This lot is a combination of coffees from two small primary cooperatives in the Jimma zone: Koma and Wolenso. Both of these cooperatives have only recently begun washing their coffees and selling them directly—rather than through local intermediaries.

Koma is located in the far north of Limu in an area that is among the most remote of all the TechnoServe projects in Western Ethiopia. It is a relatively small group, with a total of 544 farmers who contribute cherry to the co-op. It is also one of the more cohesive—unlike many of the other groups, there are very few inactive farmers and there seems to be a high level of unity among the coop members. On my last trip to Ethiopia I visited 15 different cooperatives and it was Koma that left me with the most positive impression. The quality of the cherry delivered was extremely good by Ethiopian standards, and I got the feeling that this group was really committed to the idea of uplifting quality as a means of securing higher premiums. The 2012 crop is incredibly tasty, and I expect even bigger things from them in the coming years. The leadership there is as solid as it comes, and with good management usually comes tremendous success.

The farmers at Wolenso, like most in the area, used to sell their coffees as dry cherry at the local markets or to private wet mills before the restructuring of the cooperative and the establishment of their own wet mill. The returns were somewhat dismal and inconsistent, based mostly on the whims of local traders who controlled the market and the farmers were not realizing much benefit from their coffee gardens. Beginning in 2010, things began to change as the efforts the group put into quality control started showing up in the cup. Incomes from the coffees have risen to 5 times the 2008 levels and the solidarity within the coop has grown to unprecedented levels. As a result, the group has steadily increased the volume of cherry they are processing and managed to pay off the entirety of their wet mill construction loan after just 1 year of working together with TNS.

GEOFF WATTS | GREEN COFFEE BUYER
Just outside of the town of Jimma (the former capital of the Kaffa region, recently re-zoned as part of Oromia) there is a peculiar little monument to what is described as the original Arabica coffee tree from which all other coffees of the species are descendant. It is mostly symbolic, intended to remind people that Ethiopia, and in particular this area of the country, is known to be the birthplace of coffee. This region is home to the largest pool of genetic diversity in the world of coffee, a real-life Eden for anyone interested in the unique tastes that can be found in heirloom coffee varieties.

Historically the Western coffee zones of Ethiopia have been overshadowed by the much better known areas like Harrar and Sidama, and the coffees from the West have received far less attention despite some of the natural advantages found in the Kaffa forests. This is largely a result of circumstance—political and economic conditions have favored development and investment in coffee in the Southern and Eastern provinces, and the global coffee industry has done a lot to promote those zones over the last several decades. But there is a sort of renaissance underway in the West, due in part to a renewed interest in discovering coffee’s genetic roots and to an intensive effort led by an organization called TechnoServe (TNS) aimed at improving infrastructure in the area and assisting local farmers in upgrading their quality protocols.

Today there is a lot to be excited about in what remains a sort of Wild West relative to the more institutionalized coffee sectors in other parts of the country. There are dozens of new cooperative groups that have been established over the last 10 years, incorporating farmers who had up until recently not been realizing anything close to full value for the coffees they were producing. Farmers participating in these new projects are benefitting from being part of a collective that allows them to bring their coffees into the market much more directly than they could when operating individually and with an unprecedented level of transparency. Now that they have access to washing stations the intrinsic qualities of the coffees they’d been growing for decades are able to shine through more consistently and with greater clarity than they did in the past. Some of the floral traits that had long been obscured by more pungent fruit flavors associated with the sun-drying process can spread out peacock-style and show themselves off. Coffees that used to be treated as second-class are proving themselves to be deserving of the same kind of reverence that has long been enjoyed by the Southern stalwarts. And as good as they are now, the likelihood is that they still haven’t reached their full potential; they should continue to get even better as the farmers become more familiar with the new systems. There is a palpable diamond-in-the-rough feel about the area and a sense of hope among the farmers, many of whom are just now learning about the specialty market and understanding for the first time that the potential value of the coffees they are growing is something that can be modified by their own actions and the efforts they put into quality control.

We’ve been working closely with the TechnoServe team and investing in the success of the Limu-area cooperatives for several years now. The goal is not limited to improving quality, however. In many ways quality improvement is simply a tool that helps to catalyze all sorts of other important advancements, such as investment in social services and environmental safeguards. It is our shared goal to create systems that promote transparency in both handling of coffee and distribution of payment to individual farmers. There is a lot of work still to be done, but the progress that has already been made is inspiring. Over the coming years we plan to continue strengthening our relationships with groups like Koma, Debello, and Doyo, working together with them to pursue ever-increasing levels of quality and discover some of the treasures that this region has to offer.
COFFEE PRODUCTION IN ETHIOPIA

To describe why Ethiopia is so intriguing and why its coffees are so unbelievably full of life is a job best left to poets, but there are a number of factors that combine to give Ethiopia some unique advantages over the rest of the coffee-producing world. For starters, remember that Ethiopia is the birthplace of coffee. It is the one place on earth that where native coffee varieties grow wild, and it is home to more genetic diversity in coffee than the rest of the producing countries combined by a huge margin. The trees varieties that are being cultivated all over the country have adapted to their surroundings over centuries and have learned to grow better. And oftentimes the lots we taste are not the product of a single variety, but rather a composite of many, which might help to explain the soaring complexity and seemingly endless nuance that can be found in the best Ethiopian coffees—a virtual kaleidoscope of tastes made possible by combination of so many distinctly different coffee types.

One of the greatest ironies in the coffee industry is that most producing countries do not consume their own coffees, and until very recently the very notion of high-quality coffee has been limited to consuming countries in the developed world. Ethiopia is the stunning exception: it boasts the most ancient and the most compelling traditions for coffee consumption that the world has ever seen. Coffee permeates the cultural fabric of Ethiopian life, and is celebrated daily in a way that would make Juan Valdez give up his poncho and his mule and pursue a life of meditation and monastic serenity. Take the coffee ceremony, for example. It is extremely common for people to buy green coffees in the markets then take them home and prepare them in the living room using a pan to roast over coals, a mortar and pestle to grind, and a clay pot to boil and brew. The coffee ceremony is at once a social tradition, a celebration of the virtuous properties of coffee, and an opportunity for contemplation and reflection. Coffee is served over a period of time in three individual rounds—the Abol, Tona, and Baraka, each of which has its specific significance. Life without coffee is almost unimaginable—most people drink coffee in the morning, the afternoon, the evening, and sometimes late into the night. Ethiopia is one of only two producing countries that drink more than half of what they grow!

Coffee (“buna” in Amharic) accounts for nearly two-thirds of foreign export earnings, and employs about 10% of the population. It is in many ways the life’s blood of the entire country. For those who approach coffee as a culinary delight it is hard to beat Ethiopia for the sheer complexity, nuance, and delicacy of flavor that can be found. Nowhere else have I experienced the kind of aromatics that we routinely discover in there—gorgeous jasmine, orange blossom, and honeysuckle fragrances that infiltrate and seduce the most primitive and vital of our senses. If you’ve ever wondered what all the fuss is about, grind a sample of this coffee and take a long, slow inhalation. That gleeful, bewildered look on your face is all the answer you’ll need. It breathes life, and you get the feeling that were you to toss a few seeds up in the air they would land and become trees in a day.

Ethiopian coffee is generally separated into three major zones: The East (Harar), the West, (Jimma) and the South (Sidama/Yirgacheffe). Each is distinguished by particular climate factors and socio-political developments that have combined to create very distinct identities. For instance, in Harar the climate is especially arid and water resources are relatively scarce, so washing coffee does not make a lot of sense there. By both tradition and by mandate all coffees from this area are processed using the sun-dried method, where coffee seeds are left to dry inside the fruit. In the South the climate is much more humid, with abundant rainfall in most years. It was here that the practice of washing coffee was first introduced, near to the small town of Yirgacheffe, in the mid 1970’s. Compared to the other regions there has been a lot more investment made in coffee production infrastructure, largely due to political and economic circumstance. In the West, the Kaffa forests house the majority of the remaining genetic rootstock and the many of the best coffee growing areas are especially remote and still remain difficult to access. At their best, coffees from all over Ethiopia are nearly untouchable in the world of Specialty Coffee and
that is unlikely to change anytime soon. What is remarkable is that the surface may have only been scratched – there are coffees there that remain unclassified, and up until now very few micro-lots have been preserved all the way to the market. That will continue to change. We're working with some of the most talented and resourceful coffee people in Ethiopia and developing projects that will lead to more separations of quality and higher returns for the growers who produce them. I think our notion of what constitutes perfection in coffee will be challenged over the next few years by coffees that emerge from the hills of Southern Abyssinia and the Western region still colloquially referred to as Kaffa. So let this serve as notice, world: the original source of coffee has come back to retake the throne from the rest of the world that took its seeds and grew them to create an industry.