

# ROASTERS REALM



ROASTING REFLECTIONS ON PAPUA NEW GUINEA • BY JOSEPH BRODSKY

Our Vittoria roaster looks like a locomotive, and with the changing color and aroma of coffee in the tryer, the operator often finds himself in the passenger car, riding back along the paths our coffees travel. With my eyes on the warm brown of Owena Cooperative coffee turning in the cooling pan, memories return from the wildest origin trip I've yet taken.

## PNG COOPERATIVE COFFEES COMPETITION OPENS AT MITEGA COOPERATIVE

A giant pig backbone was unearthed from an underground oven and presented to esteemed coffee industry guests from six countries. Tropical colors, painted skin, adornments of shell and feather, chants and songs, and smells of wild humanity and roasted meat decorated the October Papua New Guinea darkness. The first annual Pride of Papua New Guinea International Coffee Competition would be under way the following day. Noses would be over cups for five days—an atmosphere of coffee revolution was in the air. Growers were unifying for the first time in an effort to improve the quality of their coffee, to understand its value and to export directly to specialty markets around the world. Absent from the crowd were large exporting companies and government officials who stood to lose substantial amounts of money in this shift toward PNG-coffee-grower independence.

Nearly 80 percent of the approximately one million bags of green coffee currently grown in PNG is produced by small-holder farmers. Typically, one family will deliver between five and 15 bags of parchment coffee at the slimmest of margins to coffee buyers and exporters who pay very little compared with their selling price.

At Mitega Cooperative, the hope of the farmers was in the air. Those of us invited to taste the fruit of their labor sat smiling—the ceremony of the people seemed familiar, as if it were part of our own ancestral memory, our distant human past. “Tok tok lik lik,” Jon Yogiyo, head of the PNG Coffee Growers Federation, joked to the more than 2,000 coffee farmers and their international guests. He was indicating in Pidgin English, the only common tongue to the more than 870 different ethnic groups in PNG, that he was about to give a short talk. In PNG, speeches are almost never brief. His inspirational talk was followed by words from head judge Willem Boot, former SCAA president Paul Katzeff and coffee writer Ken Davids.

In the days that followed, the cuppers would taste 55 finalist coffees under the watchful eyes of farmers whose faces, pressed without rest against the windows of the cupping lab, formed a mosaic of curiosity and nervousness. How would their coffees perform? They scanned the tables of randomly numbered samples and looked for clues in our sniffs and slurps.



The author with young Papua New Guineans

## A SNIFF OF FRUIT OR A SLURP OF FERMENT?

There can be no better education for purveyors of fine coffee than focused cuppings and subsequent discussions with staunchly confident and experienced industry peers. In the first day's calibration tastings, many samples elicited controversy, the resulting arguments fiery and riveting. Some thought there was no place for any degree of “ferment” in washed coffees such as those we were sampling. Others lauded the same cups for well-placed “fruit” attributes. Like art aficionados simultaneously admiring and despising the same painting, cuppers divided themselves along natural lines of aesthetic appreciation. Even mild cup acidity wasn't unanimously approved.

Our raucous and quirky crew endlessly poured out their opinions in the cupping room, on bus rides to farms, in meals

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at the hotel, and on the most ethereal, misty-green prop plane ride any of us had ever taken.

## OWENA COOPERATIVE: COFFEE ON HIGH

Missionary pilots meticulously checked every seal and switch on the tiny yellow-and-brown-striped plane. We had awoken just after dawn and headed the few hundred meters to the Goroka airstrip, escorted, as always, by armed guards to protect us from hazards ranging from numerous highland pickpockets to the rare occurrence of a maliciously wielded machete. We were to visit coffee farmers who were completely cut off from the outside world, to show our white and tan faces where almost none had been seen.

Once off the ground, the ever-changing view of pristine and wild landscapes below produced a sense that we were traveling back in time. Dense forest, broad highland deltas, furious white rivers crashing down evergreen slopes, and, finally, the ascension to intensely green high-country valleys, clear flowing rivers, and an unbelievable bouncy landing on a flat-topped mountain near a tiny village called Owena.

Stepping out of the plane, we could hear the chanting and singing of hundreds of painted and pierced tribespeople as they danced among a handful of immaculate, perfectly painted huts that looked as much a part of the mountain as each blade of grass and waft of hanging mist.

The Owena people put on a play for us, to illustrate their story with coffee. They showed how they picked, pulped—with stones as round as the earth and as smooth as polished sandstone—fermented, washed, dried and carried parchment coffee for days on foot. They described how they were treated by coffee buyers and told “take it or leave it” in response to

their dissatisfaction with the obscenely low prices offered.

## FARMER AWAKENING

At the crux of the coffee farmer’s dilemma is the PNG coffee grading and pricing system. Coffee grown by smallholder farmers, regardless of quality, is sold as “Native Y-Grade,” which trades at a substantially lower price than do “X” or “A” grades. With 80 percent of the coffee initially categorized as “Y,” middlemen have been making fortunes for years by simply sorting and reclassifying the coffee.

John Yogiyo, a native of Goroka, explained his solution to the farmers:

Organize, understand your coffee, improve its quality, and export directly to the growing specialty market through cooperative organization and the PNG Coffee Growers Federation. He went further. By aligning the Federation with a publicly traded company in the United States called Coffee Pacifica, which imports, brokers, roasts and retails PNG smallholder coffee, he offered the farmers a vertically integrated solution that allows them to share in profits from origin to cup.



An Owena woman



Ken Davids and Willem Boot evaluate cups.

## AS THE COOLING ARM TURNS

Papua New Guinea has tremendous potential to produce an increasingly special and distinctive array of specialty coffees. The Pride of PNG competition provided a taste of this potential to some of the world’s top coffee people. On the table, we tasted primarily heirloom varieties that come from several microclimates with soils ranging from lime-and-peat to volcanic in origin. The variety of samples was almost as diverse as the culture that welcomed us every day in each visit to the farms and cooperatives of Eastern Highlands Province. In the end, the best coffees seemed to have in common a tremendous depth and sweetness. The same can be said for the people. Across the astonishing sociolinguistic differences among the farmers who collected with us, a profundity and a warmth exuded that was consumed by our group of visitors as if it were the most superbly aromatic cup of coffee.