



## **AAK Cooperative – Apo Coop**

**Eastern Highlands,  
PNG**

**Partner since:** 2011

**Traceable to:**

**Altitude:** 1400 - 1615 MASL

**Varietals:** Typica & Bourbon  
(90%), Caturra (10%)

**Processing:**



Brian Kuglame is the General Manager of the AAK Cooperative, a group of 64 communities from across the highlands region. That's 64 different 'house-lines', single-family villages each with languages and traditions uniquely their own. What they have in common is a pidgin called Tok Pisin, and membership in the AAK Cooperative. AAK stands for Apo, Angra and Kange – the word for 'Unity' in the three major local languages. Coffee brings the world together in more ways than one. AAK is the only cooperative in PNG to unify so many disparate tribes, and they are proud of the role that coffee plays in promoting unity.

With the exception of a few well-known estates, Papua New Guinea coffee is for the most part all from smallholder production, all very small scale and very little attention is paid to high specialty production due to the strong involvement of middlemen. While the middlemen play a valuable role in bringing the coffee economy to remote areas high up in the mountains, they add yet another factor working against quality promotion between buyer and seller. With so many disparate cultural groups and languages across the Highlands, PNG culture has traditionally also not lent itself well to cooperative export structures. AAK is one of the few organizations in the country to have successfully organized farmers across the Western, Central and Eastern Highlands into cohesive groups focused on quality.



Papua New Guinea coffees most commonly hail from the Highlands – the high-altitude areas of the “mainland” and split up between Western (Hagen), Central and Eastern (Goroka) Highlands regions. Smaller regions are beginning to pop up (e.g. the smaller islands like New Britain). The country offers a diverse set of options not in processing (rare to see anything but fully washed), but in producer format. Suppliers

range from small cooperatives to well financed estates, to massive washing stations that can each produce dozens of containers per year. Crop to Cup's focus is generally on the smallholder coffees of PNG (as opposed to its estate coffees). While each smallholder farm is small in land size and yields are drastically low, the sheer volume of smallholder farmers allows the country to produce massive volumes most years. Many smallholders pulp by hand and wash in bags on their own farms, then sell parchment to local collectors who then re-sell to larger middlemen who buy from the side of the road and sell to exporters in larger towns like Goroka and Hagen. Those are generally low-quality coffees, but they account for most of the volume produced by the country (usually sold as Y-Grade). Most specialty lots come from washing stations who send trucks far and wide to collect cherry from thousands of smallholders. Tarp drying is most common, and the daily or weekly lots that come out of these washing stations can be impressive, for many of them are well managed with strict red cherry collection, clean water and careful attention to drying. The other sources of PNG specialty lots are the new generation of coops and small, traceable producer groups. Coops and other organized farmer groups are now producing impressive qualities, but their numbers are still low. Much of this difficulty in building membership is due to cultural and geopolitical issues between

villages. Hundreds of disconnected languages are spoken across the Highlands, and historically there was not a lot of cooperation between villages. The support that agriculture provided was generally limited to each village, and each village is usually comprised of just one or a few families/clans. Further, the countless disparate areas of the Highlands only became connected upon the completion of the Highlands Highway (from the port in Lae to Hagen in the West) in the early 1950s (and “first” contact between Highlands and the coastal areas was not even until 1930!). To this day, access to the secondary valleys off the Highlands Highway is still difficult, and a lot of coffee is still transported by small prop plane from tiny airstrips in the middle of dense forest.

But when you do see coops, they are impressive. The examples of farmer organization we’ve seen in PNG often trump that of many other established producer countries. Coop farmers are often paid by cashless card swipe, and detailed home and family income growth plans are the norm. Traceability has improved as well, and we can now access lots as small as 10-20 bags produced by only one or two families. This has greatly improved our ability to weed out defective lots (which will always be common in such a smallholder context), and, over recent years, cup scores and consistency have followed suit.