

# From The Shores *of* Lake Kivu



Lake Kivu, eastern Democratic Republic of Congo. | Photo courtesy of Equal Exchange

## Specialty Coffee AND THE Democratic Republic of Congo



By Beth Ann Caspersen

To say the coffee market in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) is complex is an understatement. The DRC is an enormous coffee-producing country situated in the middle of Africa. Covering more than 1.4 million square miles, it's the second-largest country in Africa by size and is home to nearly 80 million people. Well-known coffee producing origins—including Rwanda, Burundi, Uganda and Tanzania—make up the nine countries that surround it. Although rich in minerals and biodiversity, the DRC is riddled with conflict of historic proportions that has hampered development and the ability to bring coffee to market.

So why have its neighbors flourished in the international coffee market while the DRC largely has been left behind? The story is long and sordid, involving myriad factors that include precious metals, warring factions, access to markets, and a series of cultural heartbreaks that have left gaping wounds still in the process of healing.

But things *are* changing.

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Coffee farmer Nyanabo Kishwero of the Bishange primary society of SOPACDI tends a nursery of bourbon coffee. Photo courtesy of Equal Exchange





Dunia Moises Muhindo, quality manager for the co-op SOPACDI, prepares a cupping in the co-op's lab.  
Photo courtesy of Equal Exchange

Twentieth-century Developments

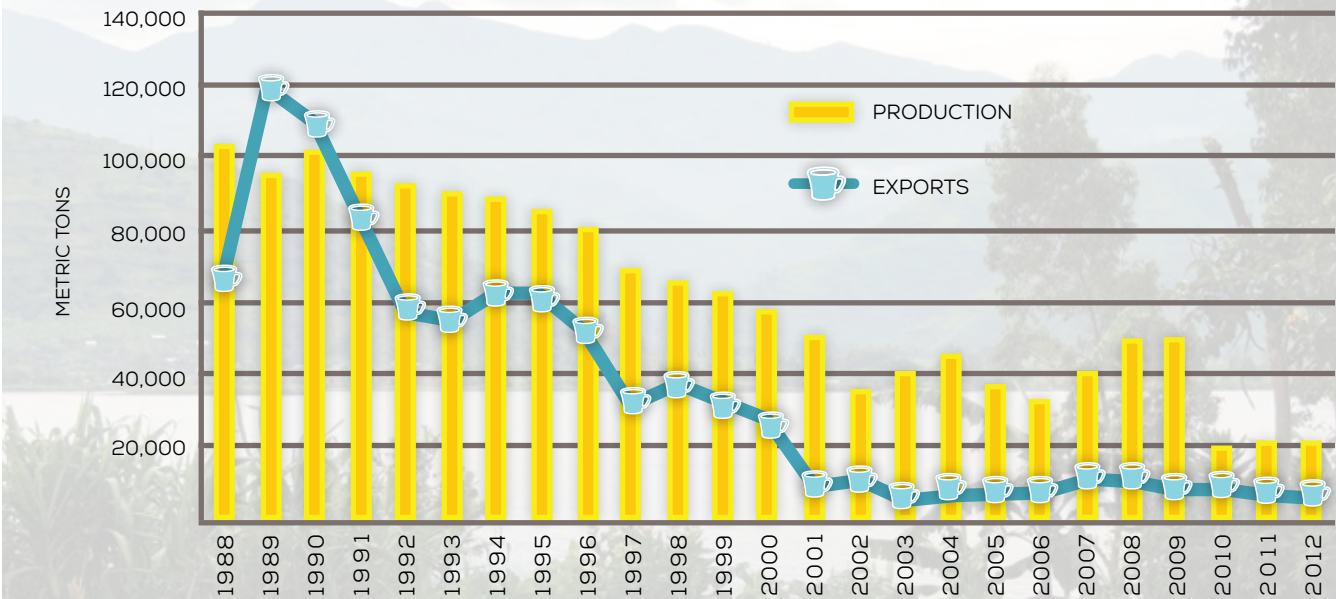
Over the past century, coffee has experienced a continual rise and fall in the DRC. It is believed that coffee made its way to the then-colonized Belgian Congo in the early 1900s, and by 1948, Congolese coffee was regulated by three geographically separate bodies: the Office for Robusta Coffee (OCR), the Office of Agricultural Products from Kivu (OPAK), and the Office of Agricultural and Animal Products of Kisangani (OPAEMI). During this period, 14 robusta varieties and nine arabica varieties were introduced into the DRC.

As early as 1948, the Congo was the first country to analyze and grade both green and roasted coffee. In 1960, the Congo gained independence and became the Republic of Congo, only to be renamed Zaire a few years later. In 1972, the government merged the three regulating bodies into the Zairian Office of Coffee (OZACAF) and nationalized the coffee sector. Between 1973 and 1976, all private coffee plantations and dry mills were occupied by the government. This appeared to be a good move. Reports state that between 1970 and 1980, coffee was the most exported agricultural product in the country, accounting for 70 to 85 percent of agricultural exports and 10 to 15 percent of all exports.

In 1984, the government liberated the coffee sector with minimal oversight. During this time, large companies such as Bralima (a brewery) and SOTEXKI (a textile firm) registered as coffee production and export firms, although they had little or no expertise. Production fell and, as a result, the government cut export taxes by half, to 4.5 percent for arabica and 3.5 percent for robusta.

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EVOLUTION OF COFFEE PRODUCTION AND EXPORTS IN THE DRC OVER 25 YEARS



Source: Office National du Café (ONC). Special thanks to Kambale Kisumba Kamungele of Ets. Tsongo Kasereka, and the African Fine Coffees Association.

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Raised drying beds at the Tsheya washing station in the eastern DRC. | Photo courtesy of Equal Exchange

## Conflict, Disease and Rich Biodiversity

The history of the DRC is complex and multi-layered. The country has been held hostage by conflict for decades. The aftermath of the 1994 Rwandan genocide had a dramatic and lasting effect on the DRC, leading to three different wars and more than 6 million lives lost. Coupled with an outbreak in the late 1990s of coffee wilt disease—an epidemic that has wreaked havoc in Africa in robusta coffee, and to a lesser extent arabica, causing leaves to turn yellow, wilt and fall off—the coffee sector was essentially eliminated.

The DRC is rich in minerals, with artisanal mines scattered throughout the country. Many of these mines are controlled by paramilitary groups that use the money earned from mining to support their actions. Minerals used in electronics such as cell phones and computers—including tin, tantalum, tungsten and gold—are extremely valuable, and their sale helps fuel the violence. A lack of infrastructure further complicates the issue. The topography of the land itself provides shelter to countless fugitives and paramilitary groups fighting for control, and rape has become a tactic of war. Thousands of women, men and children have been sexually assaulted. While coffee and other products are on the rise—and are contributing to a new economy—insecurity remains prevalent.

The DRC is part of the Great Lakes region of central Africa, which spreads from Uganda to Tanzania. It is one of the most important freshwater lake systems in the world, supporting numerous animal and bird species and providing a significant source of drinking water. In the DRC, arabica coffee is grown primarily in the eastern part of the country, where elevations are highest. Here, the Virunga Mountains and the historic Virunga National Park are hotspots for biodiversity, home to mountain gorillas and the rare okapi. Coffee is grown along the shores of Lake Kivu, at 1,460 meters above sea level. For years, Congolese coffee was smuggled across Lake Kivu and sold as Rwandan coffee.



A 4-month-old bourbon plant in the SOPACDI co-op nursery. | Photo courtesy of Equal Exchange



Cuppers sample local coffees at the Saveur du Kivu competition. | Photo courtesy of Equal Exchange

Many people lost their lives engaging in this traditional bartering system, known as *troc*. Richard Hide—head of trading and marketing for Twin & Twin Trading based in the United Kingdom—notes that during his first visit to the Congo in 2007 he saw women greatly outnumbering men. Many of the women were widows, their husbands drowned while attempting to smuggle coffee across the lake.

Lake Kivu is a rare and dangerous beauty, sitting in the Great Rift Valley. Trapped below the surface of the lake is methane gas, which is reported to be produced by microbial reduction of volcanic carbon dioxide. In North Kivu, there is an active stratovolcano called Mount Nyiragongo; an eruption could mean the release of gas from the lake, which would threaten the 2 million people living in the area.

While a potential threat to the area, the lake is also teeming with life. Hide's first trip left him stunned by the potential for coffee.

"All around me, in the extraordinarily beautiful landscape, I saw coffee-growing conditions the like of which I had rarely, if ever, witnessed," he recalls. "[I saw] a combination of soils, altitude, climate, and even traditional bourbon coffee varieties, neglected, yes, but everywhere."

## Supporting Hope Through Coffee

As coffee quality control manager for the specialty food cooperative Equal Exchange, my introduction to the beauty and brutality of the DRC came through the Congo Coffee Project, a program I developed with the Panzi Foundation in 2011. The foundation approached Equal Exchange to create a coffee product that would help raise money for the Panzi Hospital in South Kivu, where survivors of sexual violence receive treatment.

In the DRC, rape is used as a tactic of war, to destroy families and separate communities. Assaultants are rarely captured or charged for their crimes, and the victims are left with few options. Many are ostracized by their families or left with life-threatening wounds. At the Panzi Hospital, Dr. Dennis Mukwege, an internationally renowned gynecologist, has made it his life's work to help these women heal.

Hearing Congolese women's devastating stories inspired me to take action. What could we, as an organization that purchases coffee, do? When I started sourcing coffee for the Congo Coffee Project, it was Hide who provided us with our first connection: the farmers of the SOPACDI cooperative in South Kivu.

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A pioneer in the DRC coffee movement, Hide started working with small coffee farmers in Africa in the 1990s. As a trader at Edm. Schluter & Co. in the late 1980s, he received occasional lots of Kivu coffee—“Some bad, but also some extraordinarily good, cupping like fine Kenyans,” he says.

Later, Hide was part of the coffee revival in Rwanda, “but as I traveled around Rwanda,” he says, “I increasingly wondered

what had happened to the coffees, and the farmers, just across the border over the lake in Congo. No one seemed to know the answer. It was as though the region and all it produced had fallen into a black hole.”

Hide’s Rwandan contacts put him in touch with Congolese farmers, and after receiving promising samples, he set off for his first visit.

## Enlisting Outside Investors

Throughout the 2000s, there was a shift in the global coffee movement: Cupping labs were popping up all over the world and capacity was growing, from Nicaragua to Rwanda and beyond. The DRC did not need to reinvent the wheel. It needed to learn from the success of others.

The reality for many coffee-growing origins is that funding and support to build up a coffee program typically come in the form of a project or grant. It’s not cheap or easy to build a coffee processing mill, train staff or provide technical assistance, and in the DRC, everything was in shambles.

“Absolutely everything needed to be built or re-built, from neglected farms to washing stations to accessing finance and building cooperatives, since there was no real history of that in the Congolese coffee sector,” Hide says. “[We needed to look at] infrastructure, training, overcoming isolation on every level, and re-launching the almost defunct coffee export sector.”

The movement began slowly. In 2009, the DRC saw its first exports of specialty-grade coffee in decades, according to Hide.

“We built the first coffee washing station in 40 years,” he adds.

Inspired by and designed like the Rwandan centralized washing stations, this new wet mill was a turning point for the SOPACDI co-op and the coffee industry in the DRC.

Building the physical coffee infrastructure for processing was an important milestone, but it had to be coupled with building human capacity. In 2012, I traveled to the DRC to find people with the raw talent, basic literacy and passion to become coffee cuppers.

One of the cuppers I chose for the SOPACDI cooperative is Dunia Moises Muhindo, the child of coffee farmers and the eldest of 10 children. I have worked with him for the past three years, crossing paths as he has traveled to Rwanda, Uganda and Ethiopia to cup with other coffee professionals. This work was supported by a grant from the United Methodist Committee on Relief to build capacity in the co-op. Today, there are only a handful

of coffee cuppers in the DRC, and Muhindo is among the most advanced.

In 2009, the Organizacion Nacional du Café (ONC; previously known as the Zairian Office of Coffee, or OZACAF) clarified its mandate to be a certifying body for coffee exports and took on a huge list of tasks, from extension support for farmers to supervising processing and milling conditions. It is a tremendous set of tasks that, despite the name, spans all agricultural sectors across a huge country.

So much is changing and evolving in coffee, yet only a few groups in the DRC understand international coffee standards, roasting, cupping, or running a lab. Building and investing in human capacity is vital for the Congolese coffee movement.

## Connecting With Buyers

Today, there are more than 26 co-ops and organizations working in coffee in the DRC, many of which have built or are building coffee washing stations and learning what it means to produce exceptional coffee. And while enthusiasm is growing, one of the primary concerns for coffee farmers is gaining access to markets—in other words, buyers. Once systems and infrastructure allow growers to meet the needs of the international specialty coffee community, how do they sell their coffee? Where do they meet buyers?

There is a great deal of interest in and excitement about the burgeoning coffee movement in the DRC, and many of the early supporters of these initiatives recognized the potential for high-quality coffee. This was highlighted during the first-ever coffee competition in the country—called Saveur du Kivu—in June 2015.

I was honored to serve as head judge for the competition, which was hosted in conjunction with Run Across Congo—a seven-day, seven-marathon extravaganza—and a two-day supply chain workshop presented by several nonprofits, including On the Ground,

Eastern Congo Initiative, Catholic Relief Services and Twin. Chris Treater—owner of Higher Grounds Trading Company, based in Traverse City, Michigan, and co-founder of On the Ground—was a key organizer for this multi-faceted event.

The logistics involved in hosting a coffee competition in the DRC were both exciting and outrageous. When I arrived, contractors were still painting the walls,

wires hung from the ceiling, there was no running water, and the roaster and coffee grinder were in boxes, unassembled. Thankfully, I had help. Dan Bailey of Amavida Coffee and Trading Company and Caleb Nicholes of Kickapoo Coffee Roasters assembled the roaster. Muhindo, the Congolese cupper from the SOPACDI co-op, helped roast and prepare the coffee samples.

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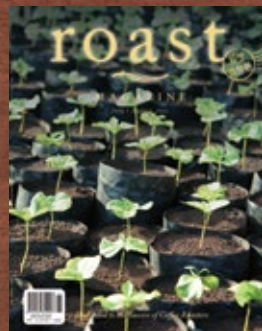
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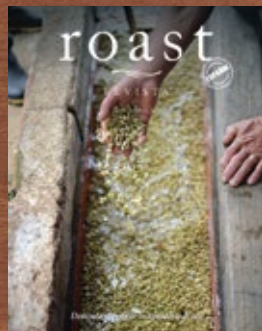
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Slowly but surely, it all came together.

Coffee buyers from the United States, Europe and South Korea, along with two Congolese cuppers, arrived to sample the best of what the eastern DRC had to offer. The first flight of six coffees was a success. The grinder overheated during the second flight, but by the end of the day we had cupped 18 coffees, with six standouts making it to the final round.

The coffees exceeded the judges' expectations and showed amazing potential, with an array of beautiful flavors—tart and tropical, soft and

fleshy stone fruits. Tim Hill, green coffee buyer for Counter Culture Coffee and one of the judges, summed it up this way: "Coffee from this region, and in this cupping in particular, showcased a beautiful balance of acidity and sweetness, complexity and balance."

Despite the logistical challenges, I have no doubt Saveur du Kivu was historic on many levels.

"Specialty coffee buyers were able to taste and learn about new coffees that are just being made available on the market and will have increasing availability, access for exportation and, as processing infrastructure continues to be built, an increasing cup score," Treater says. "This has already yielded new purchases as buyers explore potential partnerships with growing organizations for years to come."

For me, the experience was highly emotional. From losing electricity during the final cupping to watching the winner practically cry in disbelief, it was one of the most professionally challenging and rewarding experiences of my life.

## What Does the Future Hold?

The potential for the future of Congolese coffee is enormous, but will the movement pick up speed? Hide is optimistic.

"Now people have started to catch the vision of what is possible," he says. "Farmers, exporters, NGOs [non-governmental organizations], traders and roasters have started to engage in all sorts

of ways. It is still fragmented and piecemeal, and it hasn't proved a smooth upward journey for any of us—given the context, why would we expect it to be?—but I believe that an unstoppable revival has started, and the farmers up and down eastern Congo will not rest until the remaining very considerable barriers and obstacles can be overcome.

"Most importantly," he adds, "the coffee revival is built on the aspiration to produce and market the finest coffees, and to be rewarded for them."

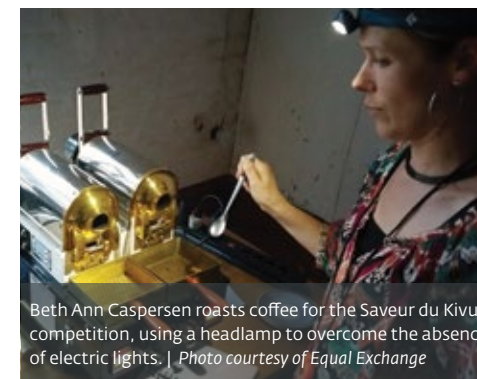
BETH ANN CASPERSEN is coffee quality control manager at the Equal Exchange cooperative in West Bridgewater, Massachusetts. Equal Exchange is a specialty food cooperative that sources coffee, chocolate, tea and other products from small-farmer cooperatives all over the world. Caspersen is a specialized instructor for the Specialty Coffee Association of America (SCAA), a member of the SCAA Coffee Tasters Pathway Committee, a Q instructor, co-founder of Java Jog for a Cause and an advocate for women's rights. Reach her at [bacaspersen@equalexchange.coop](mailto:bacaspersen@equalexchange.coop).



Beth Ann Caspersen (center) with participants of a coffee quality training held before the Saveur du Kivu competition. | Photo courtesy of Equal Exchange



The seven-day, seven-marathon Run Across Congo was held in conjunction with supply chain workshops and the Saveur du Kivu coffee competition in June 2015. | Photo courtesy of On The Ground



Beth Ann Caspersen roasts coffee for the Saveur du Kivu competition, using a headlamp to overcome the absence of electric lights. | Photo courtesy of Equal Exchange



Runners and community members gather during Run Across Congo. | Photo courtesy of On The Ground

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