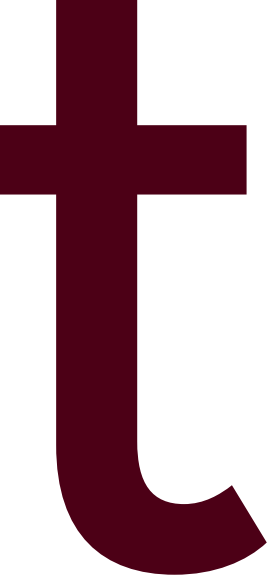


COFFEELAND

DAVID FARLEY travels to Ethiopia to
find the source of a global obsession

PHOTOGRAPHS BY AMI VITALE



THE FIRST THING AZEB WANTED TO KNOW about me was if I was on Facebook. After that she got to the less important stuff: Where I was from, if I was married, had kids, believed in God—and what was I doing in southern Ethiopia? Azeb, a 25-year-old business student with big glowing eyes and long dark hair, was born and raised not far from where we were having breakfast. We ended up sitting together when we realized we were the only people in the dining room at the Lesiwon Hotel in Yirgacheffe, the namesake town of a region known to coffee cognoscenti for producing some of Ethiopia's highest-quality coffee beans.

As Azeb scooped up pieces of her omelet with torn-off hunks of bread, as is the Ethiopian custom, I stabbed at mine with a fork and told her about my travels thus far in her country. But it was something I mentioned in passing that seriously broke the ice. Until this trip—specifically the day prior to our chance encounter, when I had driven down from Addis Ababa, the Ethiopian capital, to the southern part of the country—I had never seen a coffee tree.

Azeb's mouth fell open, her head tilted heavenward, and she let out a high-pitched laugh. "You'd never seen a coffee cherry before?" she said, and then she just stared at me, her mouth still agape, as if I'd just casually asked her if airplanes drive on invisible roads in the sky.

Coffee is to Ethiopia what hops are to Bohemia or grapes to Bordeaux. That is, coffee is almost everything, from the cornerstone of the community's economic fortunes to the lifeblood of its social relations. Java drinking is so deeply rooted here that Azeb was dumbstruck that I could have lived 40 years on the planet never having seen what coffee looks like before it's plucked, peeled, dried, roasted, and ground.

Which is exactly why I was in Ethiopia. I wanted to travel around this East African country's primary coffee-growing regions and immerse myself in its coffee culture. I can sit around at coffeehouses in New York and San Francisco drinking all the Ethiopian coffee my brain can take before spinning out of control. But I was curious about the time and toil it takes to produce these beans, everything that goes into slaking the States' obsessive thirst for small-batch artisan roasts.

After all, great coffee is harvested all over the world—in Guatemala, Colombia, Indonesia, Kenya, and Rwanda, for example—but no coffee-producing country on earth can match the variety that grows in Ethiopia. By some estimates, nearly 99 percent of the world's arabica coffee can be traced to Ethiopia. Moreover, according to aficionados, it's here that some of the best coffee in the world is being produced.

Every December and January, coffee-harvest time here, representatives of Third Wave coffee roasters—the smallish, hip U.S. coffee companies that take their java very seriously (see sidebar, page 93)—materialize and scour the landscape for the highest-quality single-origin beans Ethiopia has to offer. This is Coffeeland.

BY THE TIME I MET AZEB, I had already made several stops on my quest. The day after I arrived in Ethiopia, I contacted a friend of a friend, Yohannes Assefa, in Addis Ababa. A lawyer, Assefa is well connected in the coffee world. He helped establish the Ethiopian Commodity Exchange (ECX), a first in Africa: a government-run organization that provides a transparent marketplace for farmers. This has revolutionized Ethiopia's coffee industry, mostly for the better, by closing loopholes that had facilitated rampant corruption.

Assefa promised to teach me how to drink like an Ethiopian. Year after year, the nation is consistently one of the largest coffee exporters in the world and the largest in Africa. Ethiopians, however, drink about half of all the coffee they produce, preparing and serving it in an elaborate ritual that distinguishes their coffee-growing culture from all others. On my way to meet Assefa at his home, I walked through Addis's upscale Bole Road neighborhood, where the wide streets are flanked by newly built hotels and countless coffee shops, each one packed with men and women sitting around nursing macchiatos.

At Assefa's two-story house on Bole Road, he and his housekeeper were poised to show me how Ethiopians have classically drunk coffee. Within seconds of my arrival, the housekeeper went to work: She lit coals and set a *jabena*, a traditional coffeepot that looks like a sort of lantern or bottle where a genie might live, on top of the coals to boil the water. Then she rested a pan with green (unroasted) coffee beans atop another container of burning coals. Finally, she lit some incense—frankincense—and the coffee making was in full swing. As large plumes of the scented smoke swirled toward the ceiling, Assefa and I chatted about coffee's role in Ethiopian culture.

"It's deeply spiritual," he said. "Just look at the incense that is burned every time we make coffee. And is it a coincidence that monks played a role in discovering coffee?" As legend has it, a ninth-century goatherd named Kaldi noticed his flock "dancing" one day. When he realized the goats had been eating the cherries on a tree, he took some of the fruit to a nearby monastery, and the monks there began chewing on it as a pick-me-up. And coffee, so the story has been retold countless times, was born. "This drink," Assefa said, gesturing toward the housekeeper, who was now crushing the roasted beans with a mortar and pestle, "exemplifies Ethiopia more than anything else."

Coffee is so significant to Ethiopia that, Assefa told me, it's a matter of national security. "It's our most valued commodity," he said, "accounting for around 30 percent of our exports. With the money we make from coffee, we are able to buy weapons and medicine." This is why the government regulates the coffee industry, making sure the best







THE PREPARATION RITUAL CERTAINLY HAD THE FEELING OF A SACRAMENT. IT ISN'T PERFORMED MUCH OUTSIDE THE HOME IN ADDIS. IN THE RURAL TOWNS, HOWEVER, WHERE MODERNIZATION IS MUCH SLOWER, I PARTOOK IN THE CEREMONY EVERY TIME I DRANK COFFEE.

beans of all get exported. And this is why, ironically, experiencing the finest product the Ethiopian coffee industry has to offer might mean drinking it in Minneapolis or Madrid instead of Addis Ababa.

Still, the coffee here is remarkable, especially the intense brew that is served ceremonially. After several minutes of preparation, Assefa's housekeeper poured our first round into tiny, handleless cups. As tradition dictates, the Ethiopian coffee ceremony consists of three rounds, each with its own name. The first, called *abol*, simply means "first" in Amharic, the country's official language. By the *tona* (second) stage, and certainly by the third, *baraka*, which means "blessing," one is guaranteed to feel like bouncing off the walls from overcaffeination. As Assefa and I sipped, we intermittently munched roasted barley, a traditional snack enjoyed with java here, and popcorn, a recent addition to the snack menu. The coffee was robust, with a taste stratum of citrus and floral lingering on the back of my tongue—a common Ethiopian flavor profile, especially for this coffee, grown in the Yirgacheffe region.

The preparation ritual certainly had the feeling of a sacrament. It isn't performed much outside the home in Addis, where most coffee consumption seems to take place in the ubiquitous chain outlets. In rural towns, however, where modernization is much slower, I partook in the ceremony every time I drank coffee.

A couple days after my afternoon with Assefa, for example, I was sitting with eight locals in a small living-room-cum-coffee-shop in the Yirgacheffe region. With incense wafting between us, its scent blending with that of the roasting coffee, we needed something to do while we waited. So we talked. The entire process was slow and purposeful and intimate. While the woman (and it's always a woman) roasted and crushed the beans, we were forced to slow down, to chat, to pay attention, and to get to know one another. I began to see a social component to what Assefa had described as coffee's spiritual nature, and to understand what he meant when he told me, "People will go hungry rather than give up their daily coffee rituals."

THE SECOND PHASE of my coffee journey involved traveling around southern Ethiopia with Geoff Watts, co-owner and green-coffee buyer for the Los Angeles- and Chicago-based roaster Intelligentsia







INTELLIGENTSIA COFFEE'S GEOFF WATTS BOARDS A FLIGHT, THIS PAGE, TO SOUTHERN ETHIOPIA. THERE, OPPOSITE, HE NEGOTIATES WITH LOCAL FARMERS FOR THEIR BEST BEANS.

Coffee. We spent several days navigating the bumpy back roads of the Sidama Zone, the traditional homeland of the Sidama people, passing through mud-hut villages where children went into “It’s the ice cream man!”-like hysterics as we cruised by. They ran alongside our truck and yelled, “*Farenji, farenji, farenji!*” (approximately, “white face!”), and chanted somewhat more cryptically, “You, you, you, you, you, you!”

Our destinations were coffee-washing stations, the centers where farmers bring in their just-plucked cherry (the fruit that surrounds the coffee bean, always referred to in the singular) to be stripped, fermented, soaked, and dried. The stations, almost always set on a slope, consisted of a machine that de-pulped the cherry and a dozen or so 100-foot-long tables where the pits (the coffee beans) would dry in the shade for a few days. At each stop, as soon as we’d climb out of the truck, about 40 farmers would gather around. At the first washing station we visited, I got to see Watts, a 39-year-old with brown sideburns stretching down below his earlobes, in action.

“My name is Geoff, and I’m a coffee roaster from the United States,” he said through a translator. “I’ve traveled all this way to meet farmers like you, because the business I work for is based on the idea that for *us* to be successful, *you* have to be successful.” There was a hush, as if the

farmers hadn’t exactly grasped what he was saying. Then Watts added, “I can’t promise that I’ll buy your coffee. But if we do work together, I will pay you higher than the market value for your goods.”

This was Watts’s umpteenth trip to the Sidama Zone to scout out coffee. He spends up to eight months a year venturing into remote coffee territories around the world and cultivating personal business relationships with farmers. Third Wave roasters and retailers such as Intelligentsia distinguish themselves from mass producers and Second Wave businesses (such as Starbucks) by presenting coffee as an artisanal foodstuff. Further, Intelligentsia has pioneered the concept of direct trade—buying coffee directly from individual farmers. Unlike Fair Trade—a global, standardized certification system that guarantees organized farming groups a minimum floor price for their products—direct trade, as practiced by Intelligentsia, aims to build a sustainable business model based on individual relationships between roaster and farmer, and the assurance that farmers will always get a better-than-market price for their coffee.

After Watts delivered his spiel at the washing station, he looked over at a farmer who had just turned up with a wicker basket full of cherry. “Oh, these don’t look very good,” he said. “You see, if you let all these green, unripe cherry go through



the process, it's going to create low-quality coffee. It's like a 10-egg omelet—one bad egg will ruin the whole thing. I know you want to make money by bringing in all your cherry—ripe or not so ripe—but trust me, you'll eventually make more money if you sort through this and include only the ripe cherry. That will produce very high-quality coffee. And you'll get an above-market rate for it." The farmer hung his head and slunk away, wicker basket in hand.

Watts's twofold mission is to buy the best coffee directly from the farmers and to help those farmers become better growers who provide a consistent product. The Ethiopian government, in its attempt to regulate the coffee industry, had inadvertently put a roadblock in Watts's path by requiring that all coffee be sold through the Economic Commission Exchange in Addis Ababa. In general, the ECX made it easier for foreign coffee companies to buy beans. But for the handful of specialty coffee buyers like Watts, the regulation made it nearly impossible to trace the provenance of a coffee back to an individual farm. After the law was in place, one could follow the trail only as far back as a region or, at best, the washing station where as many as 1,000 farmers might drop off their cherry to be processed. Fortunately, an exception permits someone like Watts to bypass the ECX and buy directly from registered cooperative unions and single-estate owners. This allows Watts to promote not just the region, not just the local washing station, but individual farms and small cooperatives.

As we drove back down the unpaved road toward our hotel in Dilla, the south's major market town, we watched children trudge up the hill, jute bags full of cherry on top of their heads. Watts sighed. "This is what makes you mad," he said. "You see these kids carrying bags up this hill, and meanwhile, back home in the U.S., some guy comes into a coffee shop and gets angry because he's paying \$3 for a cup of coffee."

Coffee, it turns out, touches a lot of hands. "It's a very finicky process," Watts said of coffee's march to the market. "There are so many little things that could go wrong to change or taint the flavor of the coffee." He spelled it out for me: There's the farmer who plucks the (ideally ripe) cherry from the tree. The washing station manager who (also, ideally) removes any unripe cherry before processing. The many workers who, after the cherry has been stripped and soaked in water for 24 to 48 hours, push the beans around on long tables to make sure each one dries properly. Then there are the workers who load the dried beans into jute sacks, and the driver who transports the coffee to Addis Ababa to be sold or shipped off. Eventually, there's the roaster who, if all goes well, treats the bean with respect and doesn't overroast it. Finally, there's the person sitting in front of a cup of coffee, not complaining (ideally) that it costs too much.

After two days of visiting washing stations in the vicinity of Dilla, Watts had found some decent coffee, but he's a persnickety buyer, and there was nothing he was ready to purchase at the moment.

Next stop, western Ethiopia.

JIMMA IS A BUSTLING LITTLE CITY of about 140,000 people, its potholed roads crammed with racing tuk-tuks, scooters, and dilapidated automobiles that slow down only when the occasional bovine decides to wander down the middle of the road.

Watts and I were in a truck provided by TechnoServe, a non-governmental organization that teaches coffee farmers more profitable methods. Joined by a few people from TechnoServe, we drove deep into the hills outside the city. After a bouncy two-hour ride, we arrived at the village of Koma. Carl Cervone, an American in our group who works for TechnoServe, expressed surprise that the one road through the village had been much improved and that aluminum-sheet roofing



GREAT COFFEE IS HARVESTED ALL OVER THE WORLD—IN GUATEMALA, COLOMBIA, BOLIVIA, INDONESIA, KENYA, AND RWANDA, FOR EXAMPLE—BUT NO COFFEE-PRODUCING COUNTRY ON EARTH CAN MATCH THE VARIETY THAT GROWS IN ETHIOPIA.





WHERE TO FIND ETHIOPIAN COFFEE IN THE UNITED STATES

Over the past decade, coffee connoisseurs in the United States have become obsessed with how beans are sourced and roasted. Third Wave (following Peet's and Starbucks) coffee companies feed this passion by buying from individual farms and collectives and roasting their beans in small batches.

BLUE BOTTLE COFFEE

Founded by James Freeman in Oakland, California, Blue Bottle pioneered the practice of delivering its beans to consumers within 48 hours of roasting. In addition to its beans from the Yirgacheffe region, Blue Bottle sells *small-lot* coffees, including Kemgin (with hints of peach, sugarcane, spice, and tea) and Nekisse (blackberries, huckleberries, and sugared lemon slices), from the boutique importer Ninety Plus. *Coffee bars in the San Francisco Bay Area and New York. bluebottlecoffee.com*

COUNTER CULTURE COFFEE ROASTERY

Ethiopian beans from three cooperatives come to the United States via Counter Culture, based in Durham, North Carolina. The Haru co-op, in the Yirgacheffe district, experiments with different wash processes and fermentation times to produce a bright, lemony coffee with notes of jasmine. *Training centers at eight locations in the East, South, and Midwest hold public Friday coffee cuppings. counterculturecoffee.com*

INTELLIGENTSIA COFFEE

Stop by one of Intelligentsia's coffee bars in Chicago or Los Angeles (additional openings are planned for New York and San Francisco) to sample beans from the Debello cooperative, located in Ethiopia's western Jimma zone. Vice president and coffee buyer Geoff Watts recommends drinking Debello as a simple filtered brew to best appreciate its complex and fruity flavors. *Various locations. intelligentsiacoffee.com*

LAUGHING MAN COFFEE & TEA

The espresso blend Dukale's Dream pays tribute to the Ethiopian coffee farmer who inspired actor Hugh Jackman to found this roastery. The Kochere-region beans deliver a robust flavor that stands up to frothy milk in Laughing Man's signature flat white, which has more espresso and less milk than a latte. *184 Duane St., New York City. livelLaughingman.com*

STUMPTOWN COFFEE ROASTERS

With cafés in New York, Seattle, and its Portland, Oregon, home base, Stumptown has for three years been pouring a stone-fruit-tinged floral coffee sourced from the Duromina cooperative in western Ethiopia. Co-op leaders recently told Stumptown representatives that they plan to use their profits to buy a local school bus and invest in other community projects. *Various locations. stumptowncoffee.com*

—JESSICA SILBER

COFFEE WORKERS AT THE CABO PULPING STATION IN SOUTH-WEST ETHIOPIA, THIS PAGE, TAKE A BREAK FROM BAGGING BEANS FOR EXPORT. IN HER HOME NEAR THE TEPPI PLANTATION IN THE KAFFA REGION, OPPOSITE, AMIEL AMBAYE SERVES COFFEE IN THE TRADITIONAL STYLE.





had replaced thatched hay on most of the buildings.

Right after I stepped out of the truck, a young man approached me, a huge smile on his face. His name was Mohammed, he told me, and he was 20 years old. When he learned where I was from, he beamed: “I love America!”

I reciprocated by saying I loved Ethiopia. “We are the Black Lion of Africa,” he said, referring to the fact that Ethiopia was the only African nation to have repelled attempted colonization (by Italy, in Ethiopia’s case). “We are strong” he said.

Mohammed had reason to be happy. As the Ethiopian economy had slowly been gaining ground, he had seen his life improve a lot. Electricity, he said, would be coming to Koma soon. He told me he works part-time as an industrial machine mechanic, then added, “Now I am a coffee farmer, too. Thanks to the washing station, we are all making more money.”

Two years ago, the coffee farmers around Koma were using the traditional sun-drying method, which generally yields a lower-quality coffee by too quickly and unevenly reducing moisture in the beans. Farmers were receiving seven Ethiopian birr, or about 35 cents, per pound of coffee. Now, by using the new washing station that TechnoServe helped install and by switching to shade-drying methods, they are producing beans that fetch at least 35 birr, or \$1.75, per pound—a 500 percent raise.

Watts launched into his usual speech about *Intelligentsia*: buying directly from farmers and giving them an above-market price for good coffee. Then we strolled around the washing station, a dozen or so farmers in tow. Watts occasionally stopped, picked up a handful of shade-drying coffee beans from the tables stretching out over the hillside, and took a deep whiff.

“What other crop,” he said to me, after dropping some beans back on the table, “is going to mobilize an entire continent the way that coffee does? I mean, people aren’t going to travel halfway around the world to find the best corn and then pay a premium price for that corn.”

Watts gave a few nodding approvals as he scanned the washing station. “This is some of the best-looking fruit I’ve seen in a long time,” he said. He smiled broadly and bobbed his head up and down. He was excited, and that seemed to infect the farmers. I could feel a special vibe that pervaded the air around Koma.

As Watts and I walked back toward the truck—having just toured our last of dozens of washing stations over five days or so—eight of the farmers asked for a lift back to the village, a mile away. I sat in the back of the pickup with them, all of us watching the sun set behind the acacia-clad mountains. When the truck came to a halt, we shook hands and they jumped out. There were smiles and waves. The truck drove on, and I stayed in the back, standing up, as the figures of the men got smaller and smaller in my vision.

Back in New York, I began seeing names like Yirgacheffe and Sidama popping up all over the Third Wave coffeehouses I frequent in my neighborhood. They were probably listed there earlier, but travel has a wonderful way of forever spotlighting references to a visited destination, things we might have been blind to before.

The actor Hugh Jackman has even opened up a coffee shop in Tribeca that was inspired by his meeting a coffee farmer on a trip to Ethiopia. When I come upon Ethiopian coffee now, I order it—even when it costs more than \$3 a cup. ▲

Contributing writer DAVID FARLEY has written about Bolognese ragù and Czech liquor for AFAR. Photographer AMI VITALE is profiled on page 14.