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Shedding the Stigma: Robusta Gets Special

Part I of this series about Robusta coffee explored Uganda's emerging specialty Robusta production. Part II discusses more ways in which roasters, researchers and producers are further differentiating Robustas to demonstrate the spectrum of diversity available within the category traditionally homogenized under the label "not Arabica." **By Rachel Northrop**

Robusta has consistently been trading above USD \$1 per pound during the first two quarters of 2014. This rise in market price coincides with a trend from producers to roasters in exploring the possibilities of Robusta.

Sean Boyd is the founder, owner and master roaster at specialty coffee wholesale roaster Red Whale Coffee in San Rafael, Calif., but he prefers the title "leader and visionary." Most roasters subscribing to the category of "specialty coffee" are resolute in their commitment to using only 100 percent Arabica beans, but Boyd is indeed a leader and visionary in his welcome inclusion of Robusta into Red Whale's specialty coffee portfolio.

"I've been experimenting with Robusta from the start of Red Whale over 10 years ago. The US tends to stick its nose up at Robusta, and the historical presence of defects contributes to the bad name. I'm pretty good at sniffing out the best Robusta; it's there, but you have to be willing to look for it," said Boyd.

The subtle variations among different types of Robustas grown in different places are not generally as recognized as those among Arabicas. But Robusta (*Coffea canephora*) is far from a uniform group, and the differences between canephora plants are further varied by the different climates where varieties are grown.

Brazilian Conilon the largest example of a differentiated Robusta cultivar. "The *Coffea canephora* species is classified into two groups: Guinean and Congolese, named in reference to their regions of origin: New Guinea and Congo, both on the African



A cup of espresso at Red Whale Coffee, which features select Robusta beans.

continent," explained Dr. Julio Mistro, researcher specializing in coffee genetics and breeding with the Campinas Agricultural Institute (IAC) in Campinas, São Paulo. The Koulouris subgroup of Guineans, named after the Koulouris River, was introduced to the Brazilian state of Esparto Santo around 1920, later to become today's Canelones.

"The first Kouilou seeds at IAC came from Espirito Santo in the 1940s. Once planted in the (institute's living) collection, the Kouilou thrived in Campinas, providing abundant harvests," said Mistro. Since 1970 IAC and the São Paulo Agency for Agribusiness Technology (APTA) have elaborate breeding programs to develop hybrids between Conilons and other species within the *coffea* genus, such as *Coffea canephora* and the more familiar *Coffea arabica*.

The main focus of IAC's earliest *C. canephora* Improvement Program was the development of cultivars for commercial planting that were resistant to leaf rust and nematodes, the problems most common in the major producing state of São Paulo.

"The strategies used in IAC's Robusta coffee program today are clonal selections and progenies, where several agronomical and technological properties are studied, along with final chemical and sensory components," said Mistro. "Experiments aimed at the development of clonal cultivars for the São Paulo state are being conducted in areas where this species is more suitable for cultivation and it is expected that in the medium term the grower in São Paulo will have another option for cultivating coffee."

Brazil, given its prominence as a global supplier and consumer of coffee, has been able to invest in Robusta research and development in ways that other Robusta-producing nations have not. There is a direct correlation between this lack of investigation and the price Robusta earns on the international trading floor. "Robusta's current price 'ceiling' creates a limit for what producers are able to do in terms of investing in improvements. The results are inconsistent—since 2003 I've seen different quality every year," observed Boyd.

Raising the Bar for Robusta

Even though Robusta prices have currently situated themselves above USD \$1/lb, apart from a few brief spikes, the last time prices were consistently above USD \$1.10/lb was 20-years ago during the 1994-95 harvest. Low prices make farm investments near impossible, but coffee production and pricing have always been mutually influential, and in order for Robusta to be valued more highly, "producers will first have to break through quality ceiling," Boyd noted.

Producers are slowly starting to take on the mammoth task of doing precisely that: raising the bar of quality for the "best" Robustas. Bharath Mandanna, manager of The Bombay Burmah Trading Corporation Ltd.'s Elkhill Estates in Kodagu, Karnataka, India, said that the Robusta grown on the land he manages is

a unique varietal cultivated with particular care. “Robusta coffee was brought from its origin in The Congo river valleys to Sri Lanka by British planters in the 1820’s and planted in the Peradeniya Botanical Gardens in Kandy, Sri Lanka. The seed material from Sri Lanka was brought to India in 1870’s. Though the original plant material is Congolese, it is referred to as Peradeniya (or “Perridinia”) here in India.”

Elkhill’s Robustas, just like the farm’s Arabicas, are grown as part of an integrative management system incorporating multi-storied shade, where Mandanna explained that the farm’s “meticulous production methods ensure preservation of the coffee bean’s intrinsic origin qualities. Eco-friendly methods of cultivation, low impact pollution management, fair labor practices and stringent quality control combined with traceability have resulted in our coffees being Rainforest Alliance and UTZ certified.” Certification is most commonly associated with Arabica coffees, but certification is another direction producers can take towards specializing their Robusta crops while contributing towards overall industry sustainability.

Robusta is notably absent from most conversations about sustainable coffee production and long-term sustained industry supply. Boyd said sustainability is one space where Robusta can step up as an unlikely champion. “I come from a food background, so flavor profile is always my number one concern, and I keep an open mind when sourcing the flavors I’m seeking.” He wonders why so many people ignore such a huge segment of the world’s available coffee. “In the kitchen, you don’t just use one cut of meat, you use the

whole animal. That’s sustainability.”

Robusta might never be the filet mignon of coffee, but it is still part of the coffee animal, and using it as one among many tools makes the industry as a whole more savvy in its use of resources. Dr. Mistro noted that Robusta of Congolese origin is particularly tough against leaf rust, and “during droughts, *C. canephora* has a tendency to feel fewer impacts during periods of high temperatures and lack of rain; this is due to its bulkier and deeper root system compared to Arabica.”

Boyd said that lately, he’s been using Indian RKR (washed Robusta Kapi Royale), like the ones produced by Elkhill Estates. “Indian RKR tends to be really clean, and gives an even roast profile. This shows that producers are spending more time on their products.” When the “quality ceiling” is broken, Robustas are eligible for the kinds of premiums typically assigned to Arabicas, thus making this higher level of quality economically sustainable. “Just like with any coffee—or even food ingredient—if we have to pay more for a quality product, [we will],” he said.

Robusta is Not Just a Silent Filler

Other specialty coffee roasters are slowly beginning to admit that Robusta might not entirely deserve the cold shoulder it has often been given. In 2013, specialty coffee importer Sustainable Harvest, Portland, Ore., held its annual Let’s Talk Coffee conference in Salinitas, El Salvador, featuring a Let’s Talk Robusta session.

In his presentation, Kenneth Davis, of the website Coffee Review



Proponents for Robusta want to discard the taboo that currently surrounds it.

(coffeereview.com) addressed a long-standing “Robusta myth,” where, “no distinction is made between the possibility of well-prepared Robustas and poorly prepared, mass-harvested/dried Robustas with literally hundreds of imperfections.”

Robusta has twice the caffeine content of Arabicas, which allows it to maintain its caffeine even through the darker roasts typical of espresso preparations. As roasters become more tenacious about sourcing and vocal in their expectations of quality, they are discovering new ways of showcasing Robusta rather than using it as a silent filler.

Davis offered several “advantages of loosening the Robusta taboo. Doing so widens the sensory possibilities of fine coffee, helps Robusta producers who have ambition and passion for their product enter the fine coffee market, and possibly introduces a new option for producers of fine coffee who are struggling with climate issues related to global warming.”

Blends are most successful when their components are balanced in quality, and as demand for specialty Arabicas increases, there are more opportunities for quality Robustas to become part of a new definition of specialty coffee. ☞

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