The Ethiopian Herald May 30th, 2008 Vol. LXIV No. 225

Q-grading–A step forward to coffee development in Ethiopia

BY BELAYNEH TESFAYE

Recently 25 Ethiopian cuppers who are also Q graders (Quality graders) of coffee were certified at the Addis Ababa Golf Club after taking related training. As the training was conducted by an internationally acclaimed organization Coffee Quality Institute (CQI), the Q graders got internationally recognized license. The certification which made these Ethiopians to be licensed as internationally accepted Q graders would create an enormous impact in the leading export of the country-coffee. Above all, the training, thus, made Ethiopia to become the leading country in Africa in the number coffee cuppers for having 25 licensed cuppers.

The Q Coffee System is being implemented in Ethiopia as part of a training agreement among the Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development (MoARD), Fintrac-Ethiopia and the USAID-funded Ethiopia Agribusiness and Trade Expansion Programme (ATEP).

The training was aimed at developing the skills of coffee professionals, specifically coffee cuppers, and building capacity for the Ethiopian coffee industry to transform a greater volume of its coffee production to higher value specialty coffee markets.

Coffee cuppers on the training

In a remark he made on the event USAID Agribusiness and Trade Expansion Programme (ATEP) Project Director, Steven Humphreys said that the project covers four sectors i.e. the coffee, horticulture, hides and skins, and oilseeds / pulses sectors. He added that the mission of the project is to help farmers all over Ethiopia in these four sectors to improve their incomes and help in creating additional employment opportunities. Steven said "We have been here for two years now. And we are in the field mostly working with team of agronomists and also with clients who want to invest in agro-business industry. Recently we have been introducing the Q grading system for the coffee industry. Q grading is very essential profession in the industry. Some of the Ethiopian coffee brands have a very high quality standard and will get Q grade certification," he said.

He further said "This has come about through a lot of training and assistance from the Coffee Quality Institute (CQI) in the United States and coffee co volunteers who have been here on the training. And our own teams have also been helping for the last two years in improving production, harvesting, and post harvesting. And also we were working with coffee export companies to help them in coffee processing. The whole idea is to upgrade the quality of Ethiopian coffee, and to keep this high quality for long time. That of course leads to premium prices for these quality coffees. A lot of the specialty coffee buyers around the world now are asking for Q grade certificates when they see Ethiopian coffee samples and they want to buy a container coffee. This certification will boost the demand for Ethiopian coffee brands in the international coffee markets. Needless to mention this would strengthen the bargaining power of Ethiopian coffee growers' and exporters over buyers and this leads to premium prices. In fact there are more Q grade cuppers than in any other African country now.

This means the cuppers can actually do the cupping here in Ethiopia and would award Q grade certificates to exporters in Ethiopia. And it also helps to build the capacity of cupping locally." It is indicated that these cuppers are highly qualified people and at the top of their profession. "These people are very valuable to the industry," Steven said. They should be given due position in the coffee sector." The Project Director indicated that USAID is now on negotiating terms with the government and it is planning to train additional cuppers. USAID plans to train a total of 100 cuppers in the coming two years.

A cupper and Q grader to whom this writer approached for comment was Befekadu Taffese. He is a seasoned professional in cupping. His profession has taken him to Germany, France and United States and to a number of other countries. He has been in the Hannover Expo roasting and cupping coffee for five months. And he says "I am an economist and I joined the coffee business in 1984 E.C. that is some 25 years back. And now I am working for a company on a contract basis. I am a cupper and a Q grader. Q grading is very important for a coffee producing country like Ethiopia. We always say that Ethiopia is the birth place of coffee. It is a history. We are proud of it. But the important point is that we are not selling history and legends. We are selling coffee beans every year. The quality of coffee beans could be changed from year to year due to many internal and external factors. And the point is that we always say, as a producer: 'ours is always the best.' But the judgment has to be left to the consumers, the importers or the buyers on the other side of the corner."

Befekadu also said "Now the buyers are coming to us. There are a number of exporters in this country. If you take *Yirgacheffe* type coffee, a number of exporters may not export the same *Yirgacheffe*. The characteristics of coffee beans changes at the early stage at the pick season and also at the lay season. And the cup also changes. As an example, a Japanese importer buys Ethiopian *Yirgacheffe* not because of the name. He buys that coffee because of its intrinsic character. This is checked and guranteed by the Q graders.

As a matter of fact both importers and exporters have their own cuppers or Q graders. Now we do have meeting of minds. Thus those who got the opportunity of this training including me have gained a lot from the trainers because we are encircled by importers, exporters, roasters, consumers, retailers and so on. This exchange of ideas, practices, experiences we gained, would help us a lot to talk the same language with roasters and buyers on the other side of the globe."

Regarding the training Befekadu also said "This training gave us a good opportunity to grade Ethiopian coffee because we were grading the coffee a only as grade one, grade two, grade three and/or reject. This was for the local auction system. After having purchased coffee with certain higher grade, for example grade one or two, from the local auction centre, the exporters may do their own mix or blend it with coffee type often times with one lower grade to sell it at international market. What the importer buys on the other side would also be checked for quality. For there are Q graders on both ends it is unlikely to a coffee product to be rejected once it is licensed. Grading coffee is not an easy thing. Tasting by itself is subjective. But most of the times if one cupper says one coffee type is good there will not be a difference of idea with the others." There are agreed criteria to the test of good coffee or otherwise.

Ethiopia grows an Arabica coffee which is the best type of coffee in the world. Apart from this the Nitosol soil which is suitable for coffee tree to grow is found only in Ethiopia and Uganda. He said "If you are applying fertilizer you are going to the conventional market, you are not going to the specialty market. Organic coffee is available in Ethiopia because the soil is fertile. Farmers are not applying fertilizer because the price is very expensive. It is a blessing in disguise because this opportunity ignited upon international buyers to demand more of Ethiopian organic coffee. As it is known quality coffee can not be found in the cup. It is a strenuous work beginning from the selection of the seed to the fostering of the coffee tree up to the picking of the beans," he concluded.

Ethiopia is the birthplace of coffee and the fourth-largest coffee producing country in the world, but despite its status, the country's specialty coffee potential is largely unlapped. USAID-ATEA (Agribusiness and Trade Expansion Activity) has set about changing this through a range of programmes geared towards increasing specialty coffee production and export. The growing specialty coffee market pays large premiums for better quality. Accounting for less than 5 per cent of Ethiopia's $350 million in coffee export dollars, specialty coffee promises to substantially increase the country's agricultural earnings.