

DIRECT TRADE

Shegole, Ethiopia



INTELLIGENTSIA COFFEE

Syrupy and round with abundant baking spice and sweet molasses. Candied fig notes emerge with cooling along with a citrus zest acidity. The finish sustains the spice notes to the very end.

REGION	Limu Kossa, Jimma
VARIETAL	Indigenous
ELEVATION	1600 - 1950 masl
HARVEST	December - February
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FLAVOR	Baking spice, molasses, figs
ACIDITY	Citrus peel
MOUTHFEEL	Syrupy, round
FINISH	Dried fruit

GEOFF WATT'S NOTES:

Talking about Ethiopia and coffee is a difficult thing, much in the same way that it is very hard to communicate the value and impact of a masterful song or painting using only words. That's just the way it is—we don't have a language that is capable of capturing the emotional intensity and profound soulfulness of great art.

To describe why Ethiopia is so intriguing and why its coffees are so unbelievably full of life is a job best left to poets. But we'll stumble onwards anyhow.

For starters, remember that Ethiopia is the birthplace of coffee. It is the one place on earth that where native Arabica coffee varieties grow wild, and it is home to more genetic diversity in coffee than the rest of the producing countries combined by a huge margin. Ethiopia boasts the most ancient and the most compelling traditions for coffee consumption that the world has seen. Coffee permeates the cultural fabric of Ethiopian life, and is celebrated daily in a way that would make Juan Valdez give up his poncho and his mule and pursue a life of meditation and monastic serenity.

Take the coffee ceremony, for example. It is extremely common for people to buy green coffees in the markets then take them home and prepare them in the living room using a pan to roast over coals, a mortar and pestle to grind, and a clay pot to boil and brew. The coffee ceremony is at once a social tradition, a celebration of the virtuous properties of coffee, and an opportunity for contemplation and reflection. Coffee is served over a period of time in three individual rounds—the Abol, Tona, and Baraka, each of which has its specific significance. Life without coffee is almost unimaginable—most people drink coffee in the morning, the afternoon, the evening, and sometimes late into the night. Ethiopia is one of only two producing countries that drink more than half of what they grow!





Coffee (“buna” in Amharic) accounts for nearly two-thirds of foreign export earnings, and employs about 10% of the population. It is in many ways the life’s blood of the entire country.

In the past most of our attention has been focused on coffees grown in the Southern part of the country in regions like Sidama and Yirgacheffe due to the exceptional floral qualities, profound sweetness, and delicate aromatics that can be found there. But recently a project being operated by TechnoServe in the Western part of the country—places like Kaffa, Illubabor and Welega—has given us reason to turn some attention to some of Ethiopia’s oldest and most underrated coffee areas. Up until recently most of the coffees produced there were not handled especially well post-harvest and the vast majority of the coffees were treated as naturals, without any washing process. They typically sold at a discount as compared with coffees from other regions, leaving producers there at a severe economic disadvantage further compounded by the fact that many of the individual producers were not organized and would often end up selling their coffees to local collectors for low prices. The TNS projects have set out to organize producers into groups and provide them with the training and infrastructure to increase the quality of their coffees and help them earn a premium in the marketplace. Now in it’s second year, we’ve already begun to see some excellent results and have every expectation that these once unheralded coffees will begin to compete on a more even playing field with coffees from areas in the South and East.

The Shegole coop belongs to the Limu Union and is one of the flagship groups in the TNS project. Although it was constituted in 2005 with a total membership of about 400 farmers, the last two years have seen it blossom considerably. Since 2009, in large part due to their consistent success in raising quality and achieving increasing returns to the members, the group has grown to almost 1000. I wasn’t able to spend much time there on this visit, as we arrived well after sundown and the activities at the mill were relatively quiet. Nevertheless I left with quite a high level of expectations for this group, mostly due to the quality of the leadership. One of the most common causes of failure within cooperative groups is a lack of vision and cohesion. Shegole has got little to worry about here, as the administrative team is rock-solid.

