

## A Jewel in the Crown: Myanmar Coffee

Coffee origins are going through trends, but not before showing some jewels in the trader's hands. In the past decades, Brazil was the nation that produced and exported most of the global production every year. Since Vietnam and Indonesia have been emerging as leading producers since 1990, ranking second and third top producing origin worldwide, a trade shift towards Asia can be observed. Though the majority of coffee's are produced in these two countries, most of the coffee's that are sold in our Swiss retailer shops are still imported from South and Central America, as well as from East Africa.

This could change! In addition to Vietnam and Indonesia, new origins are popping up on the world coffee map, notably Myanmar. For a lot of Western coffee drinkers, not much comes to mind when Myanmar is mentioned. Therefore, a bit of history first: Myanmar was formerly known as Burma and was a British colony until 1948. It was an independent state until 1962, when the military took over with a coup d'etat. In 2011, economic liberalization pathed the way for new business opportunities and agricultural growth was incentivized by the government.

Although pioneering investors were flowing into the country, coffee was discovered relatively late by multinational trading companies. For almost half a decade coffee cultivation was neglected due to the authoritarian regime. However, with the opening of the economy in recent years, coffee has returned to Myanmar. A small production and relatively high prices compared to the world coffee market price remained a barrier for many of the new business pioneers.

### Doing Business in Myanmar

Doing business in a country like Myanmar is a balance of fragility and opportunity. The country has a projected GDP growth of 7.1% per year over the medium term, according to the World Bank. Yet at the same time, poor infrastructure and low commodity prices can pose challenges. Entrepreneurs must work hard to find solutions, making use of all available tools. Regardless the risks, I decided to take up the challenge. In 2015, during my job in the coffee department with the coffee trading house Volcafe in Winterthur (Canton Zurich), I opened the eyes for Myanmar. Myanmar is home of seven coffee



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regions, particularly cultivating coffee in the heart of the country, in Mandalay and Shan State, as well as in Chin State in the West. In contrast to its neighboring countries Laos, India and Thailand with Robusta accounting close to 90%, Myanmar is top producer of the high quality coffee Arabica.

Ten days after Myanmar's first democratic elections in November 2015, I decided to explore Myanmar's coffee regions on my own. I saw stunning Arabica plantations on the Eastern border to China (Opium Coffee UNODC), where local communities grow cash crops like coffee as an alternative to growing opium poppies. In the heart of the Mandalay and Shan State, coffee production is better developed following a five-year project, implemented by the US government's agency USAID.

When I reached rural backwaters in the West of the country, I found a paradisiac hilly landscape on the foot of the National Park of Mount Victoria. Coffee cherries were shimmering in a ruby red in the sun, the elevation is at 1800-2400 masl, the preferred altitude of coffee. At that time, there was nobody sourcing coffee from that remote area...

### Nat Coffee - Exploring the Best Coffee in Myanmar

One year later, I founded my startup Nat Coffee, based in Switzerland. It is the first startup business to bring Myanmar coffee to Switzerland. In December 2016, I moved to Myanmar and visited more than 40 coffee farmers. The core area of my engagement is in Chin State, an unconquered terrain where coffee is growing wildly and where the soil is not affected by chemical fertilizer. Over the past decades, this region, one of the least developed in Myanmar, was strongly affected by deforestation due to abusive shifting-cultivation practices. Therefore, coffee cultivation provides a long-term solution for this isolated and ravaged region that has no



other revenue than from its natural resources (teak wood, agricultural products).

After my exploration and a voyage of personal discovery, I invited my business partner, Priscilla Daniel, co-Founder of my second company, Prisma Coffee Ltd in London, to achieve a shared dream. We decided to engage in long-term mission in Chin State by building up the coffee sector from the scratch. During harvest time this year, we conducted two workshops with the objective of having an impact through two tools we believe in: fostering entrepreneurship within the farmer community and provide harvest technology. Thanks to a successful crowd funding campaign (Chin Litai), together with our local partner "Chin Ecohill System Association" and DRWakefield, a trading company in the UK, we connected 50 coffee producers and launched a cooperative (Cooperative Chin Litai). Most of the members are between 20 and 30 years old, and we are training them how to hand select and process coffee. During our second workshop in February this year, we invited the members to build so-called African dry beds where coffee cherries are spread out to dry at the sun. Coffee needs to dry 20-30 days, before the

outer skin is removed in the mill. The first batches of coffee that were produced during the workshop will be exported this year. This creates revenue for the isolated Chin community and at the same time, an extraordinary coffee is entering the European market. Our formula for high quality coffee: You can never aim high enough!

### From the Cooperative to the Exporter

U Ling Than (41 years old), one of the seven board members of the



cooperative is not only an enthusiastic coffee producer, but also a talented coffee entrepreneur. During coffee harvest time, from December until March, he spent many hours collecting coffee bags from our cooperative members. The coffee arrived in his improvised warehouse - the ground floor of his sister's house. U Ling Than opened each bag and controlled quality and weight. He ensured that the coffee cherries are fully dried and accounting less than 12% moisture. Therefore, he hired a few villagers who were hand sorting the cherries. Then, each bag was carefully weighed, a truly challenging task: In Myanmar, traditional Burmese units of measurement are still in place.

Most of our cooperative members were refusing to reform the Chin unit system ("Pyi Taung") and adopt the more common Myanmar union weight system ("Viss"). We have no choice but to apply a triple conversion (pyi Taung-viss- kilogram) and accept that local traditions can't be changed from one day to the other.

Once the coffee was packed into jute bags, it was sent to our exporter in Mandalay. The Mandalay Coffee Group was the first central coffee mill to be installed in Myanmar and consists more than 70 stakeholders. The plant has a capacity of 200 metric tons/year. It is impressive with its new high end infrastructure and cutting-edge technology. Our coffee is processed there, but post-harvest process is not completely automated yet. For export, green coffee is graded and classified by hand with the ultimate aim of producing the best cup quality.

### Produced in Myanmar, Swiss Roast

Once loaded into a shipping container, our coffee is travelling about 9000 miles around the world. In May, our first container will leave the port in Yangon and be shipped to London. One part of the green coffee will be



stored in a warehouse in Tilbury (London), while another part will directly continue its journey to Switzerland.

In Switzerland, our coffee is sent to Boreal Coffee Roasters in Geneva (Boreal Coffee Roasters). Boreal was founded as an artisanal roaster in 2008. Famed for its direct-traded coffee, Boreal fell into favour of Nat Coffee's service roaster. Today, Boreal has three coffee shops in Geneva, and recently expanded to Zurich. Despite the rapid growth during the last two years - some are claiming Boreal to become Starbucks' competitor - the roastery remains a small retailer. A team of dedicated roasters and coffee lovers works to match the profiles of the green coffee beans that we import. Bastien

Tararan, Boreal's master roaster, assures savoir-faire by perfectly mastering the roasting drum of 10 kg Probat Roaster. He is using the latest technology - roasting software that helps regulating roasting temperature and roasting time exactly to the second.

Combining ultimate precision with experience, we believe that there is no better term than "Swiss Roast" to describe a tailor-made roast. After roasting, our coffee is packed into elegant textile bags, hand-made in Myanmar. Each silk-cotton bag is carefully sewed in Myanmar and can be re-used again for coffee or any other beans. Behind the fabrication of our bean bags is Thazi Limited, a social enterprise based in Yangon, led by a Malaysian business woman who aims at empowerment of young entrepreneurs. With this social footprint, together with our specialty coffee, we bring a slice of Myanmar to Switzerland. There is a meticulous craftsmanship across all trades, be it coffee picking, coffee processing, or coffee packaging. With our final product we do not only want to boast a new coffee from Asia, but we also want to unveil a secret of Myanmar that was preserved for more than half a decade.

Our coffee will be available on our e-shop: [www.natcoffee.com/shop](http://www.natcoffee.com/shop) and in Boreal Coffee Shops in Geneva and Zurich. ■

