

## Michael Gehrken, Arusha

---

*German settlers first began planting coffee on the slopes of Oldeani, one of the volcanoes of the rift valley, in 1926. This particular farm was started in 1931, confiscated from its German owners by the British at the start of World War Two, and later given to a Scotsman as a war prize. He named the estate 'Blackburn', meaning 'dark water' in Gaelic. In 1960, Michael Gerhken's mother was travelling in East Africa and went to a party at the Blackburn estate. When she found out the farm was for sale, she started negotiating immediately, and his parents finally bought the farm the next year.*



Tina and Michael Gehrken  
with their parchment coffee

“When my parents bought the farm in 1961 there were seventy-two hectares of coffee, and now we have 103 hectares, with 170,000 trees. We employ 138 people from the local village to work on the farm.

I didn't come to East Africa myself until 1971 when I was nineteen, but it was love at first sight! I soon had to return to Germany, however, to start my apprenticeship at the bank of Paderborn. After two years at the bank I wanted to go to university to study art, but my father wouldn't allow it. He'd only let me study law, economics or construction, so I went off to university in Berlin to study economics, and by 1982, I had finished my studies and was looking for something else to do.

From the early 70s my brother had been in charge of the family farm, but the economic policies and politics of the time made it hard to succeed, and by the early 1980s the farm was run into the ground. I decided to take over management of the farm from my brother, and live here and renovate it. In 1983 when I first moved here the farm had no car, no generator, no tractor and no fridge. There was a lot of wildlife around and it was impossible to recognise the coffee trees because they were completely overgrown.

In the beginning, we lived off our arable crops. I wasn't really interested in growing coffee then because the government controlled the sale of coffee: all the beans were pooled and a farmer could not reap any reward for producing a better quality crop. Although we always had coffee trees, it was not until the government freed the market and made coffee a reasonable investment that it began to interest me economically. Up until 1988, coffee farmers hardly owned a tree, never mind a crop.

In 1988, however, things began to change. Coffee was still pooled by association but was separated by grower, meaning that the association paid the grower a bonus if his beans fetched a higher price. By 1997, the money from the auction could be paid to individual coffee growers and not just to associations, and farmers were allowed to sell directly to a trader. By 1999, we could earn foreign currency for coffee, and by 2003 I was attending the coffee auction to meet traders, and since 2005, we have been able to directly export our coffee.

And we have been able to produce high quality coffee: four years ago samples of Blackburn coffee were entered into a competition in Central America and our coffee attracted the interest of Starbucks and other international roasters. We went on to win national and international competitions and we are now a supplier for Starbucks<sup>1</sup>.

My advice to other coffee farmers would be to specialise and to grow coffee in a healthy environment, because if you have a healthy environment you have healthy coffee. Coffee farmers should try to restore the environment and replant indigenous species. Here eighty per cent of our land is reserved for nature and we have planted thousands of indigenous trees to encourage birds, wildlife and beneficial insects. At Blackburn, we are very close to producing organic coffee. We no longer use insecticides and the only chemical we use is against coffee berry disease (CBD). Now we hear that a new bio-fungicide has been developed against CBD which we want to try.

A coffee farm like this is sustainable, and our coffee is differentiated not only by taste but also by our story of ecologically responsible farming. Our most famous coffee is Elephant Kinjia (elephant trail), so-called because elephants were walking through the farm and destroying our coffee trees. We made a trail for them, not knowing if they would really use it, but they did and still do. Living with wildlife is not always easy, though: a leopard took my wife's favourite horse in broad daylight only last year.

My last piece of advice would be not to put all your eggs in one basket, or, as we say in German, do not put all your weight on one leg. In other words, have something other than coffee or farming to fall back on!"

---

<sup>1</sup> Blackburn Estate won awards from the Tanzania Coffee Association in 2004 and 2005, and the Eastern African Fine Coffees Association 2005 Taste of Harvest prize. It also won a Black Apron award from Starbucks: see <http://www.starbucks.com/aboutus/farmstories.asp>