

Coffee in Sierra Leone

This Insights leaflet provides an overview of coffee production in Sierra Leone, which is mostly poor quality and low yielding. There are opportunities to target more niche, specialised markets and these are outlined here.



Industry snapshot

Coffee continues to be promoted as an important crop for Sierra Leone. However, it has been in long-term decline since the years before the civil war when exports peaked at around 20,000 tonnes per year. Only 2,000–3,000 tonnes are now available and there is no indication that this decline is being reversed. An important reason that coffee is still exported at all is that it is a source of foreign exchange and is produced by many of the same farmers growing cocoa and is thus available and bought by many of the same traders buying the cocoa.

While a small amount of the rare *Stenophylla* coffee variety has been found in Sierra Leone,¹ as well as *Liberica*, the commercial trade is in *Robusta*. *Robusta* is a relatively low-quality coffee in comparison to *Arabica* and

commercial production is built on the higher yields that can be achieved. However, in Sierra Leone yields are very low (circa 375 kgs/ha – competitors achieve over 900 kgs) and quality is also very poor. All processing is done by sun drying on-farm with little use of milling equipment, and farmers using mortar and pestle for hulling the parchment. Traditional sun drying is always challenging in terms of delivering quality, and in Sierra Leone the process is far from ideal. This results in low prices which are much less attractive for farmers than cocoa.

Sierra Leonean coffee does not access markets through any direct links to specialty segments (this is more difficult for *Robusta* in any case) and is sold at the bottom end of the commodity market. There are several local roasters, such as Coffee Couriers which processes around 2 tonnes per annum. Aromatic Coffee and Nina's Coffee² also serve the local market.



What would it take?

Mainstream commodity market

A reboot of large-scale investment from the public and private sectors would be required in order to significantly grow production and export of Robusta coffee for the international commodity market. Planting material is not available and there is no institutional capacity to train producers in husbandry and processing. Farmers would struggle to access finance for the investment required and, as with other tree crops, would need to be supported by donors and/or government. Traders would need to gear up for a larger scale of operation and would need to establish linkages with a wider range of buyers.

Niche

To develop rare varieties, partnerships would be required between specialist coffee houses, very experienced coffee agronomists, a group of farmers and probably a donor to cover some of the research and development costs that would be incurred for many years before any revenue could be realised.

For the local market, there should be scope for more local entrepreneurs to work with farmers to buy coffee, process and roast it, and sell it to consumers in Freetown and other urban areas. There would probably be a small export market for locally produced coffee products if they were well packaged and distributed. Sierra Leonean coffee has been available as a “single origin” coffee outside the country in the past.

The opportunity

In theory, Sierra Leone could expand production for the mainstream Robusta market but with so many challenges and the lack of comparative advantage against other crops, this should not be a priority.

There are, however, several niche opportunities where small-scale success could be achieved:

- **Propagation of Liberica and Stenophylla** (currently only 15 trees) varieties. *Stenophylla* was cupped with good results, and is comparable to Arabica in quality. There could be a niche market for these rare varieties for coffee enthusiasts.
- **“Fine” Robusta could be a market option.** However, current processing practices are very far from what would be required in terms of protocols and infrastructure. Even if quality is improved to a level of “fine” marketable Robusta, this market is not guaranteed with other important Robusta origins, even in Africa (i.e. Uganda), due to competitors with more advanced market linkages.
- **Expansion of small-scale, branded products** for the local market.

¹ Davis, A.P., Gargiulo, R., Fay, M.F., Sarmu, D. and Hagggar, J. (2020) Lost and Found: *Coffea stenophylla* and *C. affinis*, the Forgotten Coffee Crop Species of West Africa. *Frontiers in Plant Science*. 11:616. <https://www.frontiersin.org/articles/10.3389/fpls.2020.00616/full>.
² Nina’s Coffee: ninascoffee.com

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Contact Invest Salone

Invest Salone has been working with a range of stakeholders in the coffee sector and is in an ideal position to facilitate introductions. Please contact us if you would like more information.
enquiries@investsalone.com | investsalone.com

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