

Women Making Waves in African Coffee



Three African businesswomen and coffee exporters are paving new ways to fight for better pay and education for the coffee farmers of Africa.

BY SELAM FANTA ASEGA

SPECIAL TO BARISTA MAGAZINE ONLINE

African coffees are some of the most loved in the world, with terroir and flavor characteristics that make them one-of-a-kind. While the setting helps make these coffees what they are, there are also people with a strong and personal connection to African countries that help bring these coffees to the greater world and advocate for the farmers who grew them.



The Mama Oyo Box, roasted by Boon Boon Coffee in Renton, Wash., features coffee from each of the women introduced in the article. Photo courtesy of Selam Fanta Asega.

One of those people is **Jeanine Niyonzima-Aroian**. Jeanine had a successful career in corporate America, but after having the opportunity to participate in the **Cup of Excellence** in 2015, she was immediately taken by the complexity and uniqueness of Burundian coffee, and began to set her sights on the coffee sector.

She founded **JNP Coffee** in 2012, where she not only strives for quality coffee, but treats and pays her farmers fairly. Jeanine believes that coffee is an avenue that can lift her people out of poverty, and that her company is setting the example of what is possible for a sustainability-minded coffee business. As she says, "Above all, I am more interested in sustainability than maximizing profits. I view coffee as an avenue to lift people out of poverty. Instead of providing free handouts, we are using coffee to teach farmers how to take care of their valuable coffee trees and promote quality at all stages of production of high-quality coffees."

Another powerful player in African coffee is **Kavi Bailey**. Much like Jeanine, Kavi came from a corporate America career on Wall Street, but felt as if she was missing a deeper and larger purpose for her life. When her job was in the middle of a big move, she found it the perfect opportunity to pivot into a different career path, thus beginning her coffee journey.

Despite Kavi's confidence in her own abilities and her history of success in her previous endeavors, she still found the change scary. Putting her fears aside, she focused on helping the coffee farmers of her home country of Kenya. At **Grand Paradé Coffee**, Kavi not only strives for high-quality coffee, but is also incredibly intentional with paying her farmers fairly. "We are paying them way over fair-trade prices, sometimes even twice or three times what fair trade would pay them," she explains on the **Savvy Spirit Podcast**. Her radical approach makes it obvious to others in the coffee industry that it is very possible and necessary to pay farmers higher wages.



Boon Boona Coffee is a café in Washington that specializes in African coffees. Photo courtesy of Selam Fanta Asega.

Laetitia Mukandahiro is an up-and-coming player in the coffee industry. Her story began in Rwanda, when she entered the coffee sector right out of high school with the simple intention to make some money before college. What started off as a quick stint quickly transformed into a passion and a deep desire to pursue coffee as a career. Just six months later, she became a national cupper and went on to become a senior cupper at **RWASHOSCCO**, which allowed her to pay off her university fees.

In 2020, she co-founded **Ikawa House** with Uzziel Habimana, with a focus on helping the women farmers of Rwanda get the most profit out of their crops. She explains, "To process the ordinary coffees, we are now improving and increasing and encouraging people to put their ... effort to produce specialty because it is where they gain more than producing the coffee (the) normal way (such as) semi-washed or the ordinary coffees." At Ikawa House, Laetitia trains the future farmers and coffee professionals of Rwanda, as well as fiercely advocates for her farmers.

These businesswomen, unlike the faceless international conglomerates, have a personal connection and a deep history with the farms and farmers they work with. It's clear that they are putting action behind their sense of personal responsibility to not only make high-quality coffee, but to also help their people along the way.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Selam Fanta Asega is a barista at **Boon Boona Coffee** in Renton, Wash. Her current passions include oat lattes, mindlessly indulging in TikToks, and long solitary drives with SZA playing at full blast.

