

Oromia: Ethiopia's Coffee Heart



Most of Ethiopia's coffee is grown in Oromia, home to the Oromo speaking peoples, the most numerous of the country's linguistic groups, and the largest of the country's 9 regional states. (See map.) Almost all of the rest is grown in the neighbouring Southern Nations, Nationalities and Peoples' Region. Oromia's coffee growing areas have the ideal conditions for arabica,

characterised by high altitude (above 1,500m.), rich, well-drained (and mainly volcanic) soils and a highland tropical climate with 1500 – 2500mm rainfall over a nine month period and optimum temperatures between 15 and 24°C. Some coffee is grown at greater altitudes but produces lower yields.

Within Oromia there are several distinctive regional coffee types, the result of different climatic and soil conditions. Sidamo and Yirgacheffe come from the south; Limu and Nekemte from the west, and Harrar from the east. Most are washed coffees, meaning that the beans are first separated from the fleshy part of the cherry with a lot of water in a mill, and then dried in the sun. The rest are completely sun-dried, meaning that the whole cherries are dried in the sun, until the flesh becomes brittle enough to be removed in a hullery.

According to legend, western Oromia is where coffee was first discovered, over 1000 years ago, in the old kingdom of Kaffa. The story goes that a young goat-herd named Kaldi, noticed his animals getting very frisky after eating the red cherries from a wild bush in the forest. This event is said to have happened in Choche, the community with which our campaign has a friendship link, making Choche the 'birthplace' of coffee, though other communities claim this accolade too!

Whatever the truth, Ethiopians will tell you that our word 'coffee' comes from Kaffa itself: Kaffa » *caffè* » *café* » coffee. While that sounds entirely plausible, it is challenged by Arab speakers, who say it comes from their word '*qahwah*'. (Things are further complicated by the fact that the Oromos call coffee '*buna*', which was borrowed into Arabic as *bunn*, meaning 'raw coffee'.)

What we can say is that:

1. Oromia is almost certainly the place where wild coffee was first discovered a long time ago;
2. the people of Oromia have been growing and drinking coffee for centuries;
3. because of coffee Oromia is very important to the economy of Ethiopia, making up about 30% of its exports;
4. coffee is central to Oromo culture and they consume as much as they sell.

One of the most enjoyable aspects of spending time with an Oromo family – or, for that matter, any Ethiopian family – is taking part in the social ritual of 'the coffee ceremony'. This can happen several times a day, and is not now confined to Oromo culture. First the green beans are washed. Then they are roasted in a shallow skillet over a blazing charcoal brazier, around which are spread flowers. The beans are then ground with a pestle and mortar. The grounds are poured into a long necked coffee pot, called a *jabanaa*, and boiled for ten minutes, before serving very hot in little cups, laced with sugar. It takes a long time, but it is *always* worth waiting for!