

By Kate Kilpatrick

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Emblazoned on the windows of Bourbon Coffee is the phrase "Murakaza neza," which in the Rwandan language of Kinyarwanda means "We welcome you with blessings."

Rwanda is better known for the 1994 genocide that left more than 800,000 people dead than for its cappuccino. But that doesn't stop Arthur Karuletwa, founder of Bourbon Coffee, from dreaming big.

"If done right, it could be the platform to re-brand the country," says Karuletwa, former chief executive and now a shareholder in the company. Coffee can "create awareness that there's recovery, there's trade, there's investment opportunities, there's tourism. There's life after death."



After opening three stores in Kigali, Rwanda, over the past three years, Bourbon expanded operations to Washington in July, taking over a converted Starbucks at 21st and L streets NW. The cafe is furnished with dark wood tables and red-leather-upholstered chairs; the walls are painted gold, moss green and burnt orange; woven baskets and traditional African motifs decorate the shelves and walls.

General Manager Bosco Munga, a Rwandan native and former refugee, says the location was chosen in part because of its proximity to international aid and sustainability organizations and their employees: The U.S. Green Building Council shares the building; the Peace Corps is down the street. A fair amount of the U.S. aid pumped into Rwanda over the past decade can be traced to surrounding lobbyists and nonprofit organizations.

Plans call for Bourbon to open a cafe in Boston at the end of the year, and later a New York location. Unlike the D.C. shop, those stores will offer on-site roasting and daily cuppings.

Although Bourbon is the only District coffee shop to specialize in Rwandan coffee, several others, including Peregrine Espresso in the Eastern Market neighborhood, feature Rwandan cups on their rotating menus.

"Obviously in D.C. we have a lot of development types who have a sense of the back story, so that sort of education sets it up in a way that might be different if people weren't as familiar with what happened in Rwanda," says Peregrine owner Ryan Jensen. "But you could not have any idea about Rwandan people and still enjoy the coffee."

Since the late 1990s, post-genocide Rwanda has been on a fast track to rebuild coffee farms and improve the quality of beans to cater to the specialty market.

In Rwanda, traditionally a tea-drinking country, coffee is closely linked to reconciliation, Karulewa says.

"Coffee is a very intimate, emotional product," he says. "The preparation, the processes and the profiling of coffee is similar to wine." Those processes, he adds, must be shared and passed down to be properly developed and preserved. Complicating matters more, the "land of a thousand hills" is dotted with tiny coffee farms that produce small batches that are difficult to monitor for quality control.

"There are over 500,000 farmers that own 100 to 200 trees in the back of their yards, so the only way they can come up with a product is to come together in a cooperative sense," says Karulewa. Coffee farmers in Rwanda, he says, are learning to work together, trust each other and be accountable to each other:

"Neighbors that once killed each other and communities that once floated in the same bloodbath are now hand in hand producing one of the most amazing products."

Rwanda is the most recent country -- and the first African one -- to enter the competition for the annual Cup of Excellence Award, considered the Oscars of coffee. (Brazil, Guatemala, Nicaragua, El Salvador, Honduras, Bolivia, Colombia and Costa Rica also compete.)

Still, the country faces serious logistical problems when it comes to marketing its premium coffee. Getting a shipment of beans from Central or South America, Munga says, might take three weeks. In the case of landlocked Rwanda, "it takes us in the best circumstances 12 weeks." Besides dealing with poor roads and highways, coffee exporters are subject to rampant fees and bribes along the way to ports in Kenya or Tanzania.

For some roasters, it's worth the wait.



"Rwanda is a very wanted origin," says Susie Spindler, executive director of the Alliance for Coffee Excellence, which runs the Cup of Excellence competition. She says coffee traders and roasters visiting Rwanda are discovering unusual flavor profiles they never knew existed.

"It mixes a lot of regular characteristics that you usually only find in one area," agrees Stacey Manley, Bourbon's barista. "Latin

American coffees tend to be lighter-bodied and kind of nutty with cocoa. But you almost never find an earthy, really heavy-bodied Latin American coffee. Those are typically Indonesian characteristics. And in Indonesia, coffee is very rarely bright. So the weird thing about Rwandan coffee is it'll have all these different characteristics in one coffee."

In the tradition of European wines, Rwanda has succeeded in establishing five distinct coffee appellations. Altitudes and soils vary among the appellations, creating unique flavors: spicy with hints of tea and cocoa in one, nutty with berry and floral notes in another.

But when it comes to Rwandan coffee, it's clearly not entirely about taste. As Spindler puts it, people in the coffee industry are "not just palate-attached but heart-attached" to the product.

"All of us were stunned, appalled and just devastated by what Rwanda went through with the genocide," she says. "There's a huge attachment to Rwanda and what happened and making sure that country never has to go through that again."

In other words, even casual cup-o'-joe drinkers who can't distinguish bold from bright or berry from brown sugar can enjoy their skinny cappuccino knowing the \$3.25 will support Rwanda's recovery.

On the other hand, Karulewa says he doesn't want Rwandan coffee to be "a pity-driven mission." He hopes consumers choose it for its quality. "The value initiative here is because this coffee tastes great," he says.

Munga agrees: "When you come here, we don't want to bang you on the head: Rwanda, Rwanda, Rwanda."

There is one particular customer he's hoping to attract, though, no matter the reason.

"President Obama, when he was in Ghana, spoke very eloquently that African development is going to be dependent on Africans themselves," Munga says. "In other words, no one is going to come to Africa to develop them, which is something the leaders in Rwanda have consistently been saying. Right in his back yard, a small coffee shop is very much doing what he is saying when he's traveling overseas.

"He is most welcome to come and get a cup of coffee with us."