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Publisher *Routledge*

Informa Ltd Registered in England and Wales Registered Number: 1072954 Registered office: Mortimer House, 37-41 Mortimer Street, London W1T 3JH, UK



Food and Foodways

Publication details, including instructions for authors and subscription information:

<http://www.informaworld.com/smp/title~content=t713642611>

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Online publication date: 23 February 2011

To cite this Article Goldstein, Jenny Elaine(2011) 'The "Coffee Doctors": The Language of Taste and the Rise of Rwanda's Specialty Bean Value', *Food and Foodways*, 19: 1, 135 – 159

To link to this Article: DOI: 10.1080/07409710.2011.544226

URL: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/07409710.2011.544226>

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Food and Foodways, 19:135–159, 2011
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 ISSN: 0740-9710 print / 1542-3484 online
 DOI: 10.1080/07409710.2011.544226



The “Coffee Doctors”: The Language of Taste and the Rise of Rwanda’s Specialty Bean Value

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The emergence of Rwanda’s specialty coffee sector during the early twenty-first century has brought high-end Rwandan coffee to the shelves of coffee retailers across the United States, Europe, and Japan. While a variety of factors have influenced the rapid development of Rwanda’s specialty coffee industry, one of the most significant has been the training of domestic coffee tasters. Known as cuppers, these taste professionals act as a unique link in this global foodway and help enable perception of locally based flavors through marketplace mechanisms. The Rwandan cupper is not simply another middleman in a very long commodity chain. Rather, she or he plays a new role in transforming a generic cash-crop commodity into locality-based luxury item. This new role highlights the language and standards used to differentiate coffees in producing countries for international niche markets.

With ideal climatic and topographic conditions for growing the heirloom “Bourbon” varietal of *Coffea arabica*, Rwanda is naturally well positioned to produce high-quality coffee. Rwandan coffee does indeed have many environmental factors working in its favor, yet those alone fail to explain why, after a century of production, the Rwandan brew suddenly “tastes better.”¹ While coffee exported from Rwanda was once marked only by a crude letter grade indicating size and degree of visible defects, an increasing volume of coffee is now leaving the country distinguished by point of origin or purported taste. Those familiar with Rwandan coffee at both the origin and consumption ends of this complex and global foodway also claim that these beans are in fact of higher “quality” than ever before, with distinctive flavors for which coffee drinkers are willing to pay more, thus increasing

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potential profits for Rwandan coffee growers. As a result, Rwandan coffee catapulted from being virtually unknown within the “specialty” sector of the global coffee industry to attracting attention and praise from high-end United States, European, and Japanese coffee companies within the first decade of the twenty-first century.

Rwanda’s shift towards exporting coffee bound for niche markets, differentiated by locality and taste attributes, is enabled by a multitude of global dynamics and characterizes a general turn towards quality improvement throughout the coffee industry worldwide. In an international coffee market long plagued by oversupply, the perception that growers are often only remunerated a small fraction of the cost of a commercial cup of coffee has become commonplace among self-identifying socially conscious consumers. This perceived economic contradiction has been partially responsible for the rise of niche coffees in recent decades, as well as the diversification and differentiation of the specialty coffee industry. Niche coffees offer consumers perceived taste improvements over mass-produced coffee blends, thus increasing the price consumers are willing to pay and in some instances guaranteeing larger profits for coffee producers in the developing world. Strategies through which niche coffees are created vary among coffee producing countries; Fair Trade certification is one widely recognized option being pursued by some exporters and importers. Rwanda is unique, however, in its recent embrace of a different quality improvement mechanism, namely the training of domestic coffee tasters, or cuppers as they are known in the industry.

I argue that domestic coffee cuppers—a new type of middlemen—have altered local coffee production dynamics and drawn international attention to, and even helped produce, the taste attributes of coffee beans grown

and processed in Rwanda. Through their tasting practices, Rwandan coffee cuppers are partially responsible for the rise of place-based coffee differentiation and the corresponding creation of certain material qualities in the beans themselves. This paper shows how Rwandan coffee cuppers are doctoring coffee beans on a microscale for global markets and how producing coffee that “tastes good” requires work that is not only driven by perceptions of consumer demand but is also inherently political. It also raises questions as to whether Rwanda’s implementation of a coffee cupping program is relying on *local* taste to an extent that producers in this exporting country are able to capture more of their coffee’s financial value within a global foodway.

This research is based on ethnographic fieldwork including participant-observation and semi-structured interviews conducted in Rwanda in 2008 at

observation and semistructured interviews conducted in Rwanda in 2008 at three coffee cupping laboratories, coffee processing centers, and in the national Sustaining Partnerships to Enhance Rural Enterprise and Development (SPREAD) project office in Kigali.² I contextualize the rise of Rwandan specialty coffee within an industry that, historically, was solely state-regulated and quantity-oriented. Rwandan cuppers are also part of a reorganization of
