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BARRY ESTABROOK THE BITTER AND THE SWEET

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The best coffee in the world is expensive; for one man who grows it, the cost has been too high.

igh on the Grand Ridge of Jamaica's Blue Mountains, objects have a way of emerging from the mist only to vanish. Dirty whiteness darkens and for a moment becomes a human, a shrub, a fence post. Then nothing. Percy McLarty, a foreman at Old Tavern Coffee Estate, points with his cutlass toward a ragged stand of juniper cedars. "One afternoon, Mark told me he was going to build his house there. That night they killed him." As he gestures, the trees disappear, and I'm left with the impression that McLarty is trying to slash through the mist.

I had come to the Blue Mountains to talk to Mark's father, Alex Twyman, the owner of Old Tavern Coffee Estate. Twyman has been instrumental in changing the way Blue Mountain coffee is processed, marketed, and sold. He has helped restore the reputation of one of the world's most valuable coffees, a vital export crop for a struggling country. But he has also made some powerful enemies.

At 71, Twyman has a couple of decades on me, but I can't keep up with him as he makes the morning rounds of his farm. My Vibram treads are useless against the slick mud of the path, and several times I feel my feet sliding out from under me. Twyman trots ahead, a shaggy, frayed figure in a hooded sweatshirt, bony, agile, and unfazed as his rubber boots find invisible toeholds. Suddenly, we come upon two women wearing cardigans and kerchiefs. Their singsong chatter sets the tune as they strip ripe coffee berries from the trees and drop them into plastic pails. Twyman plucks a berry. It's the size and shape of a Kalamata olive but has the color and feel of a ripe Bing cherry. When I bite into it, the taut skin resists for an instant before my teeth encounter a faintly sweetish layer of flesh, stopping against the mucilaginous coating of the bean. "It's the weather that makes Blue Mountain coffee the best," says Twyman. "The cold and fog mean the berries stay longer on the trees, so they develop sweetness."

While Twyman concentrates on growing and processing quality beans, Dorothy, his wife of 42 years, is responsible for operating a pair of commercial coffee roasters in a small room off their kitchen. The aroma of her handiwork saturates the mist and becomes almost dizzying.

Until 1997, what Dorothy does would have been criminal. By law, all Blue Mountain coffee beans had to be sold unprocessed to the Coffee Industry Board of Jamaica or to one of a handful of processors licensed by the board. Established in 1950, the board was intended to bring order to a chaotic system in which hundreds of middlemen purchased beans from farmers and sold them to a group of exporters who paid little or no attention to quality or consistency. But what started out as a good thing eventually metastasized into a bureaucratic monopoly.

Twyman invites me to sit in the front room on a well-worn easy chair, the only piece of furniture not cluttered with books, papers, and coffee-brewing paraphernalia. He pours us each a cup. I take a sip. There's no doubt that this is something special: hints of wine and spice, subtle but deep and complex. I understand why Kenneth Davids, writing in *Coffee Review*, praised it as "a quintessentially balanced, classic, Caribbean cup."

A British expat who could have stepped out of a Graham Greene plot, Twyman makes an improbable Jamaican hero. His self-assurance borders on arrogance, particularly when something is not done precisely the way he would do it himself. He micromanages every aspect of production, from the medium in which seeds are planted to the plastic bags in which the roasted beans are packaged. When he



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scolds an employee who picks a less than ripe berry, he does it with a British schoolmaster's brusqueness. Gone-wild eyebrows flare up to meet a tousled shock of gray hair, and the simplest pleantry launches him on a 20-minute harangue about his obsession, delivered in clipped echoes of a Cockney accent. When he's not in the pulping shed or the nursery, he is patrolling his land behind the wheel of an ancient, mud-sparkled Land Rover in the company of a shepherd-hound cross with a reputation for ferocity.

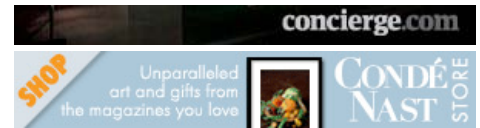
In the world of Blue Mountain coffee, it is difficult to find anyone who doesn't respect what Twyman has accomplished. Old Tavern Coffee Estate began as a hobby. Twyman, a working-class Londoner from the city's East End, emigrated to Jamaica in the late 1950s to work as a construction estimator. On weekends, Twyman, Dorothy, and their four children escaped from Kingston's grit, congestion, and crime to a frame cottage perched in a landscape of rain-forested mountains and cascading waterfalls.

As part of a government program to increase production, Twyman accepted the coffee board's offer to plant a few trees on his land. "I told them I didn't know coffee from citrus," he says. "They said it didn't matter. They'd help look after them for five years. But after five years, I knew a lot more than they did."

He knew, for instance, that coffee could flourish without the use of massive amounts of fungicide, pesticide, and chemical fertilizers. Seeing brown crevasses in his neighbors' fields where topsoil had washed away following applications of herbicide, Twyman decided to control his weeds with that all-purpose Jamaican tool, the cutlass. Composted chicken manure was his fertilizer. He was proud that his farm was 75 percent organic, and that his coffee shared space with giant tree ferns and ancient mahoe trees, their branches crowded with spiky bromeliads, wild orchids, and dangling strands of old-man's beard. Mauve and pink wild impatiens grew in solid blankets between his coffee bushes. The thrum of hummingbirds' wings filled the air.

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Twyman's 12-acre weekend refuge grew into a 140-acre farm providing full-time employment for 30 villagers. His hobby had become a raging passion. His coffee, he came to believe, was special. It had a character all its own, a distinctiveness that came from the soil, the microclimate, and the way he raised it — what the French call *terroir*. "In France, you have regional appellations, and within the appellations there are individual estates," says Twyman. "I felt that Blue Mountain should be like an appellation. Within the region, estates should be able to sell their own coffee under their own labels." The board, however, wouldn't hear of it. "After the berries left my hands, I hadn't the vaguest notion of what the board did to them. You can grow the finest coffee beans in the world and ruin their flavor in twenty-four hours."

Twyman began to investigate the activities of the board with the same stubbornness and eye to detail he brought to growing his coffee. A loophole that allowed board-approved operations located in the Blue Mountains to sell all the coffee they processed as Blue Mountain even if it had actually been grown elsewhere in the country particularly galled him. That loophole was eventually closed. And after poring over the board's financial statements, he concluded that Jamaican growers were receiving only a third of the proceeds of the board's export revenues. "There was a fortune being made from Blue Mountain coffee," says Twyman. But it wasn't being made by the farmers. In a good year, he broke even. The thousands of smallholders who grew the bulk of Blue Mountain coffee could barely scratch out a living.

Twyman would not abandon his dream of selling his own estate-grown coffee. After repeatedly being turned down by the board, Twyman countered by initiating a one-man boycott. He refused to sell his coffee, period. But he stubbornly continued to farm, trucking beans to his house in Kingston, drying them on its flat roof, and warehousing them.

Twyman's lonely war of attrition gathered speed when his son Mark returned home from England after earning a doctorate in chemistry, bringing his Oxonian diplomatic skills and capacity for hard work to the fray, lugging gunnysacks of coffee one day, sitting across from bureaucrats in air-conditioned offices the next, teaching school in his spare time. "I'm going to give Jamaica my best shot," Mark wrote his friends. "Idealistic tomfoolery...Or inspired? I don't know." The board, finally acknowledging that things would have to change, agreed that Twyman's appellation model was worthwhile and granted him a license to sell coffee.

Returning from work on July 9, 1997, Mark, 34 years old with an eight-months-pregnant wife, was ambushed by two gunmen. They shot him five times in the back and then fired once into his heart at point-blank range. Was it a coincidence that Mark was murdered on the very day his father received official permission to sell his own coffee?

Mark's murder remains unsolved; it merited only a small paragraph in the Kingston paper. Family and friends scattered his ashes on the land where he had intended to build his house. Eulogizing Mark in the *Times* of London, his friend the journalist Tunku Varadarajan wrote, "We will, I hope, toast him in coffee, the drink for which he gave his life."

Today, a half-dozen other Jamaican producers have licenses to sell their own coffee. Graham Dunkley, the newly appointed director general of the board, speaks of the "seismic change" in the Jamaican coffee industry. "I see my role as that of brand manager for Jamaica Blue Mountain coffee," he says. He is also a consumer watchdog, prosecuting unscrupulous dealers who try to sell inferior beans under the Blue Mountain name.



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Alex and Dorothy spend most of their evenings alone in their cramped cottage, roasting and packaging beans, which they sell directly on their Web site (oldtaaverncoffee.com) and to a handful of North American wholesalers. Twyman, so voluble on other subjects, volunteers nothing about Mark's death, though it's hard not to feel his presence—photos of Mark's son on the desk, a leatherbound copy of Mark's Ph.D. dissertation on a bookshelf. As our coffee cups empty, I ask Twyman why he fought for so long and gave up so much. "I suppose I'm just bloody-minded," he says, after a pause.

He gazes out the window like a man surveying his realm, but whatever he sees is in his mind's eye. It's almost dark, and the mist has reappeared, obliterating everything. With uncharacteristic softness, he says, "I wouldn't do it again."

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