



By Majka Burhardt

with Contributor Arthur Karuletwa and  
Photographer Travis Horn

# O R I G I N

ETHIOPIA'S COFFEE LEGACY









**COFFEE'S JOURNEY,  
ETHIOPIA'S HERITAGE**

Coffee's life as a seed, bean, and brew,  
unique Ethiopian cultivation practices,  
coffee's process, coffee's potential.

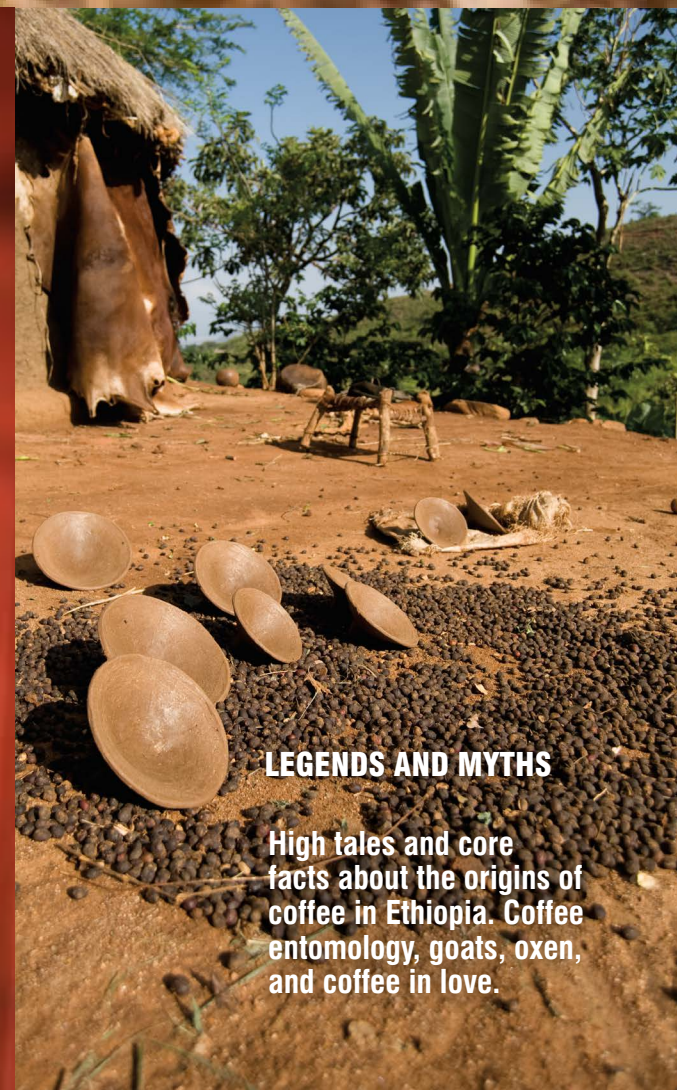
# The Elements of **ORIGIN**: Ethiopia's Coffee Legacy

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**UNDERSTANDING ETHIOPIA**

An exploration of Ethiopia via Kaffa, Harar, the Northern Highlands, Addis Ababa, Amaro, the Rift Valley and beyond. People, land, history, religion, opportunity, education, agriculture—expressed in and around coffee.



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Unraveling the world's coffee tapestry from threads that start and end in Ethiopia. Ethiopia's resonant echoes. Coffee's human supply chain.



**ETHIOPIAN COFFEE EXPRESSION**

Modern urban and rural uses of coffee, expressions of coffee through the centuries, unique differences in coffee consumption, ritual manifestations of the bean throughout its lifecycle.





# INTRODUCTION by Majka Burhardt

It's a simple question: what if a food crop—coffee—could change a nation's future?



Here are three more questions: What if that crop was something the world had grown to value starting in the sixth century as a plant, and in the fifteenth century as a brewed infusion? What if an assemblage of stories helped shine a collective light on Ethiopia's role as the birthplace of coffee, and its centuries of coffee ritual and culture? And what if the sharing of these stories increased an understanding of Ethiopia that in turn shifted both the future and the global perception of this nation away from struggle and poverty and toward strength and bounty?

Our task is Herculean; it will take an optimist.

Welcome to *ORIGIN: Ethiopia's Coffee Legacy*. I'm that optimist.

I first visited Ethiopia in 2006, as a journalist on a coffee expedition. Like most Americans, my sum-total knowledge of the country consisted of perceptions of famine, drought, war, poverty, and political strife. As for coffee, all I could tell you was that I liked to drink it. During trip after over the next seven years, I grew to know Ethiopia for its lush landscapes, broad lakes, thick forests, towering rock faces, and welcoming people. I came to understand a nation far more complex in its global role and potential than Western media convey. My initial trip started me on the road to this book. Along the way, I wrote another book about Ethiopia—one that captured its natural beauty through a lens of adventure travel and rock climbing. My and Gabe Rogel's effort, *Vertical Ethiopia: Climbing Toward Possibility in the Horn of Africa*, was the vehicle for my 2008-2009 fifty-city speaking tour across North America. People came to hear tales of Ethiopian exploration, and then stayed for stories about coffee.

During these events, I recognized a need for more information about coffee's role in Ethiopia—not just statistics, but complex stories of real people in a nation with real problems . . . and real potential.





Coffee is the world's most shared connection, chosen on a daily basis, with Ethiopia—whether we know it or not. The coffee species indigenous to Ethiopia, Arabica (so named for the Arabs who were the first to cultivate it commercially), comprises 65 percent of the planet's current consumption. Ironically, though all Arabica originally came from Ethiopia, the country's annual coffee production, at 6.5 million sixty-kilogram bags (2012), represents a mere 4.5 percent of the output of the world's leading producer, Brazil, who in contrast produces 50.1 million bags (70 percent of which is Arabica coffee).

Ethiopia will likely never compete with Brazil in volume, and most cognoscenti would suggest she not even try. But better than volume, Ethiopia holds realms of untapped quality within her borders. This is because, like grapes and wine, coffee has a flavor profile that can differ dramatically between bean varieties. And Ethiopia has more than ten thousand different types of coffee sprouting from her soil. (Colombia, by contrast, has only a handful of primary varieties.)

Specialty coffee, a movement (and term) that started in the 1960s, turned the focus to coffee's quality—a development that spawned a new retailing culture led by Starbucks and similar companies. Today's leading coffee roasters and retailers, along with coffee enthusiasts, place higher value yet on coffees produced via a combination of microclimate, variety, and customized processing. These coffees feed a growing, international by-the-cup coffee-retailing trend in which the brews are purveyed like wines on a list. Ethiopia is the world's eighth-poorest country, but it has the greatest store of genetic diversity of coffee. Its coffee, if successfully linked with the growing specialty and boutique-specialty coffee trends, can create real results for the country's economy. Ethiopia currently exports 850 million pounds of coffee per year; a price

increase of just \$0.10/pound would equal \$85 million in additional income for the nation.

Whether those who came to my talks were first learning of Ethiopia's role as the birthplace of coffee or knew of it beforehand, they always craved more information about the nation. Coffee created that desire. From the Turkish coffeehouse, to Italian espresso, to the rising appreciation of single-origin specialty coffees, coffee is the most-consumed legal stimulant on Earth. With a growing consumer awareness of food anthropology, coffee drinkers are more curious than ever about the bean's origins. *ORIGIN* emerged from that curiosity.

To most of the world, Ethiopia is barren, flat, and dry. The reality, however, is that two-thirds of Ethiopia is rain-forested highland situated between six hundred and twenty-five hundred meters in altitude, with dark, rich volcanic soil: the perfect place for coffee. It's also the cradle of humanity: the Horn of Africa is more than forty million years old, and fossilized humanoids dating back more than four million years have been found here. No one knows exactly when coffee consumption began. But the historians do concur that coffee was integral to Ethiopian life long before the sixth century, when the bean had its first opportunity to be traded over the eighty-kilometer stretch of Red Sea to Yemen.

In Ethiopia, to drink coffee is to share a story with a friend, family member, or a stranger. Peace is brokered over coffee, religion is celebrated, and in some tribes coffee can even determine a marriage—for example, in the Amaro mountains, when a suitor arrives just as a prospective bride's family is drinking a cup from the first of a daily three-round coffee ceremony, the bride must unquestioningly accept his marriage proposal.

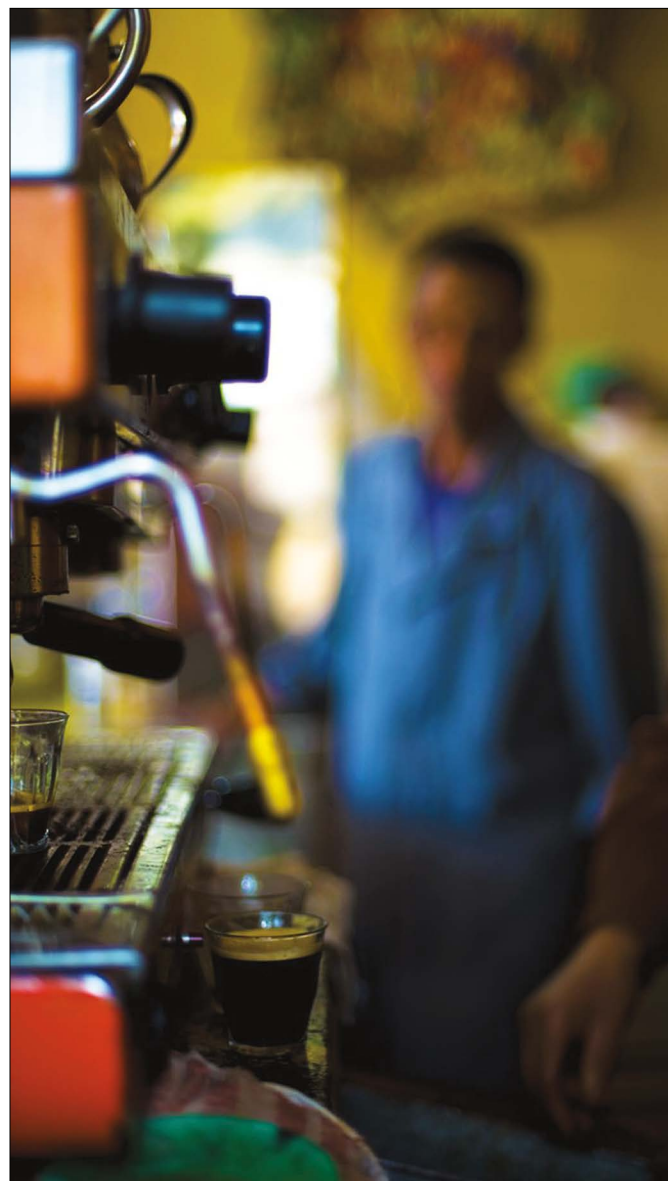
But these are only a few snapshots of a nation whose people speak ninety languages and more than two hundred dialects—there is in fact an untold number of stories inside this country of 1.1 million square kilometers. It would take many lifetimes to find and share them all.

In the coffee world, we speak of wild coffee thriving in a forest's "understory"—the plants, trees, and shrubs that cover the forest at the ground level, while soaking up protection from the larger trees above. While writing this book, I came to think of the assembled host of tales as coffee's understory. *ORIGIN* is a collection of voices and narratives that reach off the page to stimulate deeper conversation. Rather than a definitive, didactic survey of coffee's cultural uses, *ORIGIN* is an expressive collage with exploration as its central tenet. The book is assembled as a continuous journey through Ethiopia's most important coffee lands: we start in Kaffa, the genetic home of Coffee arabica; journey to Harar, where Ethiopian coffee trade crystallized; travel to the Northern Highlands, home to Tigray, Lake Tana, and the birthplace of the Blue Nile and where ancient coffee practices are still observed; revel in Ethiopia's thriving center—the capital, Addis Ababa—reconnecting with the everyday expression of coffee in this, Africa's third largest city; and finally, adventure in the emerging heartlands of Ethiopian coffee development in the Rift Valley, exploring Sidamo, Yirga Cheffe, and the Amaro Mountains. Other smaller tales from different regions, as well as essays from coffee-industry insiders, pepper the larger regions. *ORIGIN* might leave you dizzy. If it does, I have done my job.

Welcome to a conversation about the culture of coffee in the land of coffee's heritage. Welcome to a new vision of Ethiopia . . .



# Coffee Etymology in **FACT** and **MYTH**



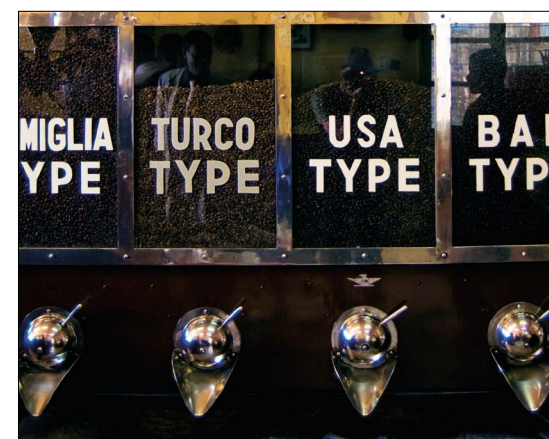
Because of its naming history and its biological home, coffee's origin claims are often conflated. The Kaffa region has become understood to be the birthplace of coffee—a correct biological fact, but an incorrect linguistic supposition. The ease of translation, onomatopoeically, of Kaffa to *coffee* fostered this semantic leap, first made by the Scottish explorer James Bruce in 1790 and then again by the Italian geographer Antonio Cecchi in 1888.

Kaffa more deeply informs coffee's etymology thanks to the story of Khaldi, a goat herder or monk (depending on the version) who saw his goats energized by a foreign plant later discovered to do the same for humans. Paul Merab, a Georgian physician who traveled in Ethiopia in the 1900s, reported that he could find no one in Ethiopia who'd heard Khaldi's tale, though the rest of the world told it with certainty at the time. Over the course of a century, the power of that story has made it commonplace, so that today in Ethiopia I have heard it from elders, schoolchildren, coffee farmers, and even those who've never seen a raw coffee bean. In every story, Khaldi lives in Kaffa, and Kaffa creates coffee.

The term *coffee* is actually an adaptation of the Arabic qahwa, a wine made from coffee's brew in the seventeenth century in Yemen. Carl Linneaus, the Swedish creator of taxonomy, named the coffee plant *Coffee arabica* in 1753 based on this association, though evidence points to the use of the word *buna* to identify the plant more than a century before it became *Coffee arabica*. The misnaming of *Arabica* is

a sore subject with many Ethiopians; as Gezahegn Berecha Yadessa, a professor at Jimma University in Southern Ethiopia, says, it has remained unchanged because "We don't have the power and publicity to get the name of our coffee back."

What Ethiopia does have, and has always had, is a consistent name for the berry and drink that crosses Amharic, Omotic, Cushitic, and several Semitic languages: *buna*, *bunn*, or *bun*. Even in Arabic, *bunn* is used to refer to the bean, and as academic Rita Pankhurst so aptly pointed out, *bunni* is the Arabic term for "brown"—the color of the bean when roasted. This consistency has become the singularly strongest piece of evidence for coffee's origin in Ethiopia. It's only fitting that everywhere you travel today in Ethiopia, *buna* is what people offer from their stoops, their stores, and their homes to welcome a foreigner or a friend.



# Coffee's Uses

## *Coffee Tea*

In Kaffa, as in most of Ethiopia, coffee tea, a brew from coffee leaves, is also consumed. Here it is called *chemo*. The leaves are gathered and lightly roasted, added to water or milk, and boiled for an infusion. *Chemo* is traditionally spiced with ginger and *berbere* (hot pepper).

## *Buna Kelema*

At a Kaffa wedding, guests indulge in *Buna Kelema*, a porridge of roasted coffee cherries mixed with butter and salt. They eat the mixture with a spoon. Traditional *Kafichios* roasted the leaves, crushed them, and prepared a refreshing infusion spiced with pepper.

## *Buna Besso*

In southwest Ethiopia, coffee is often ground and mixed with barley, called *Buna Besso*.

## *Stomach Savior*

Upset stomachs are common throughout Ethiopia, and a time-tested medicine is two spoonfuls of ground coffee mixed with honey.

## *Traveling Energy*

In the late 1800s, many Oromo took to carrying energy balls of coffee and butter. The coffee would be roasted, pulverized, and rolled with butter to form an apple-sized orb, and then stored in a leather bag for travel.





# An Accidental **RAIN** Dance

When I arrive, Marsha Aday looks like any other Messa man. The afternoon light grows long and burns away our shade, next to his house. Clouds gather in the far corner of the western sky. “It will rain soon,” Marsha Aday says.

“Before it does, I will show you what makes the Messa different.”

He goes into his hut with his wife and comes outside adorned. He tells me his headdress is called a Kalacha;

meanwhile, his cape is made of lion mane and trimmed in silver. His necklace, Joshe, means “big.” His royal regalia is seven generations old, and will be passed on to his eldest son for the eighth generation. Marsha Aday’s seven

children surround him now. They are excited, because he usually saves his costume for special occasions. An ox is customarily slaughtered for ceremony, and coffee is drunk. Marsha Aday tells me I am the reason for his dressing up today. “And now,” he says, “you must at least stay for coffee.” He smiles and adds, “It is too late in the day for an ox.”

When Marsha Aday performs his traditional tribal celebration dance, he crouches low and leaps high, shaking a shield in one hand to accentuate his baritone chanting. His knees lift up inside his lion cape, and his voice carries through the thickening air. The silver atop his shoulders dances on its attachment points, its jingling accompanying his voice. His children watch, the younger ones jumping up and down as they try to imitate their father. The clouds are amassing now, the light diffused as it reflects off the royal crown. My translator is worried about the weather, as is Marsha Aday’s cousin, who brought us here. But I am not yet ready to leave, and Marsha Aday seems to know this when he asks me inside.

We all pack into the round home together. Gete has been readying a coffee ceremony. The air is damp and fragrant with myrrh so that it smells sweet and musty. Marsha Aday sits facing the front threshold. His youngest children, three years and eighteen months, each clutch one of his legs. He picks up the littlest one. “This one,” he says, giving his son a squeeze on his belly until the baby squeals with laughter, “drinks coffee as if he were suckling at the breast.”

Like the Amaro, the Messa believe that luck is granted to anyone who arrives during the first cup of coffee. “Even a person who comes with the intention of killing another and arrives during abol will set his plans aside,” Marsha Aday says.

Coffee is plentiful here, so much so that Marsha Aday tells me there is coffee he has seen on trees but never seen picked. There are no roads or trails to these trees, and hence no way for the cherries to leave the trees. “If you come back,” he tells me, “I will take you there. This coffee—it is our gold. It puts our entire country on the world map.”



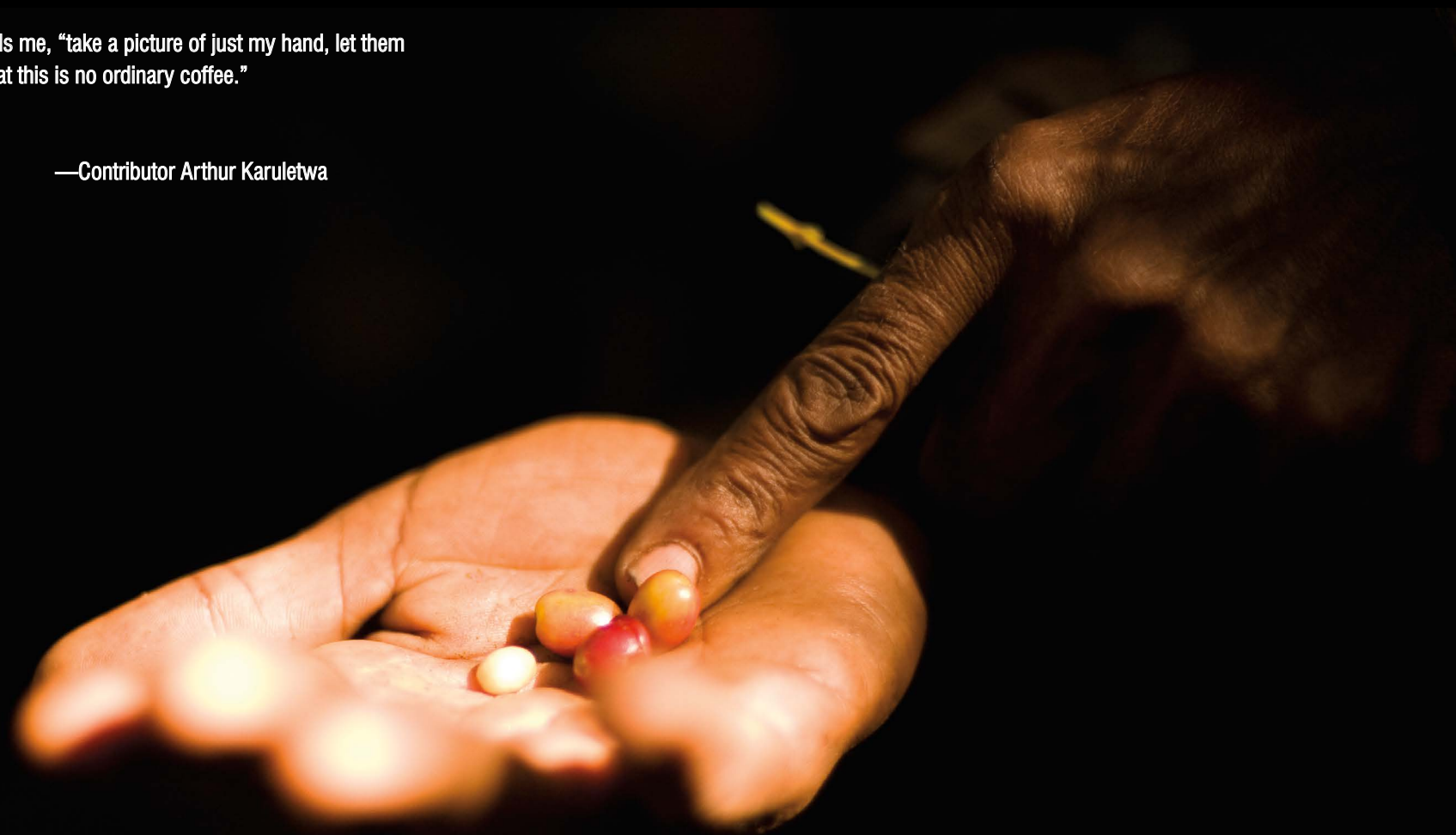


# ORDINARY

There is no ordinary in any of us; no other person embodies extraordinary more than Fendu. His work is his trademark; his type is so rare but everywhere. Though simple enough the lifestyle he believes he does lead, Fendu is one of a dying breed. As a lead coffee sorter in Addis, his name is not known far and wide; but I have reminded him that his hand has been introduced to many worldwide.

“If that is the case” he tells me, “take a picture of just my hand, let them know of my name and that this is no ordinary coffee.”

—Contributor Arthur Karuletwa



# Arid Pride

It's been raining in Tigray. For three months, the skies have poured water on the arid swath of land that makes up Ethiopia's northern edge. New trees sprout in moist soil beds suspended in rocky terraces; ephemeral lakes reflect a constant possibility of abundance; and endless permutations of green edge their way into the earthen landscape.

It's 2010, and Tigray has had its wettest rainy season in thirty years. The land is drunk with optimism. So drunk that a man named Haile tells me he might even plant coffee.

“We need to,” he says, “because Tigrayans drink the most coffee in Ethiopia.”

“Did you know people in Sidamo say the same?” I ask him.

Haile laughs. “And in Oromia, Harar . . . all Ethiopians drink the most coffee.”

Haile mainly farms barley, and he tells me he's never seen coffee grown in the Gheralta region, where he lives, though he drinks it every day. He tells me there are places in Tigray that still hold on to coffee, but here the land has been too arid for too long for him to grow it. “Maybe now,” he says, “if it keeps raining, things will change.”

Haile tells me this as we sit in the shade of a four hundred meter sandstone rock face. From our perch, we can see Tigray spiraling beneath us, terraces dancing around clusters of rock towers and pathways lacing between them linking homes, villages, and towns. This is the land of one of the greatest famines in Ethiopian history—in 1984. That was before Haile was born, but he holds a collective memory of that time.

“In Tigray,” he tells me, “we save things. We stretch out our happiness this way. Coffee is first to be saved.”

Haile, as well as many other Tigrayans, adds barley to his coffee, parceling out coffee beans judiciously for his family, splurging with 100 percent coffee for guests. When I ask him if there is a moment when he is drinking barley and not coffee, he shakes his head.

“Even one coffee bean makes it buna,” he says.



# The RIFT Valley



Cities lose their grip quickly in Ethiopia. The concentrated urban center abruptly becomes farmland whichever direction you travel, from whichever city. If you leave Addis Ababa and head south, your new horizon is the Great Rift Valley (aka the Rift Valley). The massive basin stretches, echoing, fifty-six hundred kilometers diagonally from Syria to Mozambique, straight through the heart of Ethiopia. A three-/two-lane road travels along the center of the Rift Valley— it's three when you need to pass another car, donkey cart, or cattle train, but two the rest of the time. Soon, fields unfold to either side and the city disappears entirely.

Today, the donkeys pull flat carts of teff, a grain integral to Ethiopian life—both for its nutritional value and for making injera. Farmers methodically set sickle to teff, reaping it from the fields. Each handful is deliberately thrown to one side as the farmer alternates between two rows of teff. Soon these handfuls are collected and stacked together. To the untrained eye, the piles look haphazard; but as they grow, the grain and grass interlace as latticework mooring against wind and rain.



I am not a farmer, but when I drive through Ethiopia all I want to do is be one. Cattle march in circles over domesticated grains to release the seeds. Acacia trees offer rare shade under outstretched limbs. In the distance, ancient volcanic uplifts rest quietly, flat-topped and

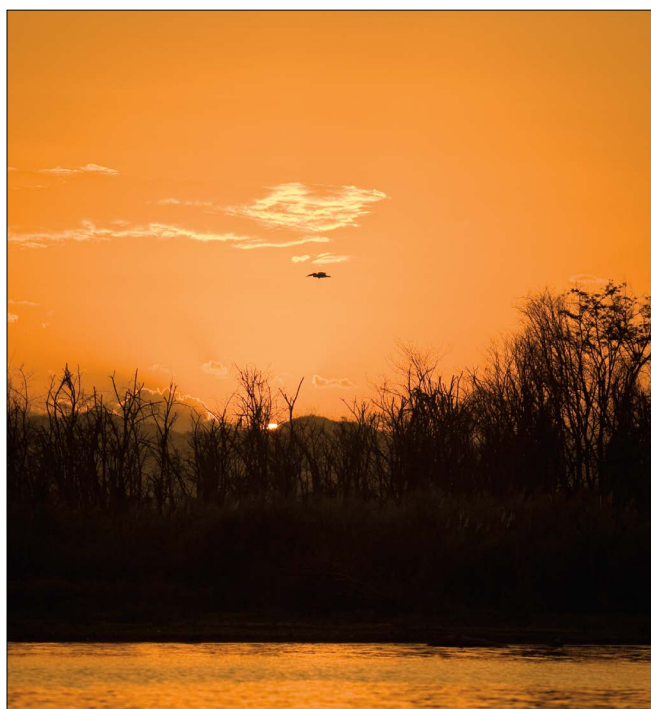
covered in grass. Soon the lakes themselves appear, first as watery horizons punctuated by people washing and farming, and then as full bodies of water that take up the entire eastern view. Lakes Ziway, Langano, Abiyata, Shala, and Awasa dot the bottom of the Rift Valley with

periwinkle waters turned yellow in the day's heat. The earth beneath the lakes is constantly churning and pushing against the surface. One day, if scientists are correct, Africa will split in two along this sunken spine.



# RIFT Fertility

Before you even glimpse the bean, the landscape lets you know you're in coffee's embrace. The air gets lighter and suggests a recent rain, or one about to come. Soft limestone crumbles above a river, giving way to hard, blocky basalt that pierces the water's edge. The trees thicken. A red cherry catches the light in the distance. This is where Ethiopian coffee sings most loudly, in today's new symphony of celebrated flavor: from jasmine to rose, lemon to grapefruit, lingonberry to strawberry, cashew to walnut, black pepper to ginger, and countless other cup attributes, each new well-processed coffee from Ethiopia exhibits nuances to fascinate the senses.



# Identity PRESERVED

“Traceability” is about identity preservation: It is a process or system of documenting the identity of a product, and maintaining the segregation of its parts. Simpler still, traceability is the documentation of what has been done with the crop. The combination of this—source, combined with process—verifies a product's identity, giving confidence to emphasize a product's 'value added nature' and allow marketers to make claims and differentiate brands. Most importantly, the information with what you have done with the crop verifies what you have done with the environment, the community and ultimately the producer. Unfortunately, or fortunately, it may also show what you have not done. These aren't just numbers; they are a preservation of us.

—Contributor Arthur Karuletwa



# Sidamo Cups of PLENTY

In the highest reaches of southern Ethiopia's Sidamo region, coffee grew wild until the reign of Emperor Menelik II, at the end of the nineteenth century. Today, Sidamo's gentle hills overlay each other with alternating hues of green, and the growing season lasts all year. Well-worn dirt paths follow and intersect rivers and

streams. Kelly-green kulkual cacti along the trails reach up to ten meters in height. And every grass-thatched home is abutted by the ever forking branches of the coffee trees, with their burgundy cherries.

During Menelik II's time, locals picked coffee by cutting down an entire coffee tree, carrying it to their home, and

waiting for the tree to dry and the cherries to simply fall off. They'd then discard the rest of the tree, and use and sell the coffee.

Ato Sha'le Bokal tells us this story. He's the elder in this community of several hundred, the man to whom others come when a dispute needs settling. Born in 1925, he

tells me that they now leave the trees in place when they harvest the coffee.

His grandparents told him the story of the trees, as well as other tales. "In those days," he says, "even still when I was a boy, we did not have any cups."

He pauses, as if to confirm that I'm still listening. I nod.

"Do you want to know how they drank the coffee?" he asks.

After I nod again, he says, "They drank it with their hands."

The gathered crowd smiles even before the translator finishes relaying Ato Sha'le's words to me. When Ato Sha'le joins in, his smile erases the eighty-four years on his face.

"No," Ato Sha'le says. "That is not true. Wait, and I will show you the truth."

We're clustered atop evenly grazed grass in the shade of a Dagucho tree. Ato Sha'le asks one of his seventeen children to fetch leaves from a false banana tree—a Woficho. His son returns clutching in one hand a dried leaf and in the other a fresh leaf, and Ato Sha'le selects the dried one first. Ato Sha'le quickly bends and buckles the leaf parchment, stringing a small twig through either end to maintain a bevel deep enough to hold a liquid. Next, he picks up the fresh leaf and through a series of folds reduces the meter-square foliage into a ladle.

"A hundred years ago," he says, "this is how we drank coffee." He shows me how they would pass the leaf and share this collective cup.

The dry-leaf vessel easily holds ten times as much coffee as today's omnipresent six-ounce ceramic cups, the kind found in all Ethiopian homes, both urban and rural. I want to ask if coffee seemed more abundant back then—not only on the land, but in the giant cup. Instead, I look around. Coffee trees fill almost the entire backdrop to the horizon, some forty kilometers away. As Ato Sha'le earlier told me, for decades here in Sidamo they'd never done anything with the meaty, red husk of the coffee bean. Other tribes roast the husk and drink the brew. When I asked about this, Ato Sha'le said simply, "It is a sign of plenty when you can throw something away."

We bid goodbye to Ato Sha'le, and then walk an hour back to the road alongside the long afternoon shadows of the coffee trees, deep in the land of plenty that is Sidamo.







# The **TEAM** Behind **ORIGIN**



Author **MAJKA BURHARDT** is a writer, professional climber, and filmmaker with more than 16 years experience producing multi-stage international ventures focused on current issues of cultural and global significance. She is the author of *Coffee Story: Ethiopia* and *Vertical Ethiopia*, executive producer of the film, *Waypoint Namibia* as well as producer of the forthcoming documentary *Lost Mountain* about conservation, science, and adventure in Mozambique. Burhardt is a frequent speaker for business and public audiences including Google, The Commonwealth Club, TEDxSMU, Banff Film and Book Festival, and many others. Her work has been featured in news programs, radio shows, magazines, and newspapers worldwide.

with

Contributor **ARTHUR KARULETWA** is currently the Global Coffee Director of Traceability at Starbucks Coffee Company. He has spent more than a decade developing and advocating for traceability in coffee regions worldwide. His recent work has resulted in a coffee-supply-chain tool that has enhanced visibility/traceability within coffee's complex supply chain in Rwanda and Ethiopia. His work has been highlighted in *Business 2.0*, a CNN money magazine, as a Top 10 industry to invest in globally.



Photographer **TRAVIS HORN** has cultivated a photography career born from a pursuit of "foreign familiarity." Horn has worked and shot extensively throughout Central and South America, Europe, Africa, and the United States. His work has been showcased by Hyatt International Hotels, *National Geographic Adventure* National Geographic Adventure, and in Miami's Wynwood Design District. Horn's involvement with the specialty-coffee industry spans multiple creative endeavors in coffee-origin countries including Panama, Costa Rica, and Ethiopia.



*Additional photography by Peter Doucette. Artwork by Molly Holmberg.*