



Field Report: Ethiopia
By David Pohl
February/March 2011

We almost passed the gate to a washing station that my host probably didn't intend for me to see. But at the last minute he offered, in an off-handed way, probably expecting I'd say no, or maybe feeling obligated to at least point it out. I nodded my head to the side and shrugged, suggesting a vague agreement to his proposal, why not, and so suddenly in response the Land Cruiser turned into the driveway of the mill.

Driving past the guard and through the grey metal gate, chipped and heavy with age, we headed towards the cement drying patios covered with steaming red cherries, freshly picked, behind which were smoldering piles of pulp, burning slowly, giving the air a hazy, mildly oppressive quality. At the height of the harvest, they have to burn some of the pulp, my host explained. Most of it is composted and used on farms. Good, I thought. It was hot now, just past mid-day, the sun bearing down upon the coffee, the pulp, the people working at the mill and the black truck I was riding in.

Turning a corner we parked under a tree, shaded from the light, and stepped out onto the dusty grass. Coming into focus then were the workers, who began to approach, baskets in hand—they had been sorting un-ripe cherries from the day's harvest and dumping these in white nylon bags—small, skinny, ragged workers with smiles on their faces, all of them. Children, many of whom were no older than my son, 5, working here in this mill . . . It was Saturday, my host explained, no school today.

Surrounded now by 20 kids, coffee sorters, I was uncomfortable, not wanting to judge but wanting to understand why they had to work here in the heat, fermenting coffee under their bare feet—why they weren't inside, where it was cooler?—thinking of my son and suddenly feeling an intense compassion and respect for them. Their hands were blistered, I thought at first, but no, it was coffee pulp stuck to their palms from hours of sorting. Coffee decomposes quickly after it is picked, like strawberries, but with a skin more like a blueberry. It is sticky and sweet. I asked to see their hands—it would make a good picture—so they extended them as if asking for money . . . perfect, I relaxed, and readied my camera.

Suddenly a commotion erupted behind them as a man with a switch, a rod, I can't remember, rushed forward admonishing them, whipping them, yelling, some unfortunate smiles turning to grimaces, others more lucky, laughing now, escaping pain, running away, scattering, back to work, where they belonged, but one boy still wincing at the lashing he had just taken. It was over and done, instantly, though I was still trying to explain that it was OK, we were just talking, they weren't asking for money, but the man with the switch, not hearing, not understanding, just doing his job, got them back to work, those kids. . .my host remained silent just standing there, no particular expression on his face. . .OK, I tried to regain my composure, discover what to do next, how to regroup my shattered thoughts, the man was just doing his job and the children now were again doing theirs, sorting coffee, high-quality coffee, coffee that I buy and sell for Equator. . .

Travelling around the hinterlands of the southern coffee regions of Ethiopia in December, I experienced many scenes like this. Fifty-three percent of children in Ethiopia ages 10–14 work, according to the International Labour Organization. They have to; it is survival, though in the more cautiously orchestrated visits to cooperatives the children were kept carefully away by the switch-man, knowing, I am sure, how this would be seen by a group of *faranji*, foreigners. While it is taboo in the West for children to work, the truth is that in countries like Ethiopia it is sometimes the only viable option for them. When there is drought, as is often the case in Ethiopia, parents sell their assets to buy food, and children are sent to work, sometimes for the rest of their lives. Of course, not all child labor is equal—in fact, most of what I saw in Ethiopia was reasonable, not necessarily dangerous or excessive, work—children picking coffee on their family’s plot or sorting coffee at a mill. The role of the switch-man surprised me, yes that’s true—it felt a bit harsh—but overall even kids under his watchful eye looked happy.

Driving into villages in Sidama, Yirgacheffe, Guji, and Amaro Gayo we would invariably be greeted by scores of children singing, though really yelling, *youyouyou*—a friendly greeting commonly used to acknowledge the presence of outsiders, as if to say “hey you there . . . hi”. This sometimes built into an undulating blanket of sound that enveloped our vehicles, the sight of children running after us in the rearview mirrors, until they ran out of breath or we sped away, having cleared whatever obstacle caused us to slow down in the first place. If they caught our eye or if we returned their greeting they would beam, giggle, laugh. Then once in a village, at a mill, and out of our cars, stretching, looking for our cameras, the children would approach, still saying *youyouyou*, and if the switch-man wasn’t near, they would begin to ask for money. . .

I was in Ethiopia as part of a group put together by InterAmerican Coffee, of the Neumann Kaffee Gruppe, and Trabocca BV, a top notch Dutch-Ethiopian coffee exporter. With their generous support, along with a handful of visits I set up on my own, I was able to visit more than a dozen growers in a short period of time (both cooperatives from the Yirgacheffe and Oromia Unions and privately owned mills in Aleta Wondo, Agere Maryam and Amaro Gayo), affording me the opportunity to see first hand the state of coffee in southern Ethiopia as the 2010/2011 harvest season was wrapping up.

I was impressed by what I saw. First, this is shaping up to be a much smoother harvest and shipping season than the last. The weather was poor before harvest but harvest itself has gone off reasonably well—at least in the regions of Sidamo that I visited. Furthermore, the Ethiopian Commodity Exchange (ECX) now has its regional receiving stations firmly in place (both good and bad), meaning that there should not be as many delays there. Last, the Oromia Union just opened its own mill in Addis, helping to speed up the export of these coffees. The most worrisome element of this season is the C price—it is high, which causes farmers and millers to hoard their coffee, waiting for the best moment to sell. This has already been quite disruptive to shipments from other origins, Indonesia in particular.

While in Ethiopia I sampled 30 washed and 15 natural coffees from this crop year, many from the very mills I visited on the tour with IAC and Trabocca, and found them to be above average. The washed Gujis were floral, the washed Limus were herbaceous, the natural Sidamos were overwhelmingly fruity. I even sampled some early Harrar Gr. 4s, which were milk chocolatey.

Beyond the coffee itself, I was impressed by the industriousness of the countless people involved in the production of specialty coffee in southern Ethiopia, the raw human labor that fuels coffee, the layers of detail involved in every step of the process and the effective means by which quality coffee is derived usually with very little means. It is amazing really to stand around a drying bed where 50 women are sorting coffee and singing, their hands moving to the rhythm of the music.

In addition, I witnessed a beautiful, ancient culture with deep roots in family, community, religion, and food. Dinner was a long affair, with many courses, and always followed by *bunna*...coffee, that central hub of Ethiopian society, bringing people together three times a day to celebrate coffee, catch up on the news and rest. It always took at least an hour for a coffee ceremony. How nice it was to actually enjoy coffee at such a leisurely pace! Furthermore, in the smallest towns, at the most humble watering holes, I found vintage Italian espresso machines, and people who knew how to operate them, of course a little differently than we do, but still with a familiarity that was impressively all their own.

I was also deeply unsettled by the level of need I saw all around me—the children asking for money, the children working, the people everywhere in ragged clothes, the destitute by the side of the road or in the cities lying on the sidewalk.

Over the course of the trip, from village to village, I struggled to reconcile the image of boutique, micro-lot Ethiopian coffees (the gems that they are!) with the country itself—desperately poor and lacking in basic resources, even, and to me especially, in the coffee industry. The average income for a coffee farmer is likely to be just \$375 this year, much higher than last year, but slightly lower than the per-capita income, largely because farms are very small and also because yields are extremely low. Considering this reality, there is often nothing left to reinvest in a coffee farm itself, as extra income is used on basic human necessities like food, clothing and transportation. I left Ethiopia wanting to explore this contradiction, tell the story not just of the coffee itself, but of the people behind it, with the hope that we as an industry—roasters, importers and baristas—can work together with our farmer-partners to improve both quality of coffee and quality of life.

With this in mind here are three areas of development and change I feel would strengthen the Ethiopian coffee industry (some of which also apply to other origins around the world and which others in the industry are already working on):

1. Improve yields: The average yield is five quintals/hectare in southern Ethiopia, but I talked with farmers who were yielding just two. In Costa Rica the average yield is 35 quintals! This severely limits income potential on what tend to be tiny farms—just a half hectare on average. Simple pruning, fertilizing and harvesting techniques could begin to change this, though further down the road large investments in irrigation would be helpful given how dry and drought prone Ethiopia is.
2. Add value to coffee via improved quality: With small farms and low yields, improving quality and therefore receiving a higher premium is critical to higher incomes. Trabocca pays farmers much higher prices when they deliver only red

cherries, which are then sold as part of its creatively named “Operation Cherry Red” (OCR) program. Farmers who participate in this program are paid twice or three times as much the going rate, which is incentive enough to invest extra time and care in selectively harvesting coffee. Pushing for red-cherry alone would help quality significantly. At nearly every mill I visited I saw ripe, under-ripe and overripe coffees going into the de-pulpers together, at which point it becomes much harder to separate. So, I would love to see OCR type programs applied more extensively.

3. Improve the traceability of Ethiopian coffee: First, the superficial—nice bags. One of the easiest ways to know where your coffee comes from, and promote it to customers, is a clearly labeled bag. It is a constant reminder and just may end up on someone’s wall. Yet for some reason Ethiopian coffees often come in difficult if not impossible to read bags with little distinguishing information. It seems that it should be relatively easy to change this, right? It would sure make me happy. Again, I point to the OCR coffees from Trabocca because they come in clearly and artistically designed bags.

Beyond this easily achievable step, I hope we can continue to find ways to work constructively with the Ethiopia Commodity Exchange (ECX). I really want to be able to buy directly from private mills again. The ECX was met with shock by coffee buyers in the U.S. and Europe when it was set up two years ago because it took away control and reduced transparency. The message then was that coffee was a commodity and would be treated as such—specialty be damned. But the ECX is here to stay, it seems, and appears interested in working with the specialty coffee industry, as the Direct Specialty Trade auction demonstrated last year. My goal is to push for more traceability of micro-lot and boutique coffees, something that at the moment is very hard, though not impossible, to do. By clearly labeling bags and guaranteeing traceability of some, if not all, coffees along the chain of custody, we could more effectively tell the unique stories of these coffees, adding significant value.

As the cradle of coffee and civilization, Ethiopia is a fascinating place. And despite daunting problems, the Ethiopian coffee industry has enormous potential, and is indeed already one of a kind. If it remains as it currently is we will still get good coffees, no doubt about that. Yet, having just spent two weeks there I can say that for me I feel the farmers and their families deserve better. \$375 is not enough to run a sustainable farm, however small. It results in poverty, child labor and inconsistent coffee quality. We can and should work together, as many people already are, to return more value to coffee farmers in exchange for better quality coffee, capitalizing on a growing market for boutique coffees in consuming countries.