

*Jeanine Niyonzima-Aroian, founder of JNP Coffee, poses at a Worcester, Mass., roastery as the Business & Law winner of the 2019 YWCA Katharine F. Erskine Award, which recognized her support for women coffee farmers in her native Burundi.*



# MASTER Q & A

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## Jeanine Niyonzima-Aroian

**REDEFINING BUSINESS-AS-USUAL FOR BURUNDI COFFEE**

**By Ever Meister**

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**“I KNOW I TALK VERY FAST**—my mother tells my friends that I speak fast in all languages,” laughs Jeanine Niyonzima-Aroian into the phone, where she’s called from her home in Massachusetts. (Jeanine speaks five languages). It’s true, she is an animated and captivating conversationalist and speaker, but that’s not the only reason she’s hard to keep up with: Jeanine is also a true force of forward momentum in specialty coffee, and she hardly seems to take a moment’s rest. She is an entrepreneur and a businesswoman as the owner, founder, and president of JNP Coffee, specializing in developing the specialty trade in her home country of Burundi. She is a philanthropist who founded the nonprofit Burundi Friends International, focusing on offering educational opportunities and financial literacy for Burundians in their home country. She is an expert coffee taster with her Q-grader certificate, and she’s been newly ap-

pointed as the first Northeast regional coordinator for the Specialty Coffee Association’s U.S. chapter. Those are just the work-related bullet points, and they barely scratch the surface.

We recently caught up with Jeanine during a rare break in her duties and travels. (She had just come back from a long trip to Burundi, but you’d never know it—she is all energy!)

***Barista Magazine:** We always love to hear about coffee people’s young lives, and we’re curious what your life was like when you were growing up—you were born in Burundi, right?*

**Jeanine Niyonzima-Aroian:** Yes, I was born and raised in Burundi, in the city Bujumbura, and went to primary school there, graduated from high school, and then I came to the U.S. Literally after graduation I came to Nebraska to go to college.



*Jeanine explains the cupping scoring sheet system to two European café owners at a cupping lab during their visit to Burundi. Below: A harvest visit offers the opportunity to discuss quality and best practices for sorting out the best cherries.*



**BMag:** Wait ... Nebraska??

**JNA:** It's a very long story, but actually I had a friend who was going to school in Nebraska, he was a runner. You know how you always go somewhere you know someone? I didn't even speak English when I came here! I came to learn English before I went to college. It was quite a culture shock for me, but Nebraska is actually like home for me because it was where I first came when I went to the U.S. However, with the cold weather, I soon realized, "What did I get myself into?" I tried to get out as quickly as possible by taking summer school classes, so it only took me three and a half years to earn two degrees. [Laughs] International business and marketing were my two degrees. I was in wireless telecommunication before I got to coffee.

**BMag:** Was coffee something you were familiar with from your youth? Did your family drink coffee or was it something that you mostly experienced when you moved to such a cold place as Nebraska?

**JNA:** I didn't drink coffee growing up, but my mother knew coffee. She grew up on a farm in Ngozi Province and many years later she told me the story of her family growing coffee, and how the whole family helped harvest the crop. The money they received from their coffee paid the cost of schooling for her and her siblings. When she told me this not too many years ago, my response was, "What?!" She said, "Yes, how do you think I went to school?" My mother was such a strong believer in getting a good education and she worked hard to get one, and made sure her children did too. That's how I ended up on this journey to the U.S. and eventually back to coffee in Burundi: It all started with a good education.

**BMag:** Other than that, coffee didn't play a big role in your life?

**JNA:** No, most people don't drink coffee in Burundi, I grew up drinking tea. When I was a little girl, in the morning before school, we were always fed tea and a piece of bread. In the evening after school, working on our homework, we had tea as well. Tea is part of the culture more than coffee—people just grow coffee for export purposes.

**BMag:** The farms are typically pretty small as well, is that right?

**JNA:** Throughout the whole country, the majority of people farming coffee in Burundi have fewer than 50 trees of coffee. Almost all the farmers in Burundi do grow coffee, in addition to other crops, but

in small quantity. It's such a very small country—it's the size of the state of Maryland, and overpopulated. We have over 11 million people. When you go to the countryside, it's stunning, there are hills all around, but you don't see many houses because so many people live under one roof. But it is a very community-bound place: They all live with each other and support each other.

**BMag:** What inspired you to leave Burundi to come to the U.S.A. and study?

**JNA:** When I came to the U.S. there were not that many Burundians in America. Most people would go to school in a place like France or Belgium, because having been a French colony, we spoke the language. The trend was always to go to Europe. "Who goes to the U.S.?" For me, however, it was a question of opportunity. I've always been a person who would take a risk for the possibility of a good outcome. So when the opportunity to go to the U.S. came, I said, "I'll learn the language and see how it goes." Today, my sister and I both live in the U.S. I have a brother who lived in France for about 20 years and recently moved to Kenya, and another younger brother who stayed in Burundi. This brother actually has his degree in agronomy! So he is always helping us when we have questions about coffee.

**BMag:** Speaking of coffee, how did you get your start in this industry from working in telecom for so long?

**JNA:** Really what inspired me to get into coffee was that I had a relative in Burundi who was in coffee and looking for some help to get his coffee to the marketplace—but at the same time I was expecting twins and I was traveling a lot internationally. I said, "I need to change my career a little bit, to do something that doesn't require me to be on the road quite as much." When this cousin approached me, I said, "Why not help this kid?" As it happened, I had been hearing a lot about coffee because the coffee industry had just been privatized in Burundi. Several years earlier, I had met someone who was working with USAID in Burundi, and he said, "You know, you should really be getting into coffee—there are going to be so many opportunities." So, it was all aligning when my cousin asked for help. My response was, "Why don't you come to the U.S. and we'll go to the SCAA [Expo] and see what is going on in this coffee industry." It was inspiring. When I came home from the event in Seattle, my husband said, "You're out of your mind: You're working in telecom, you're doing consulting, you have a nonprofit, and now you want







*To Burundi with love: Participants in a recent JNP Coffee field trip to Burundi included women farmers, IWCA Burundi leaders, JNP Coffees quality manager, founder Jeanine Niyonzima-Aroian's brother and business partner René, plus café owners and green coffee buyers from Europe and the United States. Below: Jeanine visits with a co-op farmer and owner in Kayanza Province.*



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to help someone else! You have to let one thing go.” So, I let telecom go. I thought working in coffee would be the easy thing I would do! [Laughs] I would just contact people over the phone about coffee and go to SCAA once a year and that would be it. Well, the rest is history!

**BMag:** A lot of your work in Burundi is with women coffee farmers, and you are active with the International Women’s Coffee Alliance (IWCA). Can you tell us a little about how that aspect of your work began?

**JNA:** I was doing work for my nonprofit, Burundi Friends International (BFI), on one of my trips to Burundi, and I just happened to meet the woman who was the president of the IWCA in Burundi [Isabelle Sinamenye] while visiting a washing station. I actually knew her growing up as a young girl, and in such a small country, we all indirectly know each other. She explained that she was working with a group of women farmers, and suggested that I get involved. I asked, “How can I help?” At that time there were only 100 members of the IWCA in Burundi, so I just sat down with them and listened to their ideas. So, they wrote a proposal for me and what they actually wanted was goats. I took their proposal to the board of BFI and they agreed to provide two goats to each member: one male and one female. It turned out to be one of the most successful efforts. It’s still being talked about! That was in 2013, and in 2015 the women came back to me and said, “We’re in the coffee business but we can’t sell our coffee. Can you help us?” It was a turning point for me, so I said, “Well, I trade in high-quality coffee. Of course, I don’t know what quality you have, but if you can make the grade quality-wise, I think that we can do something together.” Then, I purchased a small lot from them. In 2016 we met again and I decided to start a small program in which we would provide more support to produce quality and then pay a premium for their high-quality lots. This program grew quickly and had a measurable impact. In 2017 we paid these women growers \$80,000 in premiums for their coffee, and that year I was able to place all their coffee in the international market! When we started this work together, there were 100 women in the group; now there are 2,000 members!

**BMag:** What is your specific focus for the women coffee producers?

**JNA:** Women are the single most underutilized group in terms of labor, and the most underserved in terms of equality. When Isabelle started this IWCA group back in 2011, they used to tell her, “Women don’t own land in Burundi.” Well, things are changing, but they change very

slowly. In Burundi, when a woman marries, her husband is the one who owns everything. Even though she works the land, she is the one in the field, and often she is the only one doing the picking, it is the man who delivers the cherries to the washing station and who receives the payment. Sometimes the family doesn’t even see the income that came from the coffee. We do things differently! When we pay our premium, we pay the woman who grew the coffee directly, face-to-face, hand-to-hand. This changes everything: Their coffee takes on extra meaning because they get something important out of it. Our program has become so successful that some of the men say, “My wife wants to be part of the IWCA and I want to be part of the IWCA, too,” and we say, “Yes of course, absolutely!” It is important to be inclusive with success, and now about 30% of the IWCA members in the Burundi chapter are men. Men are participating with their wives because they see the importance of what the IWCA is doing for the family.

**BMag:** Wow, really?!

**JNA:** It’s unique! This is one of the few chapters that pays the money directly to the women who grew the coffee, tended the coffee, and cared for the trees. Our agreement with the washing stations is that we wire the payment money directly to the IWCA chapter and then the executive members of the chapter distribute the money directly to the farmers. From time to time people will ask, “How do we make sure the money is directly going to the right people?” We just provide proof with statements. I love to attend these payment celebrations. We are making women part of the economy. Our project is transforming how they see themselves because now they are empowered.

**BMag:** It seems like working in coffee has a very different motivation than working in telecom for you.

**JNA:** I woke up one day in my condo—I used to live in a high-rise overlooking the ocean in San Diego—and I was thinking, “I come from one of the poorest countries on the planet, I’ve been gifted all of this. What am I doing for my people?” For me, I felt that because I was blessed, I need to pass the blessing to others. Today, every single thing I do is about Burundi. I gave up the money from telecommunications and found the most fulfilling work I’ve ever done. There’s no greater joy than doing what I’m doing. We are here to make a difference. **b**

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