

Nick's Rwandan coffee

23 Nov 2004 by JR

Monday 10 February 2003 was a red-letter day in my life and not just because a most generous friend served a flush of great wines at dinner of which the stars were Krug 1979, Certan de May 1981 and Mouton-Rothschild 1952, my birth year.

No. What had even outshone this was the half-hour I had spent doing something I really feel rather unconfident of doing - standing up in front of TV cameras, radio and fellow journalists and a panel which included Clare Short, the Secretary of State for International Development, and the Rwandan Government Minister for Commerce, a tall, impressive man with the rather difficult to pronounce name of Dr Alexandre Lyambabajje.

What had brought us all together in the offices of the Department of International Development was the launch of the first top-quality coffee from Rwanda, Cafe Maraba Bourbon, of which as I got up to speak, 33,000 bags (or 13 tonnes of green coffee beans) were being stacked on to the shelves of 400 Sainsbury's supermarkets around the UK. And all because of a germ of an idea I had had over two years ago whilst sitting on a plane at Kigali Airport in landlocked Rwanda.

I had gone down there with Kevin Cahill, the chief executive of Comic Relief, because two years before that I had had the idea for Wine Relief, which by uniting the British wine trade had raised £150,000 for the charity in 1999 and £350,000 in 2001. Wine Relief has just resurfaced in its third incarnation in all major British supermarkets and wine retailers and is running now - we hope even more successfully - until the Red Nose Day weekend of 14 March.

I had been invited down to Rwanda in a dual capacity, partly to see where the funds I had helped to raise were being put to such good effect and partly as a journalist to help spread the good word. It was an extraordinary trip, ranging from the fear in the pit of my stomach as we walked through Kigali Central Prison which housed then 16,000 prisoners, many convicted of genocide, to extraordinary admiration for the widows we met who were trying to make a new life for themselves and their families having lost their husbands and, often, having been raped. Having seen just what man can do and this extraordinary bravery in the face of adversity, I vowed to myself never to complain about anything that might befall me in this land of plenty - a promise I have, I am ashamed to say, not kept.

But the fact that these women are beginning to make a new life for themselves did persuade me of one thing, that although they deserve our sympathy and charity, what they need more than anything else is the opportunity to work, to be paid a proper living wage so that they can put their awful past behind them. This thought was travelling round my brain as I sat, very hot and sweaty, waiting for take off.

Whatever the particular thought process, I remember looking out of the window at the stunning Rwandan scenery, thinking that one of their few primary products of note is coffee and wondering, in my very simplistic way, whether we could do the same for coffee as we had done for wine. Was there any prospect of Coffee Relief for 2003 using Rwandan coffee?

There was in this instance just one company to turn to and that is Union Coffee Roasters run by a remarkable couple of coffee aficionados, Steven Macatonia and Jeremy Torz (www.unioncoffeeroasters.com). They, like so many, had developed their passion for coffee in San Francisco, moved back to the UK where they supplied the fledgling Seattle Coffee Company until it was taken over by Starbucks, before setting up once again on their own.

Steven and Jeremy know the world and British markets well but most importantly they are a commercial organisation. If Rwandan coffee were to make its mark it would have to be because it is good enough to satisfy the market rather than out of sympathy. I would just add at this stage that Rwandan coffee has been exported before but always as part of the commodity market where it has only commanded the lowest price, a price which for the past several months had been in free fall.

Steven and Jeremy were intrigued. Although they had sourced top-quality coffee from Africa they knew little about Rwanda and turned for information to John Schluter whose family has been involved in the equitable development of fine coffee in East Africa since the 1930s. Schluter is an extraordinary man, tall, hugely knowledgeable and terribly generous with the coffee expertise he has accumulated. In 1999 John had written a report on coffee in Rwanda which had

concluded that it is of a very good quality but that it needed, above all, improvements - investment and standardisation in the washing process - before it could enter the gourmet market.

That at least gave us hope, and this was to be a vital commodity as Jeremy and Steven took the bit between their collective teeth and ploughed into two years of meetings which have finally culminated in Cafe Maraba Bourbon.

Whilst Comic Relief were genuinely enthusiastic, we could only count on their support if we could prove a link between the coffee producers and the beneficiaries of their grants in Rwanda. And we also had to secure the blessing of the Fairtrade organisation without which Comic Relief could not endorse the coffee, however good it was, for 'political' reasons.

Fortunately, matters started to fall into place. Schluter discovered a project funded by two NGOs (non-governmental organisations) ACDI/VOCA and PEARL of crop education for an association of coffee growers called Abahuzamugambi, in a region called Maraba, two hours south-west of Kigali. They were also building a new, central coffee washing station. Union tasted the first samples in September 2001 and were impressed. Hurdle number one had been jumped.

In February 2002 Steven travelled to Maraba with Richard Graham, the erudite and patient African grants supremo for Comic Relief, and satisfied himself not only as to the quality but also established that a number of the coffee smallholders were widows of the 1994 genocide and that many were members of AVEGA, the organisation dedicated to supporting the widows of the genocide, which Comic Relief funds directly. Another box was ticked.

With equal determination, Union approached the Fairtrade labelling organisation based in Bonn, Germany, who audited the Abahuzamugambi Cooperative which in October received their Fairtrade accreditation. All that was left was the final quality tasting which took place in their roastery in London E16 in September 2002. Jeremy and Steven were impressed - the new washing facilities added a defined new crispness that had not been apparent earlier.

All that had to happen now was to find a buyer. This proved easier than expected, not just because Sainsbury's have taken a particularly positive attitude to Comic Relief since its inception, but also because the coffee is so good. These two factors aside, Union were quick to praise the behind-the-scenes staff at Sainsbury's who facilitated the 33,000 bags entry into their central depot in record time.

Two years and three months after my trip to Rwanda I was standing in a room filled with the distinctive aroma of Cafe Maraba Bourbon. Other than Steven and Jeremy the star of the show was Janet, a member of the Abahuzamugambi coffee cooperative, who looked magnificent in a bright yellow and green dress against the grey London background. More heartening was her news that as a result of the price which Union is now paying for her coffee, three to four times higher than the spot commodity coffee price, she has been able to pay for her children's schooling.

Clare Short was equally impressive, albeit in a different style, with her robust, direct and enthusiastic approach. When we first met her in an anteroom she wasted no time in tackling Steven and Jeremy as to when the processing and packaging of this coffee, which now takes place in the UK, could take place in Rwanda, generating even greater income and value for the cooperative and its workers.

That will, of course, depend on how quickly the first 33,000 bags sell. They go on sale on Thursday 13 February in most Sainsbury supermarkets at £3.17 for a 227gr pack of ground coffee. If all goes well, Union have a contract to take 18 tonnes of the 2003 harvest which will be ready in late August and in the UK by the end of the year. This larger quantity will mean that the coffee is more widely available both retail and in coffee bars.

But if you get the chance do try the coffee. I may be biased but I think it is very, very good.

Cafe Maraba Bourbon £3.17 per pack of 227gm ground coffee, available at all Sainsbury's stores.