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Cambodian Coffee

We've heard raves about coffee from Guatemala, from Hawaii, from Brazil, from Jamaica, from Guatemala. But never from Cambodia, the poor little country that hardly knows how to export anything but tears. Well, Cambodian coffee may be on its way to the world market, thanks to three Americans based in Japan and the big Japanese Yanaka Coffee Co. The venture, at least at first, is non-profit, with any surplus going to help rebuild Cambodia's schools.

The sparkplug is a "foodie" named Corky Isaacs, actually a professional anthropologist with a special food, and an occasional summer visitor to Maine. She spent two years studying coffee-drinking in Japan, where it exceeds tea-drinking. Japan is the third largest coffee-importing country in the world, behind only the U.S. and Germany, with coffee houses three to the city block serving fine blends to serious coffee maven.

Ms. Isaacs found many a fine cup of coffee in Tokyo and Kyoto, but nothing to compare with what she found on her visit to Cambodia. She promptly ordered 220 pounds of the green beans, got the Yanaka Co. to roast them, and arranged for a professional tasting in her Kyoto dining room by some of Japan's top experts - but first she warmed up the tasters with a hike up a nearby mountain for a lot of talk about Cambodia's dire educational situation.

Soon, she says, "The Japanese gentlemen, jackets off and sleeves rolled up, were sipping and spitting out their verdicts with brows and high concentration. Not since last year's Boston Wine Expo had I seen such a display of connoisseurship." They compared Vietnamese and Indonesian coffees with the Cambodian brew, a hybrid blend of low-level robusto and higher-altitude arabica species.

Ms. Isaacs and her friends in the coffee industry held their breath and watched for hints of a verdict on the faces of the tasters. The decision came the next morning, by e-mail: "We can go with your coffee. We need your help."

Two Tokyo-based Americans who have organized educational and medical assistance to Cambodia, Krisher, a former Newsweek staffer, and Richard Dyck, a business man, are paying the Cambodian farmers for the beans and distributing any surplus funds through two aid agencies, American Assistance for Cambodia and Relief for Cambodia. Yanaka is doing the roasting, like the consultants and tasters, on a cost basis for the beans.

Sample kits went out last month to cafes and institutions. Orders poured in from coffee shops and restaurants and began Oct. 1. All over Japan, customers are ordering the new Ratanakiri Blend, named for the Cambodian province where the beans are grown.

So a combination of Japanese love for coffee, an urge for charitable giving, a company that foresees a market, and some American help and know-how are making a start at helping poor little Cambodia get its coffee industry on its feet.

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