

# Rwandan Coffee Goes from Ordinary to Star(bucks)

Interview with Philip Schluter, Schluter S.A.

**Rwandan coffee is featured at Starbucks this year. The path to creating a premium, well-branded coffee from a low-return mass product involved both aid agencies and private firms.**

To learn how Rwanda Ordinary transformed itself into a gourmet choice, we spoke to Schluter S.A., "the African coffee people" who have been in business since 1858. Philip Schluter, the sixth-generation head of the Swiss-based family firm, explained the process to *Trade Forum*.

Rwandan coffee is traditionally smallholder-produced. Until recently, they would pick the ripe cherries (raw coffee beans), then use a small hand-pulper to take the skin off — or, in the worst-case scenario, with rocks. They would then dry the coffee, ferment it in a small bucket with water and dry it in the sun. One smallholder fermented it for 18 hours, another for 48. Some used dirty water, others used clean, depending on where they were. Coffee quality therefore varied widely. They delivered it in very small lots of "parchment" (beans still surrounded by a layer known as parchment) to a central buying station, where it was put into commercial-sized lots, hulled in the factory and exported.

The coffee obtained — because of variance in water quality, fermentation time and so on — is of industrial quality. It has been exported, primarily to large industrial roasters, under the names Rwanda Ordinary and Rwanda Standard, which is probably not a good example of branding. Up to 2000 this was true of all the coffee in Rwanda.

## Better quality

In 2000, the authorities carried out a feasibility study through the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) to see how they could add value to coffee, whether the coffee had the inherent characteristics for better quality, which would require washing stations or wet mills. These are basically fermentation units. Like wine, fermented coffee is worth a lot more, but needs a central process. Fermentation was being done — in small buckets and with varied results. Central washing stations have small "swimming pools" where one puts the coffee and controls the fermentation process. Coffee can then be extremely well prepared.

Having decided it was feasible to produce better-grade coffee, the authorities set up two projects — one with cooperatives and one with private investors (the side that involved Schluter). When buying coffee from the small

farmers, instead of taking the small parchment, project workers handpicked out cherries that were overripe or under ripe, providing jobs for local women, and controlled the fermentation process.

## Sharing across countries

One good thing about the Rwanda story is that it used African expertise. Kenyan experts ran washing stations for the first two years and trained the local Rwandans. We took one of the Rwandans trained by a Kenyan to Cameroon to teach Cameroonians how to operate washing stations. Then we sent a Cameroonian to Tanzania who spent a while learning how to do it (from the experienced Tanzanian producers) and is now running a project in Cameroon. It shows how expertise developed across Africa can grow projects for all these countries.

In 2006 the Rwandans produced 2,500 tonnes of fully-washed coffee. The aim is to get the whole country producing fully-washed coffee by 2010. Burundi, next door to Rwanda, produces 36,000 tonnes of coffee, of which 30,000 is fully washed, using 148 washing stations. Rwanda has 71 at the end of the current season, of which about 50 are operational and more are being built.

The impact and interest among Rwandans are growing. I went to Rwanda recently with one of our coffee buyers. The President lent us a boat, with a general to take us around Lake Kivu to visit the washing stations. By the end of the day the boat's captain told us: "I am going to go home to my family's plot of land and build a washing station."

## Better branding

The premium from this coffee is in the order of 300%, due to good processing. Rwandan coffee has been one of



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the big hits in the world speciality market in the last five years. It was awarded the “Starbucks Black Apron”. Every two or three months Starbucks picks the best new coffee on offer in its stores and runs a special promotion. The award is so named because of the black aprons worn by store managers and coffee-expert staff in the coffee shops. The idea is that this is what the real coffee connoisseurs recommend. Rwandan coffee is now being featured in Swiss, other European and Middle Eastern stores. It’s an indication

of their commitment that Starbucks employees themselves raised over \$50,000 to buy cows for local farmers in coffee-growing areas of Rwanda so that the small producers would have both nutrition and manure for the coffee plants. ►

**Interview by Peter Hulm. For more on Schluter S.A., see <http://www.schluter.ch/>**

**Contributors: Morten Scholer, Natalie Domeisen.**