



*It's all in the bean. Artisan Coffee Imports sells only specialty grade, single-origin decaffeinated green coffee to roasters.*

# Resilient Coffee

**Out of that cup of decaf came a new career for Church.**

by Zinta Aistars

*“There are good efforts around the world to help coffee farmers live a sustainable and, yes, resilient life.”*

Mention the buzz word “sustainability,” and many think first of the environment and of ecologically responsible living. What percolates first in the mind of Ruth Ann Church '86 when she hears “sustainability” is economics. And then—coffee.

“Actually, the word we are using more today is resilience,” Church says. “It’s a broader concept, and we need that now that we are dealing with climate change. In the 90s, we talked about fair trade, but now we talk resilience—about how the coffee farmer

needs to respond and adapt to climate change and cope with the price volatility in the coffee market.”

Church sips a cup of coffee, a wisp of steamy fragrance rising from the cup. It’s decaffeinated.

“I’m a high-energy person who doesn’t need caffeine,” she smiles. “I just love the taste and smell of coffee.”

Out of that cup of decaf came a new career for Church.

“I started my career in international development. Due to



*A worker on a small coffee farm in Rwanda.*



*Sorting coffee beans.*



Ruth Ann Church '86 enjoys a cup of decaf.

family reasons, I had to leave that work for about 20 years. I worked as a marketer in the packaging industry and then provided technical assistance to manufacturers in the Midwest. In 2007, I was invited to a Specialty Coffee Association of America (SCAA) trade show by a friend who owns a coffee company—and I just knew I had to start my own company. I have always preferred decaffeinated coffee. It just didn't taste as good as some regular coffees. So I took a class on decaffeination at SCAA and learned that there is no reason for decaf coffee to taste bad. Just like regular coffee, if you take care throughout the entire supply chain, the quality can be just as good. But no one was doing this!"

Church had found her niche. Artisan Coffee Imports, founded

in 2009, is based in Ann Arbor, where Church and her family live when not in Rwanda. The roasters to whom the company supplies great-tasting decaffeinated green coffee are primarily out of state. Church also operates as a consultant to non-governmental organizations (NGOs) that are concerned about making the coffee supply chain more resilient. The company mission is to trade coffee in sustainable and resilient ways that improve the lives of coffee farmers while making great-tasting, green decaffeinated coffee possible for every craft-roaster.

"My main market is on the East and West Coasts," Church says, "and I'm working now on growing the market in the Midwest. The big coffee companies buy cheaper beans than the smaller, craft coffee roasters because decaf coffee is currently only about 10 to 15 percent of the coffee market. That fact and the added process to make decaf ends up adding cost to the buyer. The big companies don't want to deal with that."

Church's "smaller company" would deal with that in an equitable way. Church is pursuing a master's degree, her second, in community sustainability at Michigan State University. The more she has learned about the stories behind the small coffee farmers, the more inspired she has become to make a difference—and not only in producing better-tasting decaf coffee.

"I was inspired by how an MSU professor helped Rwandan widows after the genocide in Rwanda," Church says. "He helped them focus on coffee farming, which had been decimated by the genocide. I wanted to learn from him ways to use coffee to achieve economic development."

Church traveled to Rwanda with a delegation from MSU, then made a return trip with her husband and two of her three children for a nine-month stay in Kigali.

"I hope to grow my business while learning more about the coffee trade here," Church says.

Church talks about the different world she has stepped into—and how Kalamazoo College prepared her for where she is today. "Oh, I'm very sure that my confidence to take on something like this—the career development, learning new languages, going abroad—came from those same elements of the *K-Plan*." And how did the kids feel about this remnant of their mom's undergraduate education?

"When I brought up spending nine months in Rwanda, they freaked out," Church chuckles. Her son Isaac is 17 and her daughter Naomi is 11. "Eleven and a half," Naomi insists. Isaac said he was willing to go for three months, not nine. He said he could learn all he needed to know about Rwanda in three. "We've been here nearly five months now—no complaints. He loves the soccer team at school here. And Naomi thinks it's cool. Not many kids their ages are able to experience something like this."

Church is pleased about a volunteer role she found in her new home town. She assists with a newly formed group, single mothers who are HIV-positive who have decided to empower themselves economically.

She says, "It's a savings group. The women get together once a week and contribute the equivalent of 75 cents, to accumulate over one year. It's a chance to get ahead. My first master's degree was in

micro-lending so I relish this opportunity to see 'up close' how a group works."

Church is keenly focused on the connection between coffee and economics. Coffee, she stresses, is always grown around the equator, where some of the poorest and least developed countries can be found. Yet coffee, especially the higher quality craft coffees, is consumed primarily by the wealthy in developed countries.

"And coffee farms are not usually set up as large plantations," she says. "There are 25 million small coffee farmers in the world. With Artisan Coffee Imports I want to help achieve development for these farmers."

Church's part involves creating a streamlined supply chain from small grower to roaster to brewer, especially for decaffeinated coffee. The coffee drinker plays a role too.

"Your purchasing decisions do make a difference," she says. "There are good efforts around the world to help coffee farmers live a sustainable and, yes, resilient life. And, yes, I would encourage you to find a Rwandan coffee and try it!"

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One of 25 million small coffee farms in Rwanda

