

Last Call with Jeanine Niyonzima-Aroian, founder of JNP Coffee



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Coffee is quite literally the fuel that gets us through our day — or at least jumpstarts our engines. But for such an important commodity, most of us don't give a second thought to where it comes from, how it's made or who makes it.

Shrewsbury resident Jeanine Niyonzima-Aroian is the founder of JNP Coffee, which produces and trades coffee from her home country of Burundi and partners directly with the women who grow and process it. In this way, JNP ensures they are paid directly for their work and given the tools to improve not only their own lives but their communities. Coffee may invigorate us with a shot of much needed caffeine, but for these women, the economic practices invigorate their economies and lead to financial stability and poverty reduction. Niyonzima-Aroian sat down with Last Call to discuss how JNP came about, the challenges of working through the pandemic, and challenging long held gender norms.

How did you get started?

I've always believed that if we can make the farmers central to what we do, we can make the industry sustainable. It's a cash crop so if the cash is not enough, they'll grow something else. I was visiting Burundi with board members of my nonprofit in 2010, when I met a relative by coincidence, who asked me for help getting the coffee on the world market. Burundi had just gone private in 2008, so a lot of entrepreneurs were coming out. By 2012, I had left telecom and I was in coffee.

So you came in at a historic point.

Yes, but unfortunately, as of 2019, it's back in the hands of the government.

How has that development affected JNP?

After the government took over the mills, we pivoted to help the women build their own. They are our partners and we support them — we do a lot of education to not only help them make high quality coffee but also in financial literacy. They get all this money but it all goes to immediate needs. By helping them save, we can help them improve their situation.

Sounds like you've brought change to a deeply rigid institution in terms of gender roles. Has there been any pushback?

If we can empower the women who are doing the work, it's going to be good not only for the family but the broader community. It is extremely difficult even today. When I go to Burundi and try to talk to male workers, they always assume that my client, if they're male or white, or both, is the decision maker. They just don't think that women have any power.

So that kind of attitude must show up with the educational aspect of your work, right?

Yes, there are some places where we have to let the men in the community come into the classes because they ask 'what are you going to teach my wife?' There is that perception that women need to stay home and take care of the family.

We're creating a change in ownership by giving women power — it is something that is still not accepted but it has to happen. When we go in and start making sure the women are working at the mill and being paid properly, some men definitely feel threatened to an extent. But in general, they learn that as women better themselves, it helps the family as a whole.

How did the pandemic affect things?

It was very difficult for the supply chain. In the countryside, people don't live very close to each other so in a way it wasn't as impactful in terms of case numbers as some places in the first world or urban centers. Personally, it limited how much I could travel. I would go to Burundi three times a year — before, during, and after the harvest. Luckily we have a quality testing lab in Burundi as well as oversight at the mills.

So business was able to continue after a fashion?

Yes, what was harder was the trading — and it still is now — to get coffee from Burundi to the U.S. It's a logistical nightmare. Our first container from the 2021 harvest actually only just landed in New York and this is unheard of. The ones sent to California haven't even arrived yet.

What time of year is the harvest?

During the summer. Typically it's from March to July as a typical timeframe. The harvest entails multiple parts — picking the cherries from the trees, then processing and drying them for about 30 days before they go to the mill. The harvest is a very long process. Most

of the time, coffee isn't exported from the country until August or September, though it usually arrives at its destination in the same year. The supply chain is so derailed.

Since you couldn't travel as much, how has that affected your work?

I took advantage of it to pursue another certification. I was already a Q-grader — it's like a sommelier but for coffee. Now I'm a Q-processor and gained the knowledge to relate to the farmers on how to better make coffee. Coffee can get processed in many different ways and produce different outcomes or flavors.

Has this given you any new processing ideas for JNP?

Absolutely. JNP is first and foremost known for high quality coffee. We ensure the quality of the coffee every step of the way — from picking just the right cherries, that they're sent to the mill in time and how they're processed. Now, by taking this course, I was able to say 'Aha,' I can suggest new ways, very slight nuances that I got to learn but also very different ways to process new flavors.