

The Coffee Widows

Some of Rwanda's genocide survivors are creating coffee cooperatives, and a new future

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Rwanda is best known for the 1994 genocide in which Hutu tribesmen killed 800,000 of their Tutsi rivals. Coffee, one of the country's biggest exports, was also a casualty of that massacre. For Michigan State University professor Dan Clay, a specialist in Third World agricultural development, rebuilding Rwanda's coffee industry proved a double-edged challenge: how to get the industry on its feet yet avoid the commodity trap that dooms many farmers to subsistence living in a world where coffee is abundant.

The solution was to go upmarket and try to make Rwanda more famous for fabulous coffee than for murder. Rwanda has the ideal climate for growing quality beans, and its coffee has "notes of fruit and pecan," says David Griswold, president of Sustainable Harvest, a coffee importer. "It has a taste you can't find anywhere else in the world."

Getting that unique taste to market required a new approach. So Clay--with Texas A&M professor Tim Schilling; Emile Rwamasirabo, then rector of the National University of Rwanda; and aided by the U.S. Agency for International Development--formed the Partnership for Enhancing Agriculture in Rwanda through Linkages (PEARL). One idea: create cooperatives whose farmers, 20% of whom are genocide widows or orphans, learn a multistep process for producing gourmet coffee that involves harvesting only the ripest beans and washing, sorting and drying them at new community washing stations.



Ironically, Rwandans don't traditionally drink coffee. So importer Griswold took his customers to Rwanda to brew coffee with the farmers, showing them exactly the kind of taste and consistent quality the market is looking for. The farmers were taught to detect notes of blackberry, the consequences of improperly processing beans, and how coffee is graded.

Since 2001, PEARL has assisted 11 cooperatives with 15,000 members. "It's small, but it's growing like wildfire," says Clay, an American who worked in Rwanda before fleeing the violence. The co-ops' income has jumped from \$650,000 in 2004 to \$1.2 million in 2005 and is expected to reach \$3 million in 2006. That's just a drip in the \$11.4 billion world coffee market, but to farmers like Triphine Mukamyasiro, 23, whose family was killed in the genocide, it's huge. She made \$30 annually when she started selling coffee in 1993. After joining a PEARL co-op, she began earning some \$400 a year, about twice as much as the typical Rwandan takes home. Christian Ruzigama, 41, returned to find his plantation in tatters. Now, with his profits, he has built a house and sends his children to school.

Rwandan beans are jumping these days: this year's crop sold out, with Green Mountain coffee, Whole Foods and other companies eagerly buying. "Rwanda has gone from being completely unknown to being the hottest coffee origin in 2005," says Schilling, who runs PEARL in Rwanda.

PEARL had to solve the farmers' credit-financing issues too. Farmers can't wait six to nine months between harvest and payment. So PEARL partnered with EcoLogic Finance, a Cambridge, Mass., nonprofit that loans to businesses in Africa and Latin America, to set up financing for the co-ops, which are too large for micro loans.

Etienne Bihogo, 36, who works with PEARL, notes that the co-ops are also helping drive reconciliation between Hutu and Tutsi farmers. Growers who were once enemies are working side by side at their local washing stations. "You can see that people are together now, and they can think in terms of profits," he says, "not in terms of what divides them." -- With reporting by Megan Lindow/Cape Town