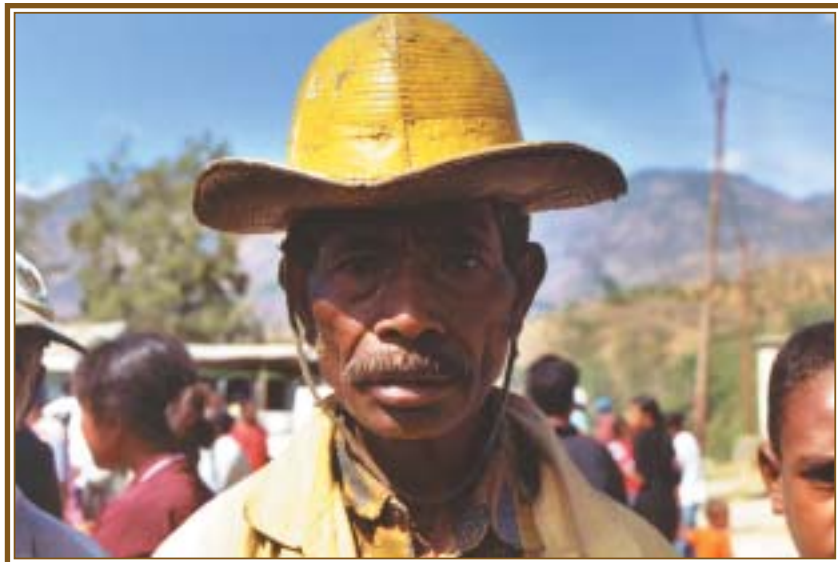




# East Timor

Coffee Cooperative Fuels Renewal

Story and Photographs by Kate LaPoint



Bernardo da Coneicao Tilman, coffee farmer



It's sunset in Dili, the capital of East Timor.

Behind the city, thunderclouds hover over the coffee-rich mountains while across the darkening sea, toward the island of Atauro off the north coast, the sky is a deep sapphire punctuated by tufts of clouds in every shade of pink, purple and orange. The scene is almost impossibly serene. A dog barks, a child laughs, a rooster crows, and the country's recent legacy of chaos fades away-but only for a moment. In East Timor, violence has given way to hope, and coffee reigns supreme as symbol of national healing.

## A Colonial Legacy

The coffee-producing country of East Timor comprises the eastern half of the island of Timor at the far end of the Indonesian archipelago, situated between the Banda and Timor Seas. Physically closer to Australia than Indonesia, the island is thought to have been a gateway for the early settlers of Australia. East Timor's largest ethnic group is the Mambai, whose ancestors are believed to have settled there more than 5000 years ago.



Organic Coffee Demonstration Plot

Today, the Mambai primarily inhabit the mountains—said to be the ridges on the back of an enormous legendary crocodile—and are responsible for producing most of the island's coffee. East Timor is roughly the size of Connecticut, with a population of only around 800,000. More than half of its residents are under the age of 20, due to the carnage of the era of Indonesian military occupation. Most speak the complex official language, Tetum. Many also speak Bahasa Indonesia and a few still speak Portuguese.

Timor was claimed by Portugal in the 1500s, but it was only in 1769, attracted to Timor's valuable stands of sandalwood trees, that the Portuguese officially settled in Dili. Timor's first coffee crops were planted in 1815, when the Portuguese authority attempted to expand the colony's agricultural exports. In the early 1900s, the Dutch (equally attracted by the lucrative sandalwood trade) and the Portuguese signed a treaty that split the island in half, with West Timor going to the Dutch and East Timor remaining a colony of Portugal.

The Portuguese continued to cash in on the prized trees of their outpost colony, but when the practice rendered East Timor's sandalwood nearly extinct, the Portuguese turned to coffee as their cash crop. In 1928, the Governor directed each family to plant 600 coffee trees. Thus, Timor established its roots in the coffee trade—a trade that would, by 1935, provide the main source of a meager income for more than half of the country's residents. Sadly, much of the coffee was processed and exported by a Portuguese conglomerate that nearly monopolized the trade for decades, and certainly did not earn the coffee a reputation for quality.

In 1975 a coup in Portugal led that country to abandon its

colonies. But freedom was not to follow, for East Timor was invaded by Indonesia. The bloody invasion, coming at the peak of the Cold War, was thought to have been prompted by Indonesia's fear of a communist republic on its doorstep. Whatever the impetus, East Timor remained under Indonesian domination for the next 24 years. During that time, it is estimated that 200,000 people—nearly one quarter of the population of East Timor—were lost to war and famine.

Under Indonesia, East Timor's coffee industry stagnated. With the trade monopolized by an Indonesian company with close ties to the military, Timorese farmers received extremely low prices for their crops. As a result, there was no motivation for them to produce better coffee, no incentive to care for the trees or to process the coffee in a timely manner. Quality declined.

Ironically, there was an upside. The lack of resources necessary to import fertilizers resulted in a truly organic, forest-grown coffee. Scott Reed, coffee buyer for California-based Royal Coffee Inc., explains: "As I have seen in many places around the world, good coffee often begins with benign neglect, which means old, low-yield varieties slowly ripening under full native shade."

## Hope and Turmoil

While underground groups agitated for the country's liberation from Indonesia, a transformation was also taking place in the country's coffee-growing areas like Maubisse, Ermera and Letefoho. In 1994, Cooperativa Café Timor (CCT) was founded, an essential part of a sustainable development grant from the United States Agency for International Development (USAID).

CCT is a national coalition of the country's 16 coffee cooperatives and has a membership of nearly 20,000 farmers. USAID saw CCT as a way to help break the Indonesian coffee monopoly and provide a much higher income to the country's impoverished coffee growers. "An insignificant player in the coffee trade prior to 1995, CCT commanded four times the price usually paid to coffee farmers within its first year of operation," says Sam Filiaci, director of the program. Assisted by the U.S.-based National Cooperative Business Association (NCBA), CCT has become the country's largest coffee exporter, and processes nearly one-third of East Timor's coffee.

Because the coffee was "organic by default," CCT rapidly earned organic certification for its coffee. Purchasing coffee cherry direct from farmers and processing it at one of its four main facilities, CCT quickly took East Timor coffee to a new level by providing the infrastructure and know-how to produce top-quality coffee on a consistent basis—something the farmers were unable to do alone.

Just as East Timor's coffees were gaining a favorable reputation in the marketplace, the country's political struggle reached a critical point. In 1998, Indonesian President Suharto was driven from office, and Bacharuddin Jusuf Habibie assumed power. Years of waxing and waning international pressure, along with more organized efforts on the part of the revolutionaries, forced Habibie to grant the Timorese a referendum on independence less than a year later.

But the months following penned another bloody page of East Timor's history. Indonesian militia rampaged; threatening, torturing and even killing those who supported independence. Massacres took place in Maubara, Liquiça and Dili; foreign

humanitarian groups, journalists and United Nations staff were attacked, and some killed. On polling day, August 30, 1999, an awe-inspiring 98 percent of registered voters turned out, some traveling for many days on foot from mountain villages to Dili. Election results were announced on September 4, with more than 78 percent casting for independence. In a final twist of the knife, Indonesian armed militia stormed the city and burned most of it to the ground. Nearly 1,000 East Timorese were killed and more than 200,000 were forcibly moved to neighboring Indonesian-ruled West Timor. The brutality continued for nearly three weeks until Australian and British troops arrived.

These horrific events coincided with the latter stages of the coffee harvest, and CCT was hit hard. Filiaci recollects, "Approximately 800 tons of export-ready green coffee were looted from CCT's warehouse in Dili. Its office was burned, and it lost practically all of its equipment and vehicles." Things were equally bleak in mountain villages like Maubisse and Aileu. Much of the population was displaced and nearly all homes and other buildings were either looted or burned.

## Faith and Renewal

The Indonesians withdrew from East Timor in late October 1999 and after a three-year period spent under a U.N. governing authority, East Timor elected its reluctant hero of the revolution, Xanana Gusmao, as president. East Timor officially celebrated its independence in 2002—the building of the nation was underway.

East Timor's coffee crops of 2000 and 2001 suffered greatly due to the violence and the rebuilding process. Its quality and reputation had to recover immediately; CCT proved instrumental. With the determination of member farmers and the equipment and expertise supplied by USAID, CCT was able to produce coffee worthy of international attention.

In a country of less than one million people, more than 44,000 families (nearly 200,000 people) derive their main source of income from coffee farming. CCT, with its knowledge of the international specialty coffee market, was able to garner, and therefore pay its farmers, a premium. CCT also earned the fair-trade label by meeting rigorous third-party criteria for fair worker compensation.

Today, Cooperativa Café Timor is wholly owned by its members. Visit any village, a Sunday market in Maubisse, for example, and you'll most likely find CCT farmers like Bernardo da Conceicao Tilman. With his characteristically handsome, dark, lined face and deep brown eyes, he views the coffee trade simply. "For as long as I can remember," says Tilman, "my family has grown coffee." He harvests it, CCT processes and exports it, and he is paid a fair price.

Another farmer, Clamento da Costa Edi, says his family grew coffee during the Portuguese era, but that during

Indonesian military rule his family's land was burned. He is growing coffee again and is "happy to be growing anything."

This is the mood in East Timor after a year of independence—a sense of relief, a quiet gratitude and a surprising lack of bitterness. In the mountains or by the sea, children wave enthusiastically at passersby. Many of these children may have witnessed atrocities. Many may have lost a parent or other family member. Many—too many—of the typical small clay and thatched-roof houses along rural roads still have cemeteries in what should be their front yards. But somehow, the people are moving on. They are rebuilding, working, going to school. And somehow, they have found the strength to face the future with optimism.

While past coffee crops have earned a bad rap, today's Timor is described as one of the finest, most unique coffees in the world. Some even consider it to be in the top one percent in quality worldwide—certainly worth a try. "The Organic Maubisse is the finest cupping Timor I've found," says John Gray, vice president of production for British Columbia-based Canterbury Coffee Corporation. "The new arrivals are terrific, with very good density, excellent grading and a wonderful complexity in the cup."

Because the cycles of supply and demand have rendered coffees from nearby Java scarce, East Timor coffees are a roaster's natural choice as the only other fully washed Indonesian. "They blend extremely well and accept all levels of roast," continues Gray. "The Organic Maubisse has quickly become one of my favorite Indonesian coffees."

Steve Leach, director of green coffee purchasing for Southern California-based Diedrich Coffee, says the improvements have paid off. "I have been testing this coffee for the past six years and this [year's] is by far the best crop. ... I find this coffee to have good body, a smooth, silky mouthfeel, a pleasantly sweet acidity and a lingering aftertaste," he describes. Thompson Owen, owner of Sweet Maria's Coffee Roastery, concurs. He believes it makes the perfect "house coffee"—one that everyone will enjoy. "The improvements in processing and transportation are noticeable in the cup," states Owen. "The coffee is obviously treated well throughout processing and transportation."

In addition to improving the processing standards of the coffee, CCT manages demonstration plots and training facilities to show farmers, first-hand, how a little care and maintenance can vastly improve productivity. With minimal pruning, natural pest control, shade management and weeding, the demonstration plots' production quadrupled in one year. "Because incentive and education is increasing, so is the quality, quantity and consistency of production," explains Alister Laird, CCT's agribusiness advisor. CCT is teaching farmers self-sufficiency and how to improve their quality of life with existing resources.

In Dili, East Timorese women are employed full-time at least six months out of the year. As



Royal Coffee's Scott Reed, cupping at CCT's offices in Dili



Hand-sorting CCT coffee in Dili

hand-sorters, women of all ages chatter away while skillfully sorting around 90 kilos of coffee per person, per day. This step in quality assurance allows CCT to claim “zero-defects” on all coffee it exports.

Unique opportunities for career-oriented education are also provided by the project. The East Timor Coffee Academy, which opened in October 2003, provides courses in agriculture, harvesting and processing technology, agribusiness management and agriforestry.

CCT continues to modernize and improve its large capacity wet- and dry-processing plants, drying fields and warehouses, facilitating complete in-country processing. In 2003 alone, CCT installed new flotation graders for faster, more efficient processing, replaced two huller-polishers, further automated the factories for speed and quality control, and purchased 10 additional trucks to transport the coffee.

All of East Timor’s coffee is shade grown—without shade the coffee would wither up and die in the dry season. Therefore, CCT manages a seedling nursery of shade trees to replace older, diseased trees and to insure the continued cultivation of quality

arabica coffee in the relatively poor soil and unpredictable climate of East Timor. In October 2003, some 320,000 shade trees were planted, mostly albezia, a tall-growing, long-living tree.

Though coffee is the core pursuit of CCT, its benefits extend far beyond this industry. Assisted by a USAID grant, CCT has instituted a much-needed rural health program, Clinic Café Timor, which provides primary health services to farmer members, their families and their communities. The health program began in 1999, with the aim of creating community-based organizations, most notably in the country’s remote mountainous regions, to be managed and operated by East Timorese, for the benefit of East Timorese. According to David Boyce, enterprise development director of the NCBA, the clinics provide a better range of medicines than government health clinics as well as essential pre- and post-natal care. Much of the funding for medicines has been provided by generous donations from coffee importers and roasters abroad. The clinics treat more than 20,000 patients per month, providing the only healthcare available for most families.

## The Taste of Freedom

“Full bodied and spicy, [Timor coffee] is perfect for dark roasting, as a stand-alone or blended with dry-process Ethiopian or Yemen[i],” describes Reed. He explains that even if roasters purchase the top of the line fair trade, organic-certified Timor coffees, they will still pay less than for most Javas.

Taste and expense aside, Reed notes that, for a coffee buyer, East Timor is a place where one’s purchases can make a noticeable difference. “Pay for good coffee and you help the world’s newest nation in a sustainable manner. You help save organic, shade-grown rustic coffee and the small family farm.”

Today, an air of hope envelopes East Timor. As the U.N. slowly moves out, enthusiastic youth are growing up and learning, in large part due to programs such as CCT, that the building of a new, independent nation is more than possible—it is happening. East Timor is slowly becoming a nation with its own face, its own rules. And now, with its own coffee that is not only a chief source of income, but of national pride.

Deeply rooted in family, community and a new sense of identity, the East Timorese coffee trade is ready to be welcomed by the rest of the world. A sweeter cup for you and me, indeed, may be grounds for a better life for those residing in the world’s newest country.

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