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THE NEW SPIRIT OF AFRICA

# Selamta


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## THE STORY OF Coffee

Exploring the  
journey of Ethiopia's  
most famous export



A STAR ALLIANCE MEMBER 



# Coffee Story: Ethiopia

Excerpts from the second edition of Majka Burhardt's book, showcasing the famed Ethiopian bean.

What if a food crop — coffee — could change a nation's future?

*Coffee Story: Ethiopia*

chronicles the answer in 180 pages of essays and photos that showcase the famous Ethiopian bean alongside the country's dynamic people and stunning landscape. Building on the success of the sold-out first edition, the recently released second edition features an updated introduction and Ethiopian history section, as well stunning new photographs. *Coffee Story: Ethiopia* is available online and at local retailers. To receive a personalized signed copy, visit [EthiopiasCoffeeStory.com](http://EthiopiasCoffeeStory.com).

Here are two of author Majka Burhardt's favorite essays below:

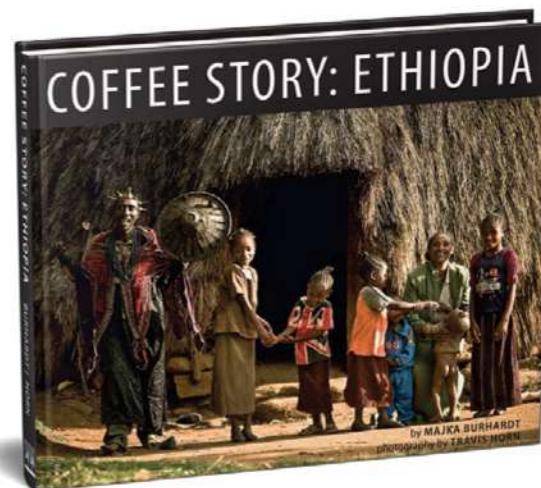
## MISSING BEANS

During the 16th and 26th days of Ramadan, Muslim Hararis gather for a ceremony marked by a porridge of coffee beans. Special dark, dried cherries are stewed in butter and sugar in an earthen pot and served atop a barley pancake: *sirri*. The sauce is thick and granular, and once dolloped on the pancake drips off the sides. Today, I am sharing the *sirri* with a group of women. It is not Ramadan, but they have agreed to show me their tradition.

We are all dressed in scarves, and behind my *fota* I take my first bite of *buna sirri*. I chew the coffee cherry. My teeth click against each other, and I widen my eyes in surprise. The other women laugh, as they wait for me. I take another bite and put another cherry in my mouth. My teeth shoot straight through, again.

"Where is the bean?" I ask.

The women laugh. "*Wahber*," they say. "Empty." One woman takes a cherry between her fingers and pops it. In her hand is only air.



“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.”

We drink *kuti kela*, coffee from Harar, and eat the *sirri*. Before long, my teeth ache from the sugar. I roll a few *wahber* cherries in my mouth and try to politely remove them to look at later. Woizero Fatuma Siti notices.

"You want to see these beans?" she

asks me later. In just moments, I am following her through the tight streets of inner Harar. I lose count after five turns and trust I will find my way back. Woizero Fatuma steps quickly over stone thresholds and through courtyards before darting down another narrow corridor. I trot behind her, watching for obstacles she steps over automatically. Soon she pauses before a blue door and turns to me. We have reached her home. Behind the home there is a storage cellar, and she pulls me inside it after her. A 20-gallon sisal bag sits in the corner. It weighs less than a newborn baby. Woizero Fatuma again takes my hand and plunges it with hers deep into the bag. "*Wahber*," she says. We laugh, running our hands through these molecules of air.

The sack has five years' worth of *wahber*. In the market, I will see piles of the empty cherries for sale for ceremony. Ramadan is almost a year away. Later, I will research and learn that these cherries have coffee berry disease; they fall from the trees young and undeveloped — empty.

## SIDAMO CUPS OF PLENTY

In the highest reaches of southern Ethiopia's Sidamo region, coffee grew wild until the reign of Emperor Menelik II, when standardized agriculture interrupted the crop's wild reign at the end of the 19th 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 10 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 84 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 17 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 to 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 10 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 40 kilometers away. As Ato Sha'le told me earlier, 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. ■



## SOME OF COFFEE'S MANY 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 bessu*.

### 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.