FIELD REPORT

RWANDA

BY SCOTT CONARY

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Opposite page: "Ladies in yellow": the Garukurebe dance and drum troupe performs at the welcome ceremony beside Lake Muhazi, Rwamagana. This page: The author pictured with children from the bilingual school in Rwamagana, where the COE judges presented students with new classroom desks.

THE VIEW FROM MY BED IS HAZY.

Sleeping under mosquito netting not because the bugs are simply annoying, but because they very likely carry a life-threatening disease—well, that's different than what I'm used to. Having just visited my family home in Maine, I can attest to the annoyance of deep-woods mosquitos, but I *still* never sleep with netting. (Black fly season is a different matter.) Count this as one of the many new experiences I am to have this trip to Rwanda to serve as an international judge in the country's 2013 Cup of Excellence (COE).

Having arrived in Kigali after some 40 hours of travel, I am obviously limited in my insight so far. I need some sleep.

The first couple of days for the COE are ones of gathering. Folks from all over the world converge and have their own travel stories to tell. We've lost a few cuppers who were to join us due to visa and flight issues, so we are now 20 judges in total. Still, the pool is very international: We hail from Japan, Norway, Hong Kong, Austria, Netherlands, Brazil, Sweden, Taiwan, Australia, the United States, South Korea, and Poland. We're joined, of course, by in-country cuppers, as well.

Those that arrive a day early like I did take the opportunity to check out the capital city of Kigali, for coffee at Bourbon, a local café that attracts mostly tourists; a bit of shopping and currency transaction (no credit cards in use here), then a quick lunch before our one-and-a-half-hour drive east to the Rwamagana district.

We check into our entirely adequate rooms at the Hotel Devera (complete with aforementioned mosquito netting) and relax with a few local beers—Turbo King is my favorite—and a nice dinner.

While I sadly forgot to bring any coffee-brewing devices, my fellow judges come well-equipped, and we play around with coffees from our home companies while relaxing and getting to know each other before our first day of cupping.

The focus at COE is on evaluating the coffees just harvested. This means we come into country right after the coffee's been picked, and don't get as detailed a picture of the action as we would were we here midharvest. We do, however, get to reap the rewards of all the work that came before, and taste the delicious results of those efforts.

Two hundred and twenty coffees were submitted to the COE in Rwanda this year. In order for a coffee to keep moving through selection, it must, by definition of a Cup of Excellence, score an 85 or higher on the 100-point scale. Of those 220 coffees, 100 qualify.

By this point, the hardworking national cuppers had worked for weeks to test and retest these coffees in order to fully substantiate their respective scores. Of these, 59 are confirmed as 85 or higher on the COE score sheet.

Coordination of this feat is no accident. The crew at the Alliance for Coffee Excellence (ACE), which produces and governs the COE competitions, along with the National Agricultural Export Development Board (NAEB), work tirelessly to ensure things run well and allow the international panel of judges—us—to focus on accurate scoring with the 59 coffees left standing.

Established in 2011 under the Ministry of Agriculture, NAEB is

After this long and memorable day, giant fruit bats serenade me to sleep with their chatter.

The next day we go right back to work with three sessions of 28 coffees, which completes our initial overview of the original 59 that are passed by the national cuppers. The coffees that make it through from these first two days will be cupped again in the second round on day three.

As a way of expanding knowledge and exposure to coffees from around the world, most of us on the international panel brought coffees from our companies or countries to share with each other, but mostly with the national cuppers, who do not get the chance to try many coffees from elsewhere. Twenty-one different coffees are set up for cupping, and a few for brewing. By pure coincidence, we manage to have an entire table of coffees from Kenya, one from Ethiopia, one of just El Salvadorans, and a fourth of coffees from Central and South America. The Rwandan cuppers are quite interested in the wide array of flavor profiles, and we have a good time talking about what they like and why.

It's hard not to see some parallels in Rwanda to many other places I've visited in my coffee travels. There are smells and sights that will instantly transport you to Central America, but others evoke images of other places, like the fact that it is amazingly clean and beautiful and generally very safe in Kigali.

Still, there are many signs of need, and one in particular we join together as a group to help.

In response to many of the judges requesting the chance to provide schoolchildren with supplies, our judges' coordinator and constant companion, Charles Rwabukumba, puts us in contact with a local bilingual nursery and primary school that has a program for accepting orphans. We arrange to visit the school and donate 63 new desks for the students, all newly made by a local woodworker. We are received by more than 150 students who sing songs and dance their appreciation for the new desks. After, we take photos with the kids and talk with them so they can practice their English and French. One child said that the gift "will make me more likely to study hard to deserve this fine desk."

Opposite page, at top: The Rwandan national flag flying outside the Kayanza cupping lab in Rwamagana. Below: The author posing with some of the children who received 63 classroom desks donated by the COE international judges. This page: Charles Rwabukumba, who served as a guide to the international judges, is a cupper, technician, and mentor for NAEB, became a great friend to the judges.

What about the coffee?

We have a chance to visit the RWACOF washing station, which is about 90 minutes away on a *very* dusty red clay road. As this is the dry season, production is done for the season. The manager walks us through the facility, explaining the processing methods, and while some of it is vague (maybe due to translation issues), I gather that he's saying the coffees in Rwanda are largely what we would consider to be a type of washed process. Coffees are sorted for defects and then milled/depulped, and left to ferment for 12 hours. Coffee is then run through the classification channels to sort for defects based on density, after which they soak for 24 hours.

Coffees are then dried on covered raised beds for 12 to 24 hours, and then moved to uncovered raised beds to finish drying for anywhere from 10 to 24 days, depending on the weather conditions.

There are many variations on this process that may lead to very different results from station to station in Rwanda's 25 growing regions, that will effect profile and quality. The coffee at RWACOF, located at 1500 meters above sea level, appears healthy, if a bit wilted from the heat and lack of rain. This may be appropriate for the current downtime planting period, but it's not a given. Other plants in the more western regions (and admittedly at higher altitudes) do not suffer as gravely, indicating that proper care could be a factor, too, in making sure plants are healthy during this regeneration period.

In round two of cupping we select the finalists for the COE auction. Twenty-eight coffees in three sessions are cupped, and we determine the top 10. We will cup these 10 again tomorrow to make sure they're accurately scored and ranked. The top 10 review is usually an enjoyable experience, a chance to just enjoy and really experience the best of the coffees the country has to offer.

Here's the sad news: Potato.

The potato defect is named for its likeness to the smell and taste of this tuber. Don't think fresh, new potatoes; it's more like an older, stale smell.

All in all we lose a lot of otherwise great coffee to this singular defect. This is often discouraging as the defect might show up in only a cup or two, and be scored highly by judges who didn't receive the bad cups. Nowhere is this more evident, and sad, than in the top 10, where we lose two coffees to potato defect.

There are a few theories on the origin of this defect, but very limited actual facts or data, and we want to impress the need for research upon Dr. Ndambe Magnifique Nzaramba, director of NAEB, when we meet with him. Of utmost importance is defining

At top: The Garukurebe drummers share their talent and cultural heritage at the welcome ceremony beside Lake Muhazi, Rwamagana. Photo by Benjamin D'Emden. Below: The Bourbon coffee variety growing at the RWACOF washing station in the eastern region.

tasked with the important management of the coffee and tea sectors of the country. The organization is involved in research and development, and supply-chain details through to export. This assistance has never been more important, and continues to grow in necessity as the Rwandan production and export of coffee grows. In 2002, Rwanda had just two washing stations and produced a couple hundred tons of coffee; today, more than 20,000 tons of coffee go through 210 washing stations in Rwanda. There's a lot for NAEB to keep up with.

What makes for an even greater distinction here is the manner in which coffee is harvested and processed. This is dictated largely by the size of the average smallholder farm, which is usually about one hectare and may only have about 200 trees. This means no single farmer is going to have enough coffee to be processed or sold individually, especially with the harvest happening over a protracted period of time.

Instead of the often-recognized "farmer level" interaction, the practice in Rwanda is focused on the washing stations or coffee processing sites mentioned above. This means that a single lot of coffee may be the combined work of anywhere from 150 to 200 different smallholder farmers from a specific region. Recent estimates put the number of these farms at around 400,000 nationwide, which combined are producing around 300,000–420,000 bags of coffee annually. For our specific focus, specialty coffee went from a production of less than 1,000 tons annually in 2004, to 6,000 tons in 2011. COE and ACE are credited with helping to galvanize the idea and effort that quality should be of equal importance with quantity, and that there should be a concerted effort to create and involve quality control and lab work to further this end.

Early morning start times help keep the day's heat at bay in the Kayanza cupping lab, a 20-minute drive from the hotel. This first day is dedicated to calibration, which is crucial for a group of cuppers coming together from around the world, so we can score coffees consistently and as accurately as possible.

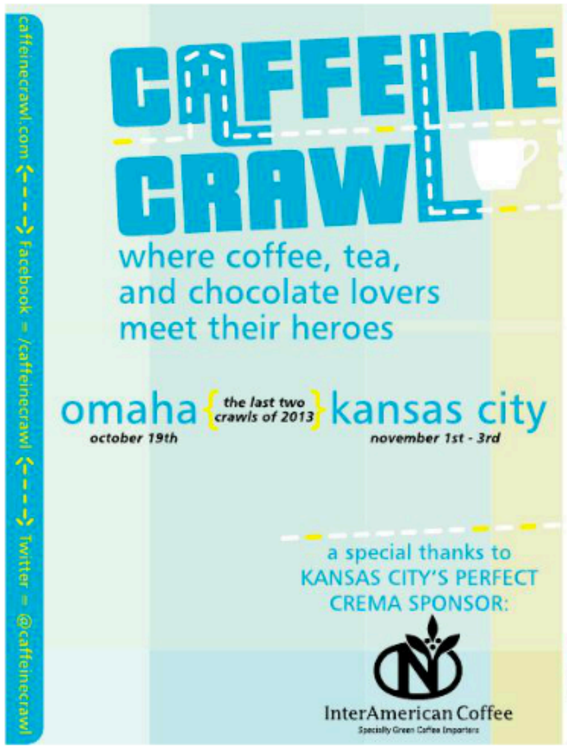
While the work we do for COE is our focus, we're plenty excited about the opportunity to soak up the experience of being here in Rwanda. Every day allows for new sights and adventures. Even the bus ride to the cupping lab is interesting.

But we don't stop there.

After our day of calibration, we're pretty low-key—enjoying a beer, catching up on e-mail, and dealing with jet lag so we're well rested for the day ahead, which has us in four consecutive sessions of cupping eight coffees per group. For any one judge, that means sampling 128 cups in however many slurps it takes to ascertain a score.

In total, that's 224 individual cups prepared four times a day. We can't do it without the amazing NAEB staff—40 in all, including auditors and drivers—who prepare the cups four times per day, clean up our mess, and set another session up again and again, so we can focus on scoring.

This first evening we're honored with a welcoming ceremony at spectacular hotel resort on Lake Muhazi in the eastern province of Rwamagana district. We're treated to traditional drums and *intore* dance by the troupe, Garukurebe, which I am told means "come back and see the beauty of Rwanda." This is our first chance to really appreciate the natural landscape and culture, and we all enjoy ourselves, some going so far as to join the dancing.



Group photo of the author with the international judges panel for the 2013 Rwanda Cup of Excellence, joined by the national cuppers and coordinators, along with COE head judge Sherri Johns.

the origin of this defect that blights otherwise amazing coffees. Susie Spindler, director of ACE, says that COE is in a unique position to help pinpoint geographical data that can be used to see if there is any regional specificity indicating localized issues, potentially bringing about or exacerbating this defect. This is especially poignant in light of the fact that neighboring Burundi is suffering from the same defect issues.

But you can smell it in the air. Driving through city and country, the potato odor will often waft into the window, the same smell we found in the cups, which sadly obliterated any good qualities in that coffee.

I don't want to paint too bleak of a picture, but I do want to be factual in relating the important issues Rwanda (and Burundi) face now and into the future. Identifying and controlling this defect is crucial for gaining the trust of buyers, who are becoming more wary of potato, which can pop up apparently from even a single defected seed.

Farming and washing station practices are being reviewed, as are genetic variance possibilities. Considering more than 98 percent of the coffee grown in Rwanda is of the Bourbon variety, this will be a real challenge to agronomists.

Meanwhile, did I tell you how amazing the coffees are? Coffee profiles range from sparkling lime and juicy tropical fruit acidity, supported by honey and cane sugar sweetness; to clean, refined cups of sweet plum and red apple with lush caramel and chocolate mouthfeel. They are truly spectacular. The jury is aligned on the one coffee that earns the Presidential Award, which is given to a coffee scoring over 90.

The three-hour drive from Kigali to the Huye District for the award ceremony is worth it for the chance to visit this lush mountain-ringed area. We're once again treated to traditional drumming, singing and dancing, and speeches by dignitaries from all over Rwanda. Many of the speakers talk of the necessity of supporting farmers in an effort to improve the quality as well as quantity of coffee grown, and to do so in a way that allows the farmers to continue to live well while doing so. The black cloud of potato defect isn't ignored in these speeches, but the focus is on what can be done to manage and fix the problem.

The Rwandan people are resilient and delightful. As we travel through the country on a bus full of *mguzu* (white people), we were an obvious spectacle. But in an instant, with a smile or wave, their look of curiosity turns to glee, and they grin and wave back happily. What an amazing sight, and one we saw over and over from these warm and friendly folks.

This seems a perfect corollary to our experiences cupping: discovering coffees that opened up and smiled at us, and in turn make us smile when describing them, just short of jumping up and down, like the kids who would flock to the road, waving as we drive by.

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