

FOCUS

**MINDANAO COFFEE:  
IN THE LAND OF STARBUCKS  
AND 3-IN-1: PHILIPPINE COFFEE  
DESERVES MORE LIMELIGHT**

*Coffee growers in Mindanao are hoping to get a big bite of both the local and global markets.*

Unknown to many, 70 percent of the country's coffee supply now comes from the Mindanao region. While Batangas and Cavite provinces remain major players in the industry, growers in the South have been slowly dominating the market share in the last few years.

In fact, the SOCCSARGEN region is now vying for the title, "Coffee Capital of the Philippines." Soccsargen or Region 12 is comprised of the provinces of South Cotabato, Sarangani, Sultan Kudarat and North Cotabato, along with the cities of General Santos, Koronadal, Taronog, Kidapawan, and Cotabato.

According to a Philippine Information Agency (PIA) report in November 2013, data from the Department of Agriculture (DA) indicate that the region produced 28,502 metric tons (MT) of coffee in 2011, contributing to 30.98 percent of the country's annual production.

In addition, four Mindanao towns received an international certification from the 4C (Common Code for the Coffee Community) Association in 2012, an industry governing body promoting fair trade and sustainable agricultural practices. These are the towns of Sen. Ninoy Aquino, Kalamansig, and Lebak in Sultan Kudarat, and Tagbina in Surigao del Norte. There are currently more than 150 coffee-producing groups in the world whose coffee has been verified to have been produced, processed and traded based on the 4C association's sustainability criteria.

In spite of these accolades and figures, the problem lies within the lack of funding and access to technology.

Pastor Fred Fredeluces, CEO of GreenTropics Coffee Enterprise based in General Santos City, admitted that it may require a lot, but with enough support he is confident in the region's big potential.

"There is a need to increase production per unit area and improve the overall quality of harvested coffee. Technical and financial support is much needed so that the farmers can increase the volume and improve the quality of coffee production," he shares.

The Department of Agriculture Region 12 is hoping to make big changes in the next few years. They have launched programs to educate local farmers and introduce them to new technologies of growing and processing coffee. In November 2013, they held the Mindanao Coffee Producers Congress in General Santos City with resource persons from Nestle Philippines Inc., Benguet State University, Philippine Coffee Board, and Vietnam's Agro-Forestry and Scientific and Technical Institute. It may only be just the beginning, but everybody has to start somewhere.

More than local efforts to lift the industry, producers also hope to attract international investments someday.

"The design for engagement should be on a partnership mode. The international partners may offer the market financing and technology, while the ordinary farmers become local farm managers and producers. The contract shall be crafted based on the fair trade principle."

**RECLAIMING THE GLOBAL MARKET** | The Philippines was once a major coffee producing country, being in fact the fourth largest producer in the world some 200 years ago.

The country's soil condition and climate are perfect

We can rise above the present circumstances and take part in the emerging vibrant coffee industry, not only on the local level but also globally.

photography **CURRENT SWELL COFFEE BREWERY**



**01** HARVESTED COFFEE BEANS CHECKED FOR QUALITY

**02** THE BEFORE AND AFTER COFFEE ROAST

**03** THE ROASTING PROCESS

for producing Arabica, Liberica (Barako), Excelsa and Robusta. Batangas and Cavite originally dominated production, but today provinces like Bukidnon, Benguet, Davao, and South Cotabato produce their own, equally high-grade coffee.

Today, the world's top 5 biggest coffee exporters are Brazil, Vietnam, Colombia, Mexico, and Indonesia, with the Philippines ranking 110th. But given enough support, coffee growers from Mindanao are confident they can get higher on that list.

“There is a need to advocate and campaign for more coffee planting because most of the trees planted during the “glory days” of coffee in the Philippines were cut down and replaced with other traditional crops like corn. There is also a need to campaign for the consumption and patronage of locally produced coffee over imported ones, and stabilize the buying price of coffee beans,” Mr. Fredeluces says.

He also suggests that the government agencies

supporting the industry should be part of crafting a “coffee roadmap,” to synergize efforts in supporting the coffee producers.

Majority of local coffee producers are dependent on big companies that buy the beans and process them into instant coffee products. What Mr. Fredeluces and other small and medium-sized coffee producers hope to achieve is to improve production and stabilize marketing of locally produced coffee products.

“The farmers have to open their eyes and see the opportunities. They need to transform themselves from mere producers into entrepreneurs. I believe that we can rise above the present circumstances and take part in the emerging vibrant coffee industry, not only on the local level but also globally.

Then maybe, just maybe, Filipino coffee drinkers would soon be lining up to buy their Macchiato and Mocha Frap from locally produced coffee beans. A nice thought, indeed. — (GG)