



Nova Coffee

**Northern Province,
Gicumbi District,
Bukure Sector,
Rwanda**

Partner since: 2017

Traceable to: 80 Members

Altitude: 1800 - 2200 MASL

Varietals: Bourbon

Processing:

Harvest: March April May June

Booking: June July August

Arrivals: August September October



Passionately caring about the well-being of others and a meticulous attention to detail...Those two traits sum up Agnes Mukamushinja, Felix Hitayezu and the Nova Coffee team. You have to pay attention to the small print when your experience is in running a pharmacy. Pharmacist Felix Hitayezu and his wife Agnes Mukamushinja (nurse) run a pharmacy called “Pharmacie Nova” in Kigali, and only recently decided to dip their toes into a coffee venture 5 years ago, which they aptly named “Nova Coffee”. The result? A coffee program run with as much professionalism as a pharmacy.

Before they started they came up with an official vision and mission statement. The Nova Official vision reads, "At Nova Coffee, we envision to drive community socioeconomic welfare through the enhancement of improved coffee farming practices." The Nova Official mission statement reads: "Being a women-centered washing station, Nova Coffee is committed to developing the neighboring community into specialized coffee farmers that produce the highest quality coffee as well as to enhancing the social cohesion in order to create more jobs and eradicate poverty".

Truly socially motivated dreamers— our kind of people! Why coffee though? During the genocide Agnes saw most of the coffee trees get destroyed in her village, trees that her father spent his entire 50 year career supporting, as a coffee agronomist and mobilizer. The remaining trees were of low quality and all coffee was being processed as semi-washed. In Agnes's words, "We bought a decrepit old washing station to fix up and try and lift up the village". That village, Bukure, is a beautiful few hour drive north from Kigali, through valleys of rice fields and banana trees. Agnes quickly signed up for every possible resource that the Rwandan government was providing for the coffee sector and set her office up at NAEB (National Agricultural Development Export Board) to make sure she didn't miss any opportunity. She joined Rwanda's IWCA chapter, and eagerly partook in any free trainings that were made available. She quickly targeted the coveted value-added product market, and worked with the non-profit TWIN to launch a domestic roasted coffee brand called "Le Cafe de Mamans". That coffee is grown by 263 women of the local Berwa Cooperative, then roasted in Kigali and sold around Rwanda's tourist market. It's still in the early stages, but the women have been energized by the project and realize that Agnes means business! Due to the rezoning law passed by the Rwandan government in 2017, now only 3 cooperatives deliver their coffee cherries to Nova to get processed. They are the Jyambere Muhinzi Wakawa Cooperative, the Dukorere Kawa Cooperative, and the aforementioned Berwa Cooperative. This special natural processed lot was grown by farmers who live just adjacent to the washing station in the Bukure sector. Some of these farmers are members of the Dukorere Kawa Cooperative but chose to have these cherries be sold to Nova outside of the cooperative. This was an experimental lot in its first year and they hit it out of the park. Like the saying goes, it didn't just happen. Part of being a good manager is surrounding yourself with great talent, and Agnes has brought top notch people into the Nova Team in the past few years. Celeste is their quality control manager with over 20 years of experience, and a big part of the success of this lot. It's rare to see him without his notebook, phone, and moisture reader. Thacien is their full-time, year round agronomist for farmers with a goal of bringing production up to 10 kilos per tree. Theresa manages their daily operations, farmer organization, and gender equity trainings. This list goes on and on. The cherries dry over the course of 18 days for roughly 9 hours a day, while being carefully watched over by Celeste. Suffice it to say, we are thrilled to introduce the US market to this special group and their coffee.



Coffee in Rwanda saw a meteoric rise after Paul Kagame was sworn in as 6th president of Rwanda in 2000. He promised to focus on coffee and leveraged international goodwill to start funding/subsidizing the coffee sector infrastructure (washing stations). In 2002, Tim Schilling & Geoff Watts ran a cupping event in Kigali where knowledge sharing began. At this point 0% of total production in Rwanda was specialty production (Washed Top Lots). However, by 2018, 60% of total production was specialty. Now, 26 of 30 districts have Washing Stations – making coffee a crop that touches the whole country. Ninety-nine percent of this crop is exported to the US and Japan as washed coffee and Europe takes semi-washed. All the care and attention goes into the Washed Processed; none is given to semi-washed (sorry, Europe). Even if coffee comes through a private mill, all coffee in Rwanda is smallholder grown. And these are smallholders with a strong cooperative culture – there are over 200 registered coops in the country. In 2017, a new law comes into effect that changes the way Rwanda handles zoning, and coffee producers are now obligated to bring their cherry to designated mills. According to the head of NAEB (National Agricultural Export Board) “The intention of zoning is to cut-out the middle men who are taking advantage of farmers.”

This is a change: since 2002 Rwanda had been organized as follows: 5 Provinces (Eastern, Northern, Southern, Western, Kigali), 30 Districts (26 of these have wet mills), Each District is then broken down into ‘sectors’, which are divided into ‘cells’ which have one or more ‘villages’. Now there are zones as well – a zone can contain multiple sectors, or be as small as one cell. Either way, each zone has designated mills to process all of that zone’s coffee. This is meant as not a political division, just a structure for organizing coffee. However, any distinction between communities – in a country with tense history – is political. In fact, the way the zones look on a map is like coffee gerrymandering.

Some Washing Stations benefited from zoning, and some have really suffered. Cocamu (a group on Lake Kivu) saw their catch basin quadruple overnight. Nova, on the other hand, saw theirs shrink drastically. Other changes have come along with zoning – the government has sent out local agronomists as extension workers, each managing between 10-20 cells. There can be up to 2,200 cells per sector, and on top of this, every washing station also has to have an agronomist. So there are a LOT of agronomists in the field. There is also now a “Floor” or minimum cherry price set by the

government. By law you cannot purchase coffee for less than this price. The idea here is that a Rwandan “coyote” can no longer take advantage of a farmer who lives remotely without transport (which is true for most – most coffee land is in hard to reach).

Add ‘dedicated mills’ per zone to a ‘minimum price’ and you get an interesting dynamic. Washing Stations HAVE TO receive the cherry that is in their zone, UNLESS they don’t have any more room – a standard that is pretty hard to enforce. Now the only price that the Washing Station HAS to pay is the legal minimum. This trends coffee down towards the minimum price, putting the premiums back as second or third payments, in a way similar to Tanzania.

In summary – the big question here is about the autonomy of farmers in Cooperatives and Farmer Groups. Imagine delivering your coffee to one washing station for 10 years, and then overnight you now have to take it to a different place. While meant to protect farmers, this change in fact strips them of their choice and some of the benefits of being members of a cooperative. More, for specialty buyers, this model encourages premiums for certification over premiums for quality. This is political. The government wanted a system they could scale rapidly, which didn’t favor certain regions over others (read: high vs low elevation), and which gave an easy path for producers to sell value-added coffee. So they hired outside consultants who selected Fairtrade, UTZ, and Organic as the three certifications to engage in this process. Certifications can provide a value-add to any producer, regardless of region (or ethnic group), making it really the only politically viable narrative for the government. The optics of unity in Rwanda are ever-present.