CONSIDERING that Kenya's first coffee plants took root in the country's volcanic soil less than 120 years ago. Although Kenyan merchants traded with nearby countries in Africa and the Middle East, until the mid-19th century, Kenya remained largely uninhabited by Westerners. But after German missionaries traveled there and returned home with stories of majestic peaks and huge lakes, Europeans rushed to explore and return home with stories of Kenya's volcanic soil less than CONSIDERED

and sun-dried processing majority washed crop December–August for the main crop; July–January for the fly crop; 

ElEVATIOn 1,500–2,100 meters and in the Great rift Valley in the Aberdare zone, in the west near Nairobi, in the 

harvest year 2008–2009, EAFCA estimates also 320 large estates organized into about 3,500 estates of 

Kenya's coffee is typically wet-processed, with onsite pulping and bean size. Graded coffees are sold to 

In 2006, Kenya legalized the direct sale of coffee, importing coffee to England in the 19th century. Since then, 

falling yields and erratic rainfall can limit harvests and profits. There are about 300,000 small coffee growers in Kenya, and 50,000–60,000 metric tons is exported of coffee was available for export, and 50,000–60,000 metric tons is expected in coffee; year 2009–2010, according to the EAFCA. More than 95 percent of total production is exported, and in this country with Muslim heritage and British influence, tea remains more popular than coffee.

The auction system has been heralded for its transparency and for its fairness—the highest bidder gets the farm, and the farmer is rewarded for producing exceptional coffee. In recent years, however, some producers have complained about nonpayment or late payments of auction premiums. In 2006, Kenya legalized the direct sale of coffee to buyers, which permits farmers to get out of the auction process. This development known as the “second window”—allows for closer relationships between farmers and the market, and motivates large trading firms to invest in extension services and assistance to farmers. Still, the auction, continues to draw 90–95 percent of the coffee sold in Kenya.

For farmers, determining which outlet will yield the best price is not easy. “Right now, some farmers are playing both of those systems and waiting to see what is going to shake out the best,” says Phyllis Johansson, who works with coffee exporters in Kenya as part of her role as president at PD Imports. “I think there is this idea that if the auction is high that week, and they did not sell through the auction, that they missed an opportunity.”

Another challenge is traceability. Because small farms grow so much of the country’s coffee and pool their coffee to sell at auction, it can be difficult for consumers to track the coffee beans back to specific areas. The largest, highest-quality beans may be sold at auction and labeled with the generic “Arabica” designation.

In 1999, when BD Importers began purchasing Kenyan, most U.S. coffee buyers were unfamiliar with producers. “Importers were putting their own brand names on the coffees,” Johnson says. “Now that producers can choose to bypass the auction, the names of Kenya’s growing regions and co-ops are becoming more familiar to consumers.”

Though the market for sustainably grown coffee has expanded, Kenya’s trails behind other African countries in offering certified organic coffees. Green coffee is more susceptible to disease, so most large estates treat their plants. Small farmers usually cannot afford chemical inputs, but their pesticide-free beans may mix with treated beans if the coffees are pooled for sale. Plus, the cost of certification is a barrier for many small farmers cannot afford.

However, progress is being made in producing coffee with an eye toward the environmental impacts of cultivation. Through development partners, the EAFCA and large, trading groups, farmers are being trained in Good Agricultural Practices (GAP). On-farm training includes, some estates have built new wet-factories with environmentally friendly machines and equipment, such as eco-pulpers and -processors. And in recent years, sustainability-minded organizations have worked to help Kenyan farmers implement new farming standards. UAC Kephi certified the first mill in Africa, Southest Mills in Kenya, in 2006 and 13 percent of the country’s coffee production. Kenya’s coffee industry may face challenges to overcome, but its future looks bright.

In the specialty coffee industry, we are looking for something exceptional, something that will stand out,” Johnson says. “It’s hard to replicate a Kenya [coffee]. I think [Kenya] is in a good position because their product has great brand recognition throughout the world. “The market continues to develop slowly,” Johansson adds. “I see younger Kenyans coming into the market wanting to import coffee, I see a great potential for the bringing the new ideas that are spread throughout the industry to Kenya.”

KENYA facts

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