

COFFEE MATCHMAKERS: TAKING A LOOK AT GROWERS ALLIANCE SUBSCRIPTION SERVICE

This month our search for coffee to love takes us to a single roaster coffee subscription service based out of Jacksonville, Florida—Growers Alliance.

The story behind the beans. Growers Alliance is proof that good coffee can brew up a beautiful love story. It happened for the owners, Martin Kabaki and Purity Gikunju who are not only business partners but romantic partners as well (they were wed in the Kenyan tradition in 2006 and are engaged to be married here in the U.S.). Although both grew up on Kenyan coffee farms only three hours apart, their paths did not cross until their coffee import businesses took them to a Specialty Coffee Association Conference in Seattle in 2003. Each of them got into the industry when they realized how much Americans were willing to pay for a cup of coffee and how little farmers back home were being paid to grow the beans. “I was seeing people pay \$3 to \$4 a cup and I didn’t understand because back home I knew we were barely paid ten cents a pound so my goal immediately was to see how we could change that culture,” Purity explains.

Martin shared that desire, and when they merged their companies in 2006, they set out to form alliances with farmer’s cooperatives to eliminate the middle man and ensure the money goes directly to benefit the grower. They have entered into fair trade agreements with six cooperatives that represent over 2,000 growers from four main coffee growing countries: Kenya, Ethiopia, Costa Rica and Guatemala. The Fair Trade certification ensures that the farmers are receiving a “fair” and sustainable price for their product. What that means for Growers Alliance is that they pay an average of \$1.90 per pound for coffee beans when they know of farmers still only earning 30 cents per pound. “Fair-trade is a game changer for farmers,” Martin explains.

In addition to the 20 cent social premium (30 cents for organic) that is tagged onto each pound of Fair Trade certified coffee, ten percent of the sale of each Growers Alliance bag goes towards investing in community service projects to improve the quality of life for Kenyan coffee growers. These include digging water wells, supporting two orphanages, establishing a kidney dialysis clinic, and helping village women produce fair trade items such as baskets and bracelets that they can sell.

The mission of Growers Alliance has always been about more than just doing good. Purity and Martin are also passionate about representing only organic coffee, roasting it in small batches to ensure freshness, and selling it straight up—no blends.

They also take their desire to connect the coffee grower directly with the consumer seriously. Two to three times a year they offer Coffee Safaris, bringing their customers to the coffee farms to interact with the growers, pick coffee, and participate in some of their community projects before leading them on a safari through the Maasai Reserve.

How it works.

When you sign up for the Coffee Club, you will be asked to make your selection of which four 12-ounce packages you'd like delivered on a recurring basis. You can choose from Kenya, Ethiopia, Costa Rica, Guatemala, Swiss Water Process Decaffeinated Kenya and Half Regular-Half Decaffeinated Kenya. If you're looking for the next best thing, you can take what Growers Alliance calls their "Coffee Safari" and make four different selections; however, if you're the monogamous type, your order can be four bags of the same coffee.

You have a choice of whole roasted bean or ground, and the timing of delivery—every four, six, or eight weeks. If you find you misjudged your coffee consumption, you can change the frequency of your shipments at any time. Free returns are offered within 14 working days of the purchase.

What's to like. We all know that caffeine makes us feel good, but Growers Alliance, with its 10 percent kickback to community service projects gives you another reason to let those endorphins flow when you're sipping your cup. In addition, if you're a purist, it's nice to know that your coffee is single-origin—you know what you are getting into. Decaf drinkers have lots to like with two choices—both Kenyan, but one is 100% Swiss water process decaffeinated while the other is half decaf and half regular.

Freshness is one of Growers Alliance's biggest selling points. Being a single roaster subscription service, they can expedite the timeframe from order to delivery. Coffee is roasted the next business day after your order is placed and then shipped out 24 hours later. Thanks to priority mail, your coffee arrives in two to three business days. In our case, the coffee was ordered on Wednesday and showed up on Monday.

Free shipping is included with every coffee club purchase and satisfaction is guaranteed—returns are welcome within 14 days after placing the order. In addition you can change the frequency of your shipments or cancel altogether at any time.

What's not to like. If you have a problem with commitment, then you may find Growers Alliance's four 12-ounce bags too much of a good thing all at once. If you're a one-cup-a-day drinker, it could take you a month or more to finish off one bag. But if you're like one of our tasters, with a three to five cup a day habit, then this quantity may be just what you need to protect you from one of your biggest fears—running out of beans.

Coffee philanderers may find themselves a little limited with the Growers Alliance selection. Roasts are on the darker side and the beans originate only from four different countries. If you'd like to try a light roasted Colombian, you won't find that here.

We also wished there was more information about the coffee included in the shipment. While the website lists the flavor profiles, the beans were packaged in heat sealed bags claiming organic and fair trade certification, shade grown 100% Arabica beans with no mention of roast date, tasting notes, elevations or varieties.

What's it going to cost? For \$39.95, Growers Alliance will ship you four 12-ounce packages of your choice of coffee. If you drink decaf, this is a good deal as their decaf coffee sells for more if ordered separately. Shipping is included.

MEET OUR COFFEE TASTERS

Each month we invite guest tasters from Portland, Oregon, to form our cupping panel. They bring with them a love of coffee, sense of adventure and their own coffee biases which we identify in hopes of providing you with honest reactions to our featured coffees which you will find useful in forming your own.

Kelliann Amato was first introduced into the coffee culture 12 years ago when she worked in public relations for Starbucks. Another four year stint with Portland Coffee Roasting solidified her stature as a coffee snob. Since she only drinks one cup a day she likes it to be memorable and more often than not, bold.

Lora Woodruff, owner of Third Wave Coffee Tours, guides coffee lovers through the Portland micro-roaster and café scene. She prefers a light roast.

<http://www.thirdwavecoffeetours.com/>

Cindy Birmingham is in charge of corporate sales for Third Wave Coffee Tours and has been a java junkie for 22 years. She starts her day off with a dark bold cup and usually follows that up with two to four more cups before the day is done.

MEET THE COFFEES

KENYA

●**The story behind the beans.** This is Growers Alliance's flagship coffee. Most of the beans come from farms known for their rich volcanic soil near Mt. Kenya, including Purity's own village of Embu. A Full City roast is applied to establish the richness and smoothness Growers Alliance aims for with this bean.

The basics: Wet process. Grown at 6,500 feet.

●**Tasting notes.**

Aroma. On first break, one taster picked up on a sweet smokiness; another found floral and spice notes.

Flavor. There is a reason this is Growers Alliance best seller. The Kenya proved to be our tasters' favorite as well. Acidity was well balanced with a round, silky body. Hints of caramel and bittersweet chocolate were layered with a sweet smokiness that lasted into the finish. Our five cup a day taster could see herself starting the day with this one, and even Lora, who prefers a light roast, thought this might work for her with some cream to soften the boldness. This coffee was reviewed by Coffee Review in 2009 and received a score of 89 out of 100. <http://www.coffeereview.com/review/gourmet-kenya/>

Tasting at home. Used a single-cup French press and noticed an initial smoky aroma, confirming the medium to dark roast. Upon sipping, coffee covered the full mouth with a bright acidity, dominated by citrus flavors and ended up finishing like a Pinot Noir. After

adding half-and-half, the citrus flavors still pulled through but gave way to more berry notes.

ETHIOPIA

●**The story behind the beans.** These beans hail from the esteemed Yirgacheffe region and undergo a dark roast.

The basics: Wet process. Grown at 5,300 feet.

●**Tasting notes.**

Aroma: Picked up on floral and dark stone fruit accents along with hints of cocoa.

Flavor: Noted the presence of cocoa and caramel with earthy shades of straw and herbs. Two of the tasters found a bitterness that interfered with identifying other elements.

Tasting at home: Brewed using a Melitta pour over cone and discovered rose floral accents in the aroma that had been missed in the cupping session. Rich, balanced acidity, making the coffee feel like it was taking up a lot of space in the mouth. Cocoa flavor was present again in this cup with a sweetness that registered at the finish. Started drinking black—qualities held up with the addition of cream.

COSTA RICA

●**The story behind the beans.** Growers Alliance gets their Costa Rican from the popular Tarrazú mountain region where high elevation and volcanic soil conditions create a prime coffee growing environment.

The basics: Wet process. Grown at 4,800 feet.

●**Tasting Notes.**

Aroma: Sweet floral tones were joined by a chocolate nuttiness.

Flavor: Liveliness was not as pronounced as in some of the other coffees tasted but it did carry a full body. Baker's chocolate came through along with stone fruit undertones. The Costa Rican came in second for our resident java junkie and would probably find its way into one of her three to five daily cups.

Tasting at home: The Costa Rican was brewed using Hamilton Beach's "The Scoop" single cup brewer. Fresh ground beans threw off a sweet fruity scent. Upon brewing, the aroma gave way to a smokiness that lingered. The sweet fruitiness carried into the initial taste and over the course of the cup, the flavors melded nicely together leaving little aftertaste. At home brewing produced a cup that was more pointed and sharp than the cupping session.

GUATEMALA

●**The story behind the beans.** This coffee is sourced in the Antigua region known for its ideal coffee growing climate conditions with well defined wet and dry seasons that allow for uniform maturation. While Growers Alliance calls the Guatemalan a light roast, the color and slight oiliness of beans suggested more of a medium to dark one.

The basics: Wet process. Grown at 4,800 feet

Taste notes.

Aroma. Breaking the crust gave way to an inviting dark chocolate that lingered.

Flavor. Citrusy tartness joined in upon tasting, mixing with layers of cocoa and a suggested earthiness. Felt big and full on the palate.

Tasting at home. Used the Hario V60 dripper and detected a berry sweetness in the aroma. The tartness from cupping held up in this brew as well, lending a vibrant richness to the feel. Cocoa hung out in the background and the finish was sweet but on the dry side. The addition of half-and-half rounded out some of the acidity but deepened the richness and still allowed the flavor profile to emerge.

GROUNDS FOR THOUGHT

If you like a dose of good karma with your coffee, Growers Alliance is worth considering. Among our tasters, these coffees definitely fared better among those who prefer a brew leaning towards bold and robust rather than nuanced and delicate. This is a good service to consider if you like cream in your coffee as these brewed beans can stand up to the addition without sacrificing flavor. Light roast aficionados who love the selections from a roaster like Ruby Coffee or Coava may want to look elsewhere but darker roast fans can bring it on!