

Umoja

South Kivu, Democratic Republic of the Congo

 VARIETY: Bourbon	 PROCESS: Washed	 HARVEST TIME: Sept–Dec & Feb–June	 FLOWER SEASON: October–December
 ELEVATION: 1480–2000 MASL	 PRODUCER: 11,600 smallholder farmers	 DRYING: Coffee is dried for 40 hours on raised beds framed with drying nets until moisture content drops from 47% to 8–10.5%.	 WET MILLING: Cherries are first washed, then depulped, and separated for density. Bulk fermentation lasts 36 hours, during which intermediate washing happens regularly.
		 DRY MILLING: Coffee is milled on site at the coop, then taken by truck through Rwanda for export at ports in either Kenya or Tanzania.	

The Democratic Republic of the Congo (also referred to here as DRC and Congo) is the second largest country (by area, after Algeria) on the African continent, covering over 900,000 square miles of west equatorial Africa. Its territory stretches from the African Great Lakes region to the Gulf of Guinea on the Atlantic coast and as far south as Zambia. Much of its territory includes the Congo Basin, a geographic area where tectonic activity combines with the climatic and topographic environment of the Congo River network to create one of the most ecologically complex areas on the planet.

The rainforest here is called the “second lung of the earth” (along with the Amazon rainforest) for its role in our planet’s atmospheric and climatological health. That metaphor can be extended to the land itself where the Congo River drainage network drags upturned earth down from its headlands in the mountainous slopes of the Western Rift of the Kenya Dome, part of Great Rift Valley, into the Congo Basin, reconstituting its parts through lithification, redistributing nutrient-rich material, and, ultimately, rearranging the earth’s crust and regulating its climate. In the Congo Basin, we have a view of the earth’s anatomy, an interface between the elements that make up its organism, a vital and delicate exposure of its churning life force.



The Congo region of central Africa is home to millions of people who form a linguistically diverse multicultural society with long and unique histories tied to Europe, the Middle East and Asia. The communities who live in this part of the world have long been connected to globalization and transnational exchange —culturally and materially. Western imperialism arrived in the Congo with King Leopold II of Belgium, who, with the complacent affirmation¹ of the United States and Europe, exemplified Western values of possession, wealth, and white supremacy as the absolute ruler. After establishing private authority over what he called the Congo Free State, King

Leopold II was able to preside over an era of Belgian society that saw enhanced social and labor protections and general enrichment at the expense of the inhabitants of the Congo Free State, who were enslaved, brutalized, and murdered. Some reports say that King Leopold II is responsible for the deaths of half of the population of this area during his

1. <https://www.thoughtco.com/berlin-conference-1884-1885-divide-africa-1433556>

Umoja

South Kivu, Democratic Republic of the Congo

reign and the term “crimes against humanity” was coined to describe his activities there. In 1908, under pressure to control human rights abuses, the Belgian government acquired the Congo Free State from him, governing it as a colonial territory until 1960, but the damage of Western intervention continues to this day where chaos has marked efforts to implement a government that adheres to Western principles in spite of its cultural and social complexities.

The exploitation continues, too, even if it has transformed; while the Congo region is no longer under formal imperial control, some of the wealthiest companies in the world—mostly American—profit off of its resources. Imperialism today lives in the batteries of our smartphones, computers, electric cars, etc. In 2019, Apple, Google, Microsoft, Dell, and Tesla “were accused in a lawsuit of being complicit in the deaths of children mining cobalt in the Democratic Republic of the Congo.”² As the companies seek to have the case dismissed, the US Government recently published a list of critically important minerals and a plan to invest in strengthening those supply chains³, including for minerals obtained in the Democratic Republic of the Congo. Even though the DRC is the richest country in the world in terms of mineral wealth, it has the lowest GDP per capita resulting in the world’s most severe individual poverty. Forces of Western capitalism and the legacy of colonialism continue to coincide with ethnic conflict to result in violence in competition for political power, resource control, wealth, and territory.



Even as (or because) many African societies have struggled to adapt after the end of direct colonial rule, innovation has defined that transformation. Mobile money systems, a community-oriented technology that reflects and serves the financial needs and habits of the economically disenfranchised, originates in East Africa and has been predicted to spur significant societal transformation⁴ across East and Sub-Saharan Africa, including in the DRC.⁵ Even though the total impact cannot yet be measured, this has caught the attention of Western finance companies. Disruptive mobile money technologies are improving life for millions of people in Africa and Asia where the technology is being used in ways that people who suffer from structural poverty in the US and other Western countries could benefit from, too.⁶

2. <https://blackenterprise.com/apple-microsoft-sued-congo-cobalt-mine-child-labor-deaths/>

3. <https://pbs.org/newshour/nation/the-u-s-is-worried-about-shortages-of-critical-minerals-for-electric-vehicles-military-tech>

4. <https://www.mckinsey.com/industries/technology-media-and-telecommunications/our-insights/lions-go-digital-the-internets-transformative-potential-in-africa>

5. <https://advances.sciencemag.org/content/7/1/eabc5831>

6. <https://www.vox.com/future-perfect/21420357/kenya-mobile-banking-unbanked-cellphone-money>

Umoja

South Kivu, Democratic Republic of the Congo

Many East African and Sub-Saharan countries also have ideal conditions for cultivating the world's finest coffees. In the Congo, while coffee agriculture declined rapidly during the years of conflict in the Kivus, its resurgence has been led in part by a transition from robusta coffee production to arabica as farmers have learned that well-cultivated specialty coffee commands a premium price in the market. This represents an innovation, too, with the vision and faith to risk the work it takes to produce high quality coffees consistently.

A complex set of challenges, including violence that still lingers on the fringes of life in the Kivus, government corruption, and a lack of infrastructure have made it difficult for Congolese farmers to bring their coffees directly to market. Many coffee farmers in South Kivu make the dangerous journey across Lake Kivu to smuggle coffee into Rwanda for immediate sale. From there, the coffee is absorbed into and re-sold as Rwandan coffee. The growth of specialty coffee agriculture and the growing presence of community-governed cooperatives are contributing to community-directed transitional paths from poverty and violence to stability and growth.

Across the mountains from the Congo's riverhead region, the Umoja coffee is grown in South Kivu, a province extending west from the shore of Lake Kivu on the border between the DRC and Rwanda. In South Kivu and North Kivu (referred to as the "Kivus"), after many years of violent conflict, "coffee is slowly becoming a symbol of economic stability, peace, and prosperity across the country", according to Perfect Daily Grind. We bought the Umoja from Mighty Peace Coffee where Jim Ngokwey is the Managing Partner and when asked if he felt this was an accurate assessment of the coffee industry as a



Umoja

South Kivu, Democratic Republic of the Congo



societal stabilizer, he said that “coffee will play a major role and that’s why we launched Mighty Peace Coffee... While there are many factors driving the conflicts, extreme poverty is the main culprit and that’s why the jobs created and coffee purchased can make a difference in the short and long-term.” Jim believes in peace with every sip and says that every coffee bag purchased through Mighty Peace Coffee makes a direct and tangible impact in the lives of farmers in post-conflict zones.

Jim, who hails from the Democratic Republic of Congo, has been working for several years to understand the economic conditions and business environment in the DRC. In addition to his role at Mighty Peace Coffee, a company that was “born out of the Congolese peace movement by an international team of business leaders, coffee experts and innovators, community organizers and human rights defenders,” he is a co-founder of the Congolese Diaspora Impact Summit and an Advisor to the Sub-Saharan Africa Chamber of Commerce, among many other roles through which he can put his tireless advocacy for Congolese coffee and business to use. One of the founding principles of Mighty Peace Coffee is to reclaim the narrative by building media resources to share stories from Congolese coffee farmers.

Umoja comes from one cooperative with 11,600 mostly small farmers in the Kivus of eastern Congo called Solidarité Paysanne Pour la Promotion des Actions Café et Développement Intégral, which translates into Smallholder Farmer Solidarity to Promote Coffee & Development. Umoja means solidarity in Swahili, and Mighty Peace Coffee uses this name with careful consideration for the solidarity they aim to build across the supply stream from farmers to consumers. Linda Mugaruka, Mighty Peace Coffee’s Chief Quality Officer and Agronomy Engineer works with the Umoja coffee farmers to build the knowledge that will allow them to produce high quality coffee consistently, year after year. Mighty Peace Coffee builds relationships with Umoja farmers to help ensure that the coffee trade results in the maximum economic benefit for them, while gathering stories to help build human connections across political borders, oceans, and cultures.

Coffees in this region are harvested from February to June and September to December. The Umoja is a washed Bourbon grown between 1400-2000 meters above sea level with complex tropical fruit and floral flavors—hibiscus, pomegranate—embedded in sturdy structures of brown sweetness—molasses, brown sugar, and golden raisin. With great awe for the work of Congolese coffee farmers against enormous odds in dangerous conditions, we are proud to be able to offer the Umoja coffee to the Joe community.