Two years ago the coffee company Moyee announced a revolution in the coffee industry. By roasting coffee beans in their land of origin, local farmers could earn more. The media were enthusiastic about these idealists. Now, two years later, has Moyee succeeded in realizing the ideal of an honest coffee chain?

Sarah Haaij

Coffee revolution: farmers roast their own beans

When you step over the threshold of Moyee coffee-roasting company in Addis Ababa, you enter a new world. Heavy exhaust fumes are replaced by the tantalizing aroma of roasted coffee beans. This interior, which might also be seen in an espresso bar in Amsterdam, is the home of what Moyee calls an ‘Ethiopian coffee revolution’. The beans here aren’t exported while still green, as are 99 percent of Ethiopia’s coffee beans, but are first roasted. These roasted beans are fortunate enough to be part of what Moyee refers to as ‘the first fair-chain cup of coffee’.

With the enthusiasm of someone who’s already had quite a few cups of coffee, Ahadu Woubshet, the manager of Moyee Ethiopia, welcomes us to ‘his’ coffee-roasting company. The idea is simple,’ he immediately explained. ‘All of the beans are usually exported and roasted in Western factories. By roasting them here in Ethiopia, the country is no stranger to certain forms of bureaucracy,’ he added with a laugh. ‘Now we’ve finally started, and in the next few months we’ll import the first shipments of roasted beans from our Ethiopian coffee-roasting company. Of course, we’re just peanuts compared to the big coffee boys. But we believe that we’re on the right road and that this approach deserves a place in the world of coffee. We also see this reflected in the big customers who join us.’

Better wage for farmer Najief

Together with the one hundred small farmers he represents, farmer Najief from Jimma, the cradle of coffee, was the first of Moyee’s suppliers. The first 25 thousand kilos was recently purchased from them, and that volume will quickly increase. Moyee is, in the words of van Staveren, ‘one of the last of the chosen’ that get a subsidy from the Private Sector Investment Programme (PSI) of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, a programme aimed at developing countries. With its own investment of 450 thousand euros and a PSI subsidy of 400 thousand, a new coffee-roasting facility will be built in Addis Ababa with five times more volume capacity.

So the brand of coffee that claims on its website that it wants to make development aid history is itself dependent on subsidies? Woubshet continues to smile. ‘You know, we could also have done it without that help, but then it would’ve taken much longer. We’re competing with companies worth millions. My concern is that the farmers here quickly profit more from the coffee they grow. To begin with, we do that by paying 20 percent more for their beans than the market does! That extra money can be invested in the community.’

Just when I wanted to ask van Staveren again about the importance for the small farmer, he anticipated me: ‘Of course journalists always ask how that extra money gets to the small farmer. Well, we’re working on it. Of the 20 percent additional cost, farmer Najief can show that 10 percent was for the higher price he paid for to the other farmers for their coffee berries. The other 10 percent goes into investments like drying beds. That’s more difficult to trace.’

The businessman in van Staveren is wary of getting too involved in how the farmers spend their money. Van Staveren: ‘Before you know it, you’re suddenly also responsible for the question of whether the money is being well spent. My fear is that Dutch customers are going to ask us to set up a school or dig a well, that classic NGO stuff.’ But don’t you have any extra responsibility as an investor in a developing country? ‘Of course I understand that this is a tricky area. But I’d rather work on this aspect with a good NGO.’ He thinks that the real impact of the Moyee strategy on the farmers and on the country itself will be visible in about three years.

Back at the coffee-roasting plant, the most important moment has arrived: coffee time. But it’s not that simple. Moyee is a high-end brand for the true coffee lover, and you have to find the right balance in the blend of berries, bitterness, earthiness, honey flavour and the at least 24 other taste nuances. Master taster, or cupper, Ashenafi demonstrates how serious coffee drinking is. The coffee is stirred, smelled, slurped and carefully tasted. With his eyes closed, Woubshet takes a sip and dreams about his future plans. ‘Sure, we’re raising the standards for coffee from Ethiopia, but everyone can follow us!’