

## Ethiopia Trip Report – Feb09

One's first trip to a new country is always exciting, and this trip to Ethiopia being my first, I was giddy the entire 30 hour trip there. I didn't actually spend 30 hours on the plane. I lucked out and had a 10 hour layover in London, allowing for just enough time to pop into the city for a visit to rockstar roasting company Square Mile Coffee, where 2007 World Cuptaster Champion Anette Moldvaer and 2007 World Barista Champion James Hoffman channel their mystical powers into every batch of coffee that they roast. Anette and I enjoyed a cup of El Salvador Santa Rita natural, as well as a cup of *qishr* type cascara tea made from the husks of cherries from the same farm. Conveniently I got into the city at a time of day when the Borough Market was cranking, and scored a delicious lunch while marveling at the Monmouth Coffee baristas handling the droves of people flocking to their counter for pour over cups and espresso bevies.

Back to the Ethiopia part of the trip, I thankfully had a full day in Addis Ababa (Ethiopia's capital) to rest and acclimatize when I first arrived. I had ambitions to get out and see part of the city, but sleep deprivation won over and I squandered my afternoon trying to get my brain-clock synched with the world around me.

The main purpose of my traveling to Ethiopia was to assist Craig in teaching a Coffee Quality Institute (CQI) Q Grader course in the eastern city of Dire Dawa, in the region of Harrar. Craig and Dan Cox (also signed on as an instructor for the course) had been in Kigali, Rwanda for the previous week for the East African Fine Coffee Association (EAFCA) conference, and were scheduled to arrive early Monday morning, the first day of the training. My assignment was to go to Dire Dawa the Sunday before the training began, to prepare the workspace secured for the training and to be sure that all of our supplies were in order. We were to be using a building on the grounds of the Dire Dawa Central Liquoring Unit (CLU,) where samples of coffees from around the Harrar area were brought to be evaluated, cupped, scored and eventually sold. I arrived with CQI's Daniel Mulu late Sunday morning to find that our training space, while amply large, was a total disaster, and no advance preparations had been made in anticipation of our arrival. The first day was spent cleaning the room, removing decrepit shelves and tangles of old wires and cables in order to clear a space to work, scrambling around Dire Dawa drumming up water for cuppings, propane and burners for heating the water, kettles, cups, spoons, all those things that one needs if one wants to do anything with coffee. By the end of the day we had five desks up on cinder blocks, a few prep tables arranged for our supplies, at least one set of burners fired up and ready to go; but no coffee, and no training materials...

And when Monday morning rolled around and the trainees all showed up with expectant looks on their ready-to-be-trained faces, we got word that Craig and Dan's flight out of Addis had been delayed by five hours, and that they wouldn't be arriving until the afternoon. What's more, we received news that our roasted training coffee (which had been shipped from Seattle two weeks before) was still held up in customs, and all of the training materials shipped to Ethiopia by CQI (more than a month before) were

not only held up in customs, but in danger of being seized all together. Luckily I brought a few pounds of a variety of coffees in case of just such an event, and Craig was able to bring a few supplies and coffees from EAFCA with him, so we were able to cobble together a day and a half of training on Monday and Tuesday.

Miraculously, our coffee was cleared from customs Tuesday afternoon, and CQI was able to hire a driver to pick the coffee up from the customs office and drive it 8 hours, over night, across the desert to Dire Dawa, so we could have it to use first thing Wednesday morning. One of the happiest moments of the week was seeing the van pull up to the Dire Dawa Central Liquoring Unit (CLU) with our coffee in the backseat. That's when we knew that it would all be okay. The vast majority of the test components of the Q Grader Exam use these 30 coffees, especially the cupping skills tests, where each student is required to cup six coffees from five major growing regions over the course of the week. Their cupping skills are evaluated based on how closely they are calibrated with their fellow cuppers, so, for some of these Ethiopian cuppers who have never tasted coffee from Guatemala or Colombia or Sumatra before, the flavors can be quite astonishing! This component tests the cupper's ability to evaluate a coffee objectively, based on the criteria in the SCAA cupping form, and award it points regardless of the cupper's previous experience with a coffee, or personal likes or dislikes.

The remainder of the week consisted of 12 – 14 hour days testing the students, offering re-takes of some of the tests, and grading their exams to determine whether or not they had completed a certain portion of the program. Some of the tests were a bit more challenging to set up than others, for example the Matching Pairs Test (where cuppers are asked to identify trace quantities of organic acids added to dilute coffee brews) which required over five gallons of coffee to be brewed at once. Luckily we had some advance notice that brewing equipment would not be available, so Craig and I got creative and used a few of my grain bags from my home-beer-brewing setup along with a few 10 liter kettles to get the job done.

Our week-long training wrapped up Friday afternoon, and we were able to spend Saturday and Sunday visiting old Harar city, and getting to know Dire Dawa a little better. Harar City is a fascinating place; the Muslim capital of Ethiopia, which hadn't been visited by a non-Muslim before British explorer Richard Burton snuck his way into the city in the 1850's. French poet Arthur Rimbaud also made his home in Harar in the 1809's, but aside from these two, Harar has had very little European influence in the past millennium. Dire Dawa, on the other hand, was intended from the beginning to be a metropolis, founded in the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century as a mid-point on the great railroad being constructed between Addis Ababa and the port of Djibouti on the Red Sea. Dire Dawa was a comfortable home for us during the week of our training, and we greatly appreciated the leisure time to walk its streets and become more familiar with its people. The Kafira market was a fantastic opportunity to mingle and shop with the locals, and is the sight I recommend seeing most if you happen to find yourself in Dire Dawa.

Craig and I returned to Addis on Sunday evening, and had Monday and Tuesday to meet and cup with exporters that Atlas worked with in the past, as well as attempt to unravel the mystery of the new coffee trading system under management by the Ethiopia Commodities Exchange (ECX) as of January 2009. The best way to summarize the way that coffee will be traded in Ethiopia under the new

exchange system is that all coffee produce by small holder farmers and sold to a privately owned washing station will be cupped by an ECX cupper, assigned a quality grade and be blended in with other coffees of similar quality based on processing method (washed/unwashed) and general producing region. Once these lots have entered the ECX system, they are traded via an “open outcry” system, where the green coffee’s value will vary throughout the trading day depending on its quality, producing region, availability and demand. The positive side of the ECX’s new system for trading coffee is that, hopefully, a standardized system for establishing market value for a coffee based on cup quality will bring the price paid directly to the farmer up for the vast majority of Ethiopian coffee farms laboring to produce the country’s bulk commodity. The unfortunate aspect for specialty buyers is that the traceability and familiarity with individual washing stations and farmers that we’ve come to appreciate in many of the finest specialty lots available on today’s market will be lost, as the small lots are blended in with other similar coffees and sold as homogenized blends. The big question going forward for specialty buyers will be whether or not they can stand to function under the ECX’s new system, or whether there will be opportunities in the future for certain coffees to be made available outside of the exchange.

Two types of coffee producers have been exempted from the trading system of the ECX: private plantation owners who also own their own washing stations, and co-operative unions where organized co-operatives work together to control quality, market and export their coffees. At the time we were in Ethiopia, many exporters had already received lots of coffee from small holder farmers that, according to the rules set up by the ECX, were viable to sell outside of the exchange as they were purchased before the new system was put into place. At this time of writing, however, the Ethiopian government has confiscated much of the coffee held in exporters’ warehouses, accusing the exporters of hoarding coffee and attempting to usurp the exchange system. It’s impossible to tell, at this point in time, exactly how specialty coffee from Ethiopia will be affected in the future. It’s almost certain, however, that the traceability and unique terroir we’ve come to appreciate from small growing regions are being threatened, and while general quality of large lots may remain high, many of the relationships and connections with individual producers and washing stations stand to be compromised in favor of homogeneity.