quickly became part of the traditions of evening prayer.

Coffee was first exported from Ethiopia to Yemen by Sudanese slaves who wrapped the cherries in animal fat and ghee (clarified butter) to create

what might be considered the first energy bar.

TODAY

Ethiopian coffee production has changed a great deal from those earlier days, but the trees still grow wild in many different areas of the country. In Ethiopia, coffee is divided into three categories: garden coffee, forest and semi-forest coffee, and plantation coffee. Garden coffee is grown on small family-operated farms that are about one to two hectares. Forest coffee is essentially wild coffee that is still picked wherever it happens to grow. Plantation coffee, not surprisingly, involves larger estates, careful pruning and organized rows.

The main growing regions in Ethiopia are Sidamo, Harrar, Djimmah, Limu, Teppi, Bebeke, Gimbi, Lekempti and Yirgacheffe. As it would be difficult to go through all these regions, I want to share with you what I saw going on in the Yirgacheffe region, located in the beautiful Great Rift Valley.

For many years, Ethiopian coffees have been primarily dry-processed, similar to those of the country's close neighbor, Yemen. However, through education and partnerships with groups such as Dominion Trading and USAID, as well as individuals involved with relationship coffee, we are beginning to see a change. In addition, coffee roasters and professionals are developing relationships with individual coffee farms and mills to increase the quality and production of their coffee. Currently, about 50 percent of all coffee is water-processed, and the Ethiopian coffees that I have cupped are showing a significant improvement in the delicate

aromas and flavors found in the country's coffees.

A good example: In Yirgacheffe, I came across Mike Stemm and Craig Meredith, who have helped establish a company called DTC Holding which is now actually owned and operated by Ethiopians. DTC Holding runs the Kebede Koomsa wet-processing plant in Yirgacheffe and ships coffee directly from the plant through their export company. When you walk through this plant you can't help but notice the beautiful singing that is taking place. While the women have the coffee on drying tables, sorting through the beans by hand, they are continually singing as they work.

We all know that water is a primary factor in the processing of coffee and the Kebede Koomsa plant was using an old, outdated pulper that used 60,000 gallons of water a day. In addition, the water had to be stored in huge pits that usually became contaminated and could not be released or used. DTC Holding installed a new eco-pulper that uses only 800 gallons per day. The water is no longer contaminated: in fact, when the water is returned to the streams, it is cleaner than when it was retrieved. It is projects like these that are improving the quality of the coffee processing, and that quality is showing in the cup.

CUP PROFILE

One of the characteristics of Ethiopian coffee that I so much appreciate is the distinct difference from region to region. Harrar, for instance, tends to have a distinctive woody, nutmeg and cinnamon with blueberry aroma and stays true all the way to the cupping. The coffees from Sidamo, when

roasted to a light/medium full city roast, tend to display plum, apricot and peach with a distinct floral aroma and hints of berry. When roasting these coffees, you can expect some inconsistency in the roast; when first crack begins, you will notice color varieties in the bean development. But watch closely, as within 10 degrees, those colors will begin to even. Thus it's critical during this portion of the roasting process to bring the bean up in an even roast, dropping them the moment you hear second crack. Most Ethiopians will be consistent in color at this point with the exception of the "Wild Horse" Harrar, which could well be named "rainbow coffee" due to its various tones.

Philip Meech, owner and roaster for Caffe Lusso Coffee Roasters in Redmond, Wash., evaluated the coffee mentioned earlier, and came up with some interesting conclusions. Meech states, "This coffee is ultra clean, even for a Yirgacheffe. For that I really recommend a lighter roast, even just prior to second crack; this will capture the fullest spectrum of origin character." Meech adds that this light roasting is only something you do with coffees that have impeccable milling and washing, as it will highlight any defect if one is present. In the dry fragrance, Meech found a hint of bergamot and jasmine with suggestions of lemon. The fragrance and the cup matched, as the dominating theme of the cup was both bergamot and jasmine with highlight notes of lemon.

FUTURE

The future of Ethiopian coffee, which contains an attempt at preserving the distinct heritage while continuing to always move forward in quality, looks promising, especially when we see relationships like the ones listed above developing, but there are still many obstacles to overcome. From 1974 to 1992, Ethiopia was ruled by a dictatorship that violated human rights. One such abuse was the government's creation of large collective farms, which were required to sell their

crops to the state at a reduced price. After the fall of the dictatorship, the government revised its laws to allow farmers to form co-ops and demand fair prices without the use of middlemen. However, due to the negative connotations surrounding cooperative work, there is still mistrust about organizing the farmers today. Yet, unless they are organized, they will have no leverage with pricing and developing quality. Along with that, the long history of coffee exporting from Ethiopia means that markets are limited due to well-established brokers and large processors. Within the country, there is little remaining good growing acreage to support an increasing population, and that is why the focus on quality and better yield per hectare is truly the only solution. This is beginning to take place through training from professional

agronomists who promote composting, stumping and pruning. There are signs of hope, though, as new robust inspection criteria are brought to the washing stations, the farmers are beginning to earn higher prices for their quality red cherries, and

that's encouraging.

What's also encouraging, but will also be an obstacle for the Ethiopian coffee market, is the fact that other African markets are beginning to develop quality coffee. In the past few years we have seen Rwanda, Malawi and now Zimbabwe emerge on the coffee scene. From my standpoint, this will help coffee professionals offer a larger selection of coffees from the African region. However, it's important to remember our roots in coffee, especially now that the birthplace of our favorite drink is beginning to gain a stronger foothold on quality.

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ETHIOPIA FACTS

OFFICIAL NAME Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia

AREA 472,000 square miles, slightly less than twice the size of Texas

LOCATION A landlocked country situated in the Horn of Africa, Ethiopia is bordered by Eritrea to the north, Sudan to the west, Kenya to the south, Somalia to the east and Djibouti to the northeast.

CAPITAL Addis Ababa

POPULATION 83 million

MONETARY UNIT Birr

LANGUAGES Amharic (official), Tigrinya, Arabic, Guaragigna, Oromigna, English, Somali.

TERRAIN High plateau, mountains, dry lowland plains.

CLIMATE Temperate in the highlands; hot in the lowlands.

