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## To Burundi and Beyond for Coffee's Holy Grail

By PETER MEEHAN

DUANE SORENSON had planned to fly to Yemen, rattle up dirt roads in dusty four-by-fours and dart through the Arabian sky in prop planes as he toured the country searching for open-minded coffee growers. Mr. Sorenson, who is the owner of Stumptown Coffee Roasters in Portland, Ore., intended to offer the farmers more money than anyone ever had before in return for a promise to improve their crops.

But a mix-up with his passport left him stuck in Washington. Disappointed but undeterred, he boarded a plane for Guatemala City instead. When he arrived, he ate tortillas, beans and tilapia with the owner of Finca El Injerto in the western Huehuetenango department, one of the most celebrated coffee farms in Central America.

It was a roundabout way to go for a meal. But Mr. Sorenson and a few like-minded coffee hunters around the country will go almost anywhere, do almost anything and pay almost any price in pursuit of the perfect cup of coffee. For people at Stumptown and friendly competitors like Intelligentsia Coffee Roasters and Tea Traders of Chicago and Counter Culture Coffee of Durham, N.C., long trips to remote farms for meetings without immediate payoffs are necessary steps in a much bigger goal: reinventing the coffee business.

“These people have an almost unbelievable ability to source exquisite, unique coffees,” Mark Prince, senior editor at the coffee appreciation Web site [coffeageek.com](http://coffeageek.com), wrote in an e-mail.

Connie Blumhardt, publisher of the coffee magazine *Roast*, concurs: “They are certainly the leaders right now. Some smaller roasters just worship them, like they’re these coffee megagods.”

“Direct trade” is the most popular name of the style of business practiced by these coffee companies, known as roasters. It means, most simply, that the roasters buy their beans directly from the farms and cooperatives that grow them, not from brokers.

The term was popularized by Geoff Watts, director of coffee and green coffee buyer for Intelligentsia. (Mr. Sorenson’s air miles last week paled beside those of Mr. Watts, who flew to Burundi with another coffee roaster to consult with groups who want to revive that country’s once-great coffee tradition.)

Direct trade — which also means intensive communication between the buyer and the grower — stands in stark contrast to the old (but still prevalent) model, in which international conglomerates buy coffee by the steamer ship, through brokers, for the lowest price the commodity market will bear.

It also represents, at least for many in the specialty coffee world, an improvement on labels like Fair Trade, bird-friendly or organic. Such labels relate to how the coffee is grown and may persuade consumers to pay a little extra for their beans, but offer no assurance about flavor or quality. Direct-trade coffee companies, on the other hand, see ecologically sound agriculture and prices above even the Fair Trade

premium both as sound business practices and as a route to better-tasting coffee.

By spending months every year visiting farms, these roasters seek to offer coffee that is produced as well as it can be, bought responsibly and roasted carefully. They aim, simply, to sell the best coffee possible.

“It’s an exploration of coffee’s flavor, really” is how George Howell explains his mission. Mr. Howell, who runs George Howell Coffee Company, a roaster based in Acton, Mass., has had a hand in practically every lurch forward in the quality coffee scene since he started out in the business in 1974. “We’re finding flavors we’ve never ever tasted before, different fruit and floral flavors from really pristine, clean coffees. These are flavors that have been lost or diluted in the old methods of blending coffee down to an average product.”

In many ways, the direct-trade roasters are building on the foundation laid by companies like Peet’s and, later, Starbucks, which went outside the commodity system to find superior coffee. But, Ms. Blumhardt said, those companies are too big to comb over every bean in every sack the way some direct-trade companies do. Starbucks bought more than 300 million pounds of coffee last year; Intelligentsia, the biggest of this group, bought 2 million pounds.

Sometimes roasters find coffee farms through serendipity. Peter Giuliano, co-owner and director of coffee for Counter Culture Coffee, spoke with palpable excitement about stumbling upon a Central American farm planted with geishas, a plant known to yield especially high quality beans. (This year, Esmeralda Especial, a Panamanian coffee produced exclusively from geisha beans, earned the highest price ever paid in a coffee auction.)

More often, roasters connect with growers through tasting competitions. The most prestigious of these are the annual Cup of Excellence competitions, now organized in eight coffee-growing countries by a United States-based nonprofit group, an event Mr. Prince of Coffeegeek calls “Coffee’s Olympics.” These blind-tasting competitions take as long as 10 days, after which the organizers auction the coffees online to bidders around the world, who compete fiercely for the beans.

Mr. Sorenson recently spent more than \$100,000 for a batch of coffee beans that took top honors at this year’s Nicaraguan Cup of Excellence competition. The coffee, from Las Golondrinas, Marcio Benjamín Peralta Paguaga’s farm in Nicaragua, sold for \$47.06 a pound, just shy of \$40 more than the winner earned last year. But for Mr. Sorenson, who said the unusual “mango, peach, cantaloupe and jasmine flower” flavors made it the finest Nicaraguan coffee he had ever tasted, it was worth it.

Counter Culture started buying from Finca Mauritania, Aída Batlle’s farm on the slopes of the Santa Ana volcano in El Salvador, after the farm’s coffee won attention at the 2003 Cup of Excellence in El Salvador. After working with Ms. Batlle for a few years, visiting the farm regularly and sampling beans produced under a range of conditions, Mr. Giuliano has asked her to pick the coffee berries when “half the fruit is at a burgundy red ripeness and the rest when it’s bright red,” a mix that Mr. Giuliano says yields just the right sweetness in a finished cup. (Counter Culture supplies the house blends for two of New York City’s most highly regarded cafes, Café Grumpy and Ninth Street Espresso.)

One of the most effective methods of encouraging change turns out to be as simple as sharing a few cups of coffee with the people who grow it. Obvious as it seems, this was far from common practice until about 10 years ago.

Mr. Watts said that cupping (coffee lingo for the formal, multistep tasting process used to evaluate quality) can help growers understand what a buyer is looking for. “There has to be a real financial incentive for every incremental improvement in quality, but it can’t be mysterious,” he said. “It has to be objective. The grower has to have every reason to believe that his investment in his farm is an investment in himself, not just him doing what some crazy American wants him to. And when they have the same evaluative skills that we do, they can taste their coffees and know what they could be worth.”

Direct trade relationships typically mean that the roaster guarantees to pay well more than the going Fair Trade price for coffees that meet an agreed-upon standard based on a cupping scale. If the coffees score above that standard, growers earn even more.

Cupping also help roasters select the best of the already very good coffees they will offer their customers. On his most recent visit to Finca El Puente, a coffee farm in the mountainous southwestern corner of Honduras, Mr. Giuliano tasted his way through 68 tiny batches of coffee. The beans were separated by the section of the farm on which they were grown, the way a winery might segregate grapes by vineyard, and by when they were picked.

The cupping gave the Caballero family, which owns Finca El Puente, a look into the qualities Mr. Giuliano values in a finished cup so they can trace those qualities back to a particular patch of land, or a type of coffee shrub, or a degree of ripeness at picking time. For his part, Mr. Giuliano got the chance to pick the best lots for this year’s El Puente blend. Any batch that was particularly exceptional he would pay more for, roast separately and sell at a premium as a “micro-lot.”

Mr. Howell recently cupped through a selection of beans with Alejandro Cadena from Virmax, a quality-minded Colombian exporter. Mr. Cadena had brought beans sorted by size to explore the effect of bean size on a finished cup. Mr. Howell has found that smaller beans from Brazil have brighter acidity than larger beans. But bean size had no discernible effect on Mr. Cadena’s Colombian coffees, a finding Mr. Howell attributed to the mixed varieties of coffee plants used by the tiny farms Virmax represents.

Cupping is also a way of pinpointing where in the production or importing chain even the most extraordinary coffees can be damaged. At a recent cupping at his headquarters in Acton, Mr. Howell demonstrated some of the dangers. Coffee that had spent too long in a jute bag, for instance, was contrasted with some that was stored in plastic.

Sometimes simple conversation ends up making an impact on the finished coffee and on the people who grow it. On a trip to Rwanda in 2006, Mr. Sorenson asked one of the farmers in the Koakaka Koperative y’Abanhinzi Ya Kawa Ya Karaba — a cooperative that supplies him with the Rwandan beans he sells as “Karaba” — what Stumptown could do to help him improve his coffees.

“He — his name is Innocent — said a bike would help him with transportation of ripe cherry to the mills,” Mr. Sorenson said, using the term for the fruit that contains the coffee bean. “Which would improve the coffee’s quality, since coffee needs to be milled within hours of picking.” Coffee berries that sit in the sun can ferment, yielding off flavors that can taint a batch of beans.

After returning from the trip, Mr. Sorenson started a nonprofit group called Bikes to Rwanda. This April, 400 bikes specially engineered for carrying heavy loads of coffee over hilly Rwandan terrain were delivered to the cooperative just in time for the harvest.

Though altruism played a part in that effort, Mr. Sorenson said he sees paying high prices for beans and treating his growers as partners as the only way to get the quality he wants. “It’s not charity,” he said. “Our producers invest back into their workers, coffee shrubs, equipment and land. We know this is happening because of all the time we spend with them throughout the year, on their farms and in their homes.”

But it’s not a point he feels the need to argue stridently, because the proof — for anyone to taste — is in the cup.

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