

Could Zimbabwean Coffee Once Again Be on Specialty Menus?

Perfect Daily Grind

1 March 2018

traductora@perfectdailygrind.com

Zimbabwean coffee was once known for its high-quality, sweet, citric, chocolatey profile. But it's been almost 20 years since it all but disappeared from the world stage and the country lost one of its most promising industries. The early 2000s saw farms seized and coffee production plummeting.

Where fertile, red, volcanic soils once produced smooth, high-quality coffee and employed thousands of local people in a highly productive industry, there are now overgrown gardens, eucalypt and acacia thickets and scorched maize fields tended by unemployed subsistence farmers.

I grew up on this lush land, walking alongside my father, a pioneer and innovator for Zimbabwean commercial and smallholder coffee farmers. Chewing the red cherries from the bushes and playing with the kids of the local workers, coffee was part of my life from the time I could walk. I learned so much about coffee farming from my father and our coffee-growing neighbours at Crake Valley Farm – the Boswell-Brown family. The story of Zimbabwe's lost coffee farms is my story too.

Today, our coffee industry is a shadow of its former self. Yet the changing political scene could herald a new dawn for Zimbabwean coffee. If the private sector is once more allowed to flourish, there is a real opportunity to drive economic growth and reduce poverty through coffee production in a country of remarkable agricultural potential.



Freshly harvested coffee cherries on Crake Valley Farm, Zimbabwe. Credit: Crake Valley Farm, Boswell Brown

Zimbabwe, “The Perfect Coffee Country”

The small, landlocked, southern African country of Zimbabwe has 16 million people and a GDP of US \$16.62 billion ([World Bank](#)). It was once one of the world's coffee darlings. In fact, green bean buyer Mike Perry of [Klatch Coffee](#) remembers it as “very sweet” with “tart cherry tones”, a nutty aroma, and chocolate profile.

Its coffee belt follows the lush valleys and cool mountains along the border with Mozambique – part of the mountain chain that runs from the Ethiopian highlands. The region stretches from Chipinge, Chimanimani, and Vumba to Honde Valley and Mutasa. Boswell-Brown explains that “the higher, cooler and wetter areas produced better quality coffee – with premier quality from the Vumba first and then Chipinge, which is the larger farming area that used to produce 75% of Zimbabwean coffee.”

He adds that “rainfall averages around 1375 mm a year with a record high of 3000 mm. Most rain occurs as heavy showers in a few months of the year”.

It’s the perfect coffee country, says Johane Jori of the Zimbabwe Coffee Mill (ZCM) Limited. This is why, back in 1992, a group of commercial and small-scale producers banded together to set up the coffee mill. Their aim was to process an additional 20,000 tons a year, bringing national capacity to 50,000 tons.



Excelsior Estates, a 150 ha commercial coffee farm situated in the Eastern Highlands bordering Mozambique. It used to produce around 255 tonnes of red cherry ever year. Credit: Nicole Motteux

The Decline of Zimbabwean Coffee, in Numbers

In 1990, Zimbabwe produced 14,706 tonnes of mostly Arabica coffee from across 5,843 hectares (FAO). This is a remarkable green coffee yield of around 2.3 tonnes per ha; more than one third higher than any other African coffee nation. It still stands as record high productivity in Africa, with Ghana reaching 1.6 tonnes/ha in 2016.

This productivity was in part driven by private producers such as Boswell-Brown.

“One tonne per ha was not economic,” explains Boswell-Brown. “We needed two tonnes to make a profit, three to do well.” As such, they planted Catimor 128 variety for “its rust resistance, good yield and consistency”. He tells me, “It is a good workhorse.”

But then, in 2000, the once prosperous nation fell into ruin. The political unrest and economic turmoil destroyed the coffee industry as militants seized private farms and forced their owners out of the country. They left behind productive farms and thousands of plantation workers, their families, and communities to face poverty.

Before 2000, there were around 180 medium to large family farms, several thousand small-scale producers and a handful of corporate estates, Johane Jori told Eastern News.

But today, the fallen coffee industry has yet to recover. In 2016, only 414 tonnes were harvested, produced on 1,784 ha. Just three commercial estates and subsistence coffee farmers still eke out a living, according to Kenneth Chikanga, Editor of the Zimbabwe Digital News. And in 2017, the World Food Program reported 63% of rural households in Zimbabwe lived below the poverty line with 27% of children under five stunted from malnutrition. It's a different country.

My Family's Story

But to really understand what happened in Zimbabwe, we need to look at more than just numbers. We need to look at the stories of its producers, of people like my father and neighbours.

Winter in Zimbabwe, in the months of June and July, is the time for picking ripe red coffee cherries. In the late '70s, my father, Hugues Motteux, General Manager of Excelsior Estates, would be up with the rising sun – the best time of the day in Africa. Together with his field managers, he supervised the quality of the picking that was done by 100 staff and seasonal labourers.

Every year brought different challenges. In Zimbabwe, most rain occurs as heavy showers in a few months of the year and are triggered by the El Niño and La Niña weather patterns. However, severe droughts in 1982/1984 and 1991/1992 had an impact on production.

My father recalls that, in early days, there was limited meteorological information. Generally, though, “winds from the west to east and from north to south brought good rains. Strong winds from the east to the west during the day and night between July and November indicated drought.”

Boswell-Brown, my childhood neighbour, also remembers the 1990 drought, as well as the 1960 frost. “It taught us a lot, including the importance of mulching, water management, and not to plant in the valley bottoms,” he says. “We created a diversified and balanced farm ecosystem to restore soil nutrients, quality and flavour to the coffee and guard against droughts and frosts.”

To counter the soil erosion and other damage from flooding, my father established contour planting of vetiver grass on land with a 25 degrees slope. He also planted *Grevillea robusta* (silky oak) shade trees to protect coffee from wind, frost and sun. After the 1984 drought, he diversified into crops such as proteas, macadamia nuts, avocados, cabbages, kiwi, timber, and livestock to better withstand the shocks of weather and volatile coffee prices.

Back in the '60s, he had trained in tropical agriculture. And in the '70s and '80s, the local coffee industry was marked by exciting innovations. Advances in technology and agricultural practices were introduced, backed by Zimbabwean and international research. My father embraced all of this, buoyed by his love for coffee, farming and the growing potential of the industry in his adopted homeland of Zimbabwe.

A Period of Farming Innovation

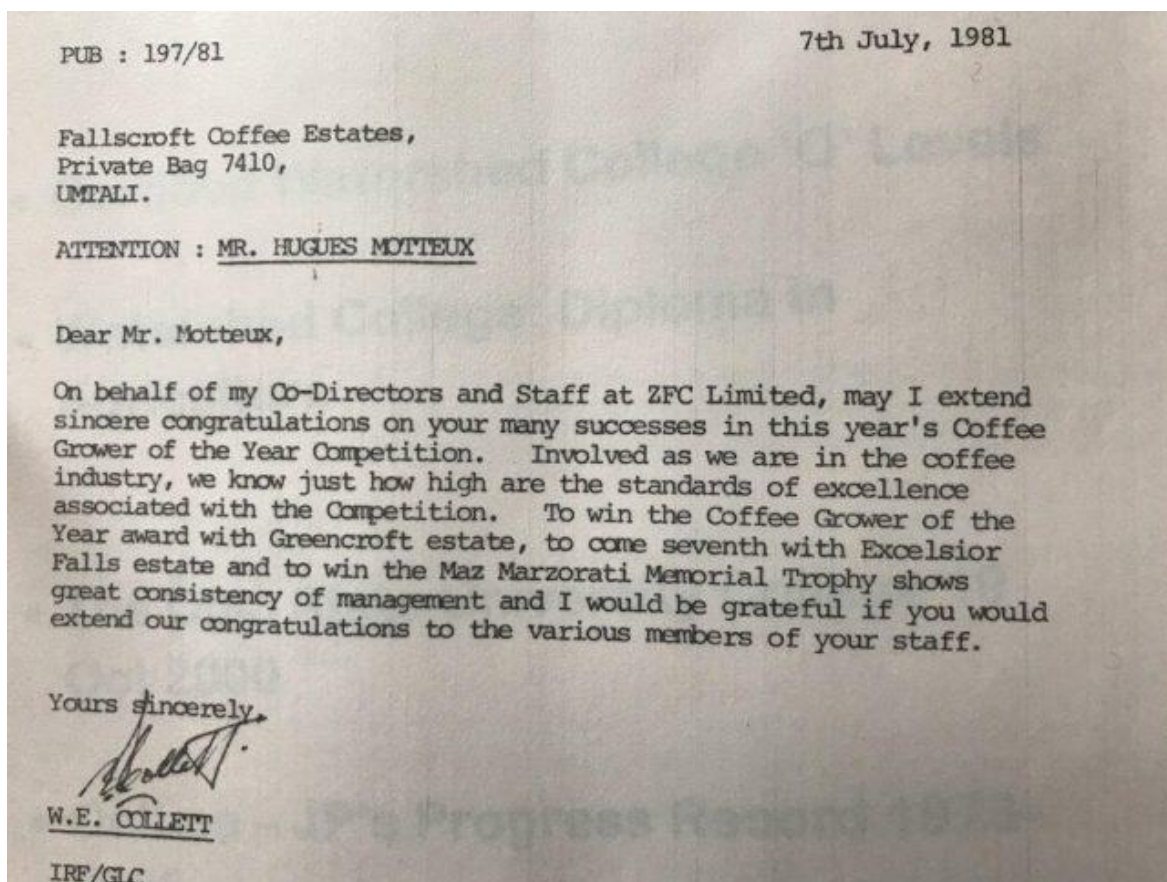
This era also saw the establishment of Zimbabwe's Coffee Growers Association. “It was created by another local family, the Fennell brothers in Chipinge, who had shared knowledge and fostered innovation from their farming days in South Asia,” Boswell-Brown tells me. “Part of their vision was to support the growth of smallholder coffee growers as a new entrepreneurial class in the emerging nation.

“Zimbabwe already had a well-earned reputation for agricultural science and research. The Coffee Growers Association’s purpose was to conduct and communicate research on good agricultural practices to enhance coffee productivity. Membership numbers quickly grew to about 180 farmers.” In the 1970s, coffee prices climbed, alongside a greater global demand for coffee productivity and quality. In 1981, Zimbabwe became an ICO exporting member.

What’s more, Zimbabwean coffee farmers were starting to introduce their own ideas and innovations on the world stage. My father remembers visiting Scotland and surprising equipment manufactures with his ideas for improving the design of coffee pulpers.

He built a processing plant designed to increase efficiency, conversion yields, and profitability for coffee enterprises. It was used by the commercial estate as well as neighbouring smallholder farmers. His four-disk pulper could pulp up to one tonne per hour – a significant improvement on what was commonly used at the time. Coffee was pumped from fermentation tanks onto drying racks that were artificially heated by a steam boiler that sped up the drying process and created a more consistent dried parchment, free of smoke taint.

His improvements to the coffee system were embraced by the Coffee Growers Association and became widely adopted by other coffee farmers. In 1981, my father was awarded the Coffee Grower of the Year, while Boswell-Brown received the award for Innovative Farm Management in 2002, both from the Zimbabwe Coffee Growers Association.



The letter telling my father that he had won Coffee Grower of the Year. Credit: Nicole Motteux

Success for Small-Scale Farmers in The Honde Valley

Yet it wasn't just large farms that were benefiting from Zimbabwe's coffee boom. In the early 1990s, the Association invited my father and Boswell-Brown to form an outreach programme for smallholder coffee farmers in the Honde Valley. The aim was to provide support in improving the quality and consistency of their coffee systems.

Honde is an isolated valley about 130 km from Mutare between Mount Inyangani and the Eastern Highland ranges. This coffee-rich land was home to the majority of smallholder coffee farmers in Zimbabwe.

Every three months, my father and Boswell-Brown spent three to four days in the Honde Valley, working with small-scale coffee growers who also grew maize and vegetables and kept poultry and oxen on their one- to two-hectare smallholdings. Each family looked after their own gardens but worked together in a coffee processing cooperative.

The outreach programme focused on key concerns shared by all coffee farmers in the subtropics. One issue was how to deal with coffee rust and pest outbreaks, including the coffee bug, the mealybug, the Antestiopsis bug responsible for the potato defect, leaf miner and green coffee scale. They offered practical demonstrations of good agricultural practices to try and eliminate these problems.

Boswell-Brow tells me that, as a result of the programme, small-scale producers in the region began to increase their output to around 300 tonnes of good-quality coffee.

A Zimbabwe Without Coffee

Had Zimbabwe coffee production continued its trajectory of innovation, cooperation and international research, it would no doubt still be famous today for its exquisite profiles and good yield. However, history intervened.

From the late 1990s until 2010, Zimbabwe struggled on several fronts. The World Bank reports ([here](#) and [here](#)) a mismanaged economy, cash and foreign currency shortages, fiscal indiscipline and budget deficits, low confidence and almost no foreign direct investment. It had a ballooning trade deficit, corruption concerns, low productivity, a rigid regulatory environment and other negative economic fundamentals.

The once busy and prosperous coffee farming families like mine were displaced. Other than Crake Valley Farm, Tanganda Estates, and Farfell Estates, there has been little meaningful coffee production in Zimbabwe since 2010. The few surviving operations continue to be dedicated to producing reliable high-quality coffee for the local and international market, says Boswell Brown, who on Crake Valley Farm exports 70% of his crop.

On coffee estates like my family's, the coffee trees are dead or have been removed and used for fuelwood. Deforestation and poor farming and management practices have taken their toll on soil fertility. Erosion has led to the siltation of waterways, reduced water quality, and a long-term decline in food security. The factory that was once a vibrant hub lies in ruins and needs large capital investment to bring it back.



A once innovative and leading-edge coffee processing facility now lies in ruins. Credit: Nicole Motteux

In 2017, the World Vision Zimbabwe Child Wellbeing Report expressed concern that a cash crisis would once again fuel inflation. Poor rural households have limited access to agricultural inputs and cash income for food, medicines and emergencies.

Bowell-Brown tells me that banks restrict cash withdrawals, which in turn results in farmers queuing for days to access cash to pay farm workers and buy inputs. A bag of fertilizer in Zimbabwe is almost 40% more expensive than the exact same product in South Africa.



When banks became cash-strapped in Zimbabwe. Credit: Anneta Charitonos

Rethinking Zimbabwe

But things are changing in Zimbabwe. In late November 2017, the current President Emmerson Mnangagwa displaced the 37-year-long rule of Robert Mugabe. As many analysts have written, this may an opportunity for Zimbabwe to implement economic and political reform.

“We are optimistic the new administration is committed to an agricultural revival. More than 70% of Zimbabwe’s 16 million people depend on small-scale agriculture,” says Kenneth Chikanga, Editor of the Zimbabwe Digital News.

And despite its tumultuous recent history, Zimbabwe’s potential remains. It is a country generously endowed with natural resources and a young and comparatively skilled population.



People hold up signs during this politically charged moment. Credit: Anneta Charitonos

New Opportunities for Coffee Producers

Agricultural economist Midway Bhunu tells me that restarting Zimbabwe’s coffee industry requires a business-enabling environment, confidence, and the availability of patient capital, good governance and political stability.

“Speciality coffee has many virtues and can make a positive impact on rural communities”, said Midway. However, the technical, financial and time investments required to produce a reliable supply of specialty coffee needs a foundation of established coffee gardens and supportive social and governance systems.

Midway believes that the government may re-establish the security of land tenure – arguably Zimbabwe’s biggest obstacle for coffee investments. Rejuvenating existing or establishing new coffee gardens requires large capital investment as well as skilled management to oversee them from nursery to harvest in four years’ time. Secure land tenure and a significantly improved business-enabling environment will encourage banks to lend to businesses. (Of course, this is not the only change that is needed. However, it would be a significant start in the right direction.)

“Let’s get straight to the point,” says Johane Jori of Zimbabwe Coffee Mill. “Private sector development is a critical step to rejuvenating the coffee industry. Industry diagnostics [already] underway will help to explore intervention possibilities and set the direction.”



Pride in Zimbabwe and its future. Credit: Annetta Charitonos

The People Already Working in Zimbabwean Specialty Coffee

Moreover, there are already Zimbabweans engaging in specialty coffee – albeit often on the brewing and consumption side of the supply chain.

Meet Tungamirayi Musungwa (Tunga) and his wife, Diana, whose goal was to build a vibrant coffee culture. Their mobile coffee business, [Zimbarista](#), is their third coffee venture.

“I thought I knew a lot about coffee. I was wrong.” Tunga laughs. “[Freshly Ground Coffee Bar](#) in Harare sponsored me to attend the Seattle Coffee training course for three weeks, 7 am to 10 pm, in South Africa. It taught me so much. It was all about artisanal crafted coffee. It blew my mind. I crammed as much learning in as possible. I had to.”

Tunga threw his passion into the Freshly Ground Coffee Bar, focusing on quality specialty coffee. But he says that the low purchasing power of Zimbabweans meant “we just didn’t have the volumes passing through”. Tunga recognised this gap in the market and so instead launched Zimbarista mobile coffee. He serves coffee beans directly sourced from some of Zimbabwe’s finest high-altitude Arabica coffee, such as La Lucie, Farfell, Leopard Coffee and Vumba Coffee. It’s his dream to one day create his own specialty roast.

“Our mission is to take specialty coffee to where people gather – at schools, weddings, family events and corporate events. Zimbarista took [us] to the streets. We just wanted good coffee to be accessible to everyone,” he says with a smile.



Zimbarista barista Laurette Gomwe serves a customer specialty coffee. Credit: Anneta Charitonos

Tourists with a thirst for locally produced specialty coffee could also help to bolster Zimbabwe's industry. Tourism makes up 5.2% of the country's GDP and, in 2017, more than 2 million people visited the country – up 15% on 2014. There is a growing confidence that this could drive new investment in coffee farms in the Eastern Highlands.

Since the mid-90s, Tony's Café in the Vumba (which means "mist") has been a popular place for tourists to enjoy a coffee along with spectacular views.

Then there's Zimbabwe's famous Victoria Falls. In 2016, the Zimbabwe Tourism Authority recorded over 1,062,166 visitors – half of the year's tourist arrivals. There, at the Wild Horizons Lookout Café, visitors can enjoy a premium local flagship coffee by boutique roaster La Lucie Coffee while looking onto the spectacular falls of *Mosi-oa Tunya* (Smoke that Thunders). The café manager, Gail Webster, says that Europeans make up the largest share of tourists and that they generally know and demand good-quality coffee.



Coffee, muffin, and incredible nature at Victoria Falls, Zimbabwe. Credit: Kevin Hogan

It's good news for the local production line too. Michel Fayd'herbe, La Lucie's CEO, says that the boutique coffee roaster (set up in 1995) is continually growing. It's experiencing strong customer demand for its specialty coffee, sourced from the Eastern Highlands, in Zimbabwe and will be looking to begin exporting this year.

The Zimbabwean coffee industry is looking ahead.

Achieving consistent, high-quality, high-yielding coffee crops will take good agricultural practices, good governance, and patient private sector investment. But Midway tells me that Zimbabwe has the potential to take a lead among the 25 African coffee countries.

Zimbabweans pride ourselves on our commitment to working together again for a bright future. As Midway says, we are looking forward to "*ramangwana rakanaka*", a wonderful future.

Written by Nicole Motteux, with additional inputs and feedback from Lilani Goonesena.

All views within this opinion piece belong to the guest writer, and do not reflect Perfect Daily Grind's stance. Perfect Daily Grind believes in furthering debate over topical issues within the industry, and so seeks to represent the views of all sides.

<https://www.perfectdailygrind.com/2018/03/zimbabwean-coffee-specialty-menus/>