

# BLACK GOLD

## WAKE UP AND SMELL THE COFFEE

By Nick Francis and Marc Francis



Multinational companies have made coffee the second most valuable trading commodity in the world. But as westerners revel in designer lattes, impoverished Ethiopian coffee growers suffer the bitter taste of injustice. Tracing one man's fight for a fair price, BLACK GOLD is an eye-opening expose of the eighty-billion-dollar coffee industry.





## FROM THE FILMMAKER

### WHY BLACK GOLD?

We were provoked to make a film about coffee after it was announced at the end of 2002 that Ethiopia was facing another famine. Twenty years earlier in 1984, people across the world had been motivated to respond to this crisis by giving aid. The difference this time was that coffee farmers were being caught up in this new food crisis while the global coffee industry was booming.

We wanted to urgently remind audiences that through just one cup of coffee, we are inextricably connected to the livelihoods of millions of people around the world who are struggling to survive.

Coffee is a universal experience enjoyed by billions of people on a daily basis and is part of an industry worth over \$80 billion a year. But the people behind the product are in crisis with millions of growers fast becoming bankrupt. Nowhere more evident is this paradox than in Ethiopia, the birthplace of coffee.

Our hope was to make a film that forced us, as western consumers, to question some of our basic assumptions about our consumer lifestyle and its interaction with the rest of the world.

### BLACK GOLD - WAKE UP AND SMELL THE COFFEE

We passionately believe that the language of film is a uniquely powerful medium to communicate to audiences everywhere about an engaging and timely issue that has an impact on the world in which we live. This has been the underlying theme of all of our work. But with BLACK GOLD, we were even more determined to make a film that would reach audiences everywhere and be relevant for all people.

From the beginning we wanted to make a film which, while having a political purpose, was not overly polemic; a film which was observational - giving the viewer the opportunity to draw their own conclusions about what they are experiencing.

In making the film we also wanted to challenge the portrayal of Africa often characterised in the Western media by an overload of de-contextualised images depicting poverty with no link to our own lives.

Nick Francis and Marc Francis



## THE FILM

Coffee is now an \$80 billion industry, the most valuable trading commodity in the world after oil. But while consumers continue to pay several dollars for lattes and cappuccinos, the price paid to coffee farmers remains so low that many have been forced to abandon their coffee fields.

Nowhere is this paradox more evident than in Ethiopia, the birthplace of coffee. Tadesse Meskela represents a union of 74 Ethiopian coffee farming co-ops. His one-man mission is to save the 70,000 struggling members from bankruptcy and, in some cases, starvation. **BLACK GOLD** shadows Tadesse as he travels the world in an attempt to find buyers willing to pay a fair price.

Against the backdrop of Meskela's journey to London and Seattle, the enormous power of the multinational players that dominate the world's coffee trade becomes apparent. New York commodity traders, the international coffee exchanges and the double dealings of trade ministers at the World Trade Organization reveal the many challenges Tadesse faces in his quest for a long term solution for his farmers.

Audiences are also challenged. Meskela and the filmmakers ask viewers to learn more about where their coffee comes from and to think deeply about the impact of individual purchasing choices. Ultimately, **BLACK GOLD**'s thought-provoking story demands that viewers not take coffee, or the people who farm it, for granted.

## BACKGROUND INFORMATION

### Ethiopia

The Eastern African nation of Ethiopia is just under twice the size of Texas. Approximately 57 percent of its 75 million citizens are illiterate and the average life expectancy is under 50. Eighty percent of the labor force works in agriculture, a livelihood often made tenuous by recurrent droughts and poor access to water. This is further compounded by distorted prices for agricultural commodities on the global market.

Ethiopia is the oldest independent country in Africa and one of the oldest in the world. Its monarchy dates back 2,000 years and, except for a short period of Italian occupation during World War II, the nation maintained its freedom from European colonial rule.

Between 1930 and 1974, Ethiopia was governed by Emperor Haile Selassie. In 1974 he was deposed by a military junta that established a socialist state. That regime was overthrown in 1991. In 1994 the country adopted a constitution and a year later held its first multiparty elections. In Ethiopia, land is owned by the government, which grants leases and permits for use.



### Statistics from BLACK GOLD

- Ethiopia is the largest producer of coffee in Africa. Over 15 million Ethiopians depend on coffee for their survival. Coffee provides approximately 67 percent of Ethiopia's export revenue.
- The Ethiopian coffee farmer receives between 1-4 Birr (20-50 cents) for a kilo of coffee. In the West, retail coffee consumers pay 2,000 Birr (\$230) for that same kilo.
- Globally, more than two billion cups of coffee are consumed every day.
- Since 1990, retail sales from coffee have increased from \$30 billion to \$80 billion a year.
- The world coffee market is dominated by four multinational corporations: Kraft, Nestle, Proctor & Gamble and Sara Lee.
- The international price of coffee is established by commodity trading exchanges in New York and London. In many years, coffee has been the second most actively traded commodity in the world.
- Ethiopian women who pick through coffee beans to ensure that no bad beans are shipped out earn less than 50 cents a day for eight hours of work.
- Seven million people in Ethiopia are dependent on emergency food aid every year. The United Nations Development Programme estimates Ethiopia's population at 75.6 million people.
- Over the last 20 years, Africa's share of world trade has fallen to one percent. If that share could be raised to two percent, it would generate \$70 billion a year—five times the amount the continent now receives in aid.
- Coffee is widely believed to have originated in Ethiopia. The coffee ceremony is a sacred Ethiopian tradition and can take up to several hours. The beans are roasted and then ground by hand. The coffee is prepared in a special pot and poured into special cups. In many parts of Ethiopia, the coffee ceremony takes place up to three times per day.
- Ethiopia is the sixth largest producer of coffee in the world and the largest African producer and exporter.

## THINKING MORE DEEPLY

### Coffee and Coffee Farmers

- Tadesse Meskela says, “Our hope is that one day, the consumer will understand what he is drinking.” What did you learn from BLACK GOLD about the coffee you drink?
- Would you consider Tadesse Meskela a hero? Why or why not?
- What do you think is the best way to help Ethiopian coffee farmers? What action could you take? What action could your elected representatives take? What actions could the businesses in your community take?
- In the U.S., high-quality, Fair Trade coffee is priced competitively to other high-quality, specialty coffees. Since the price that consumers pay for their coffee is not dependant on whether farmers get a fair price or not, why do you think that consumers continue to buy non-Fair Trade coffee?
- Critics of Fair Trade argue that the Fair Trade price has been set too low. Fair Trade advocates argue that it guarantees a minimum price and creates a transparent chain from consumer to producer. Who do you agree with and why?
- Two months from now, what do you think you will remember most from this film and why?

### Trade Policies

- Who is best served by the current reliance on “C” commodity market trading to set the price of coffee?
- What does the film suggest about the relationship between trade in illicit drugs and current trade policy? In what ways do U.S. efforts to combat drug trafficking address this relationship? In what ways does U.S. policy ignore this relationship?
- Whose responsibility is it to ensure that coffee growers are paid enough to feed, clothe, house, educate and meet the basic medical needs of their families? What responsibility, if any, does the end consumer have? What about retailers or roasters? How about governments or organizations like the WTO, International Monetary Fund and World Bank? Or the farmers, themselves? In your view, which groups are best meeting their responsibilities?
- Why do you think the representatives from developing nations were frustrated at the WTO meeting? Do you think U.S. Trade Representative Robert Zoellick’s characterization of “can do” countries and “won’t do” (with “the harsh rhetoric of the ‘won’t do’ overwhelming the concerted efforts of the ‘can do’”) countries is fair? Why or why not?

### Aid to Ethiopia

- What are the benefits and drawbacks of U.S. food aid to Ethiopians?
- What explanations have you heard for Ethiopian poverty? How does the film challenge and/or confirm those explanations?



## SUGGESTIONS FOR ACTION

Together with other audience members, brainstorm actions that you might take as an individual and that people might do as a group. If you need help getting started, you might begin your list with these suggestions:

- The first step begins with you! Commit to purchasing Fair Trade products yourself. Visit [www.fairtradecertified.org](http://www.fairtradecertified.org) to learn about where you can find Fair Trade in your neighborhood.
- Conduct a consumer information campaign designed to increase demand for Fair Trade products. Let people know where they can purchase Fair Trade products in your community.
- Educate yourself on Fair Trade certification and research the policies of other independent coffee roasters in the United States who pay farmers a higher price but do not operate within the International Fair Trade Criteria. Find out what the difference in benefits is to coffee farmers.
- Educate yourself on the various multinational coffee companies operating in the U.S. and find out why there is no presence of multinationals from Ethiopia.
- Tadesse Meskela hopes that coffee consumers will ask the people from whom they purchase to sell Fair Trade coffees. Do a Fair Trade product "scavenger hunt" at the store(s) where you buy your coffee. Work with store managers to increase shelf space for Fair Trade products. Visit [www.checkoutfairtrade.com](http://www.checkoutfairtrade.com) for resources.
- Start with what you know! Campaign to bring Fair Trade coffee, tea and other products to your workplace, your school or your congregation.
- Find out what subsidies the U.S. government currently pays to farmers. Study how those subsidies affect global agricultural trade. Share your conclusions with policy makers. Visit [www.makefairtrade.com](http://www.makefairtrade.com) for tools and resources.
- Hold an educational forum on Ethiopia. Be sure to include information that counters stereotypes of Africans as helpless. Consider contacting local community-based organizations that work with the Ethiopian community for guest speakers.
- Arrange for a panel discussion on the impact of globalization, U.S. trade policy and the World Trade Organization, International Monetary Fund and World Bank on the economies of countries like Ethiopia.
- Ethiopia is attempting to trademark its coffee names, which could generate more than \$80 million per year for Ethiopian coffee farmers. Find out how you can support this initiative by visiting [www.oxfamamerica.org](http://www.oxfamamerica.org).

For additional outreach ideas, visit [itvs.org](http://itvs.org), the website of the Independent Television Service. For local information, check the website of your PBS station.

Before you leave this event, commit yourself to pursue one item from the brainstorm list.

## RESOURCES FOR FURTHER STUDY & ACTION

### To Start

<http://www.blackgoldmovie.com/> - The official website of the film includes a forum, production notes, background information and related links for people interested in taking action.

<http://www.oromiacoffeeunion.org/> - The website of the union of farmers cooperatives represented by Tadesse Meskela.

### Fair Trade and the Global Economy

<http://www.transfairusa.org/> - The website of the organization that certifies Fair Trade products includes a detailed explanation of Fair Trade and other global market practices that promote social justice.

<http://www.oxfamamerica.org/coffee> - International relief and development organization Oxfam has created tools including Just Add Justice, a Fair Trade Tool Kit to help you get started in your community.

<http://www.checkoutfairtrade.com> - Oxfam and Co-op America have teamed up to bring Fair Trade products to supermarket shelves around the US. Visit this website to learn how you can get involved!

<http://www.maketrade.com> - Global trade could be a force for poverty reduction, but the current rules of trade are rigged in favor of rich countries. Learn about how global trade rules impact poor people around the world and how you can influence policy makers so that trade can be a positive force for poverty reduction.

<http://www.globalexchange.org/campaigns/fairtrade/> - The website of Global Exchange, a human rights organization, contains detailed explanations of Fair Trade and how it fits into the global economy, as well as links to related organizations, resources and Fair Trade products for sale.

<http://www.wto.org/> - The official website of the World Trade Organization includes information on the structure of the organization, how it makes decisions and its general policies.

**BLACK GOLD WILL AIR NATIONALLY ON THE EMMY AWARD-WINNING PBS SERIES *INDEPENDENT LENS* ON TUESDAY, APRIL 10, 2007 AT 10 PM. CHECK LOCAL LISTINGS.**

**BLACK GOLD was produced by Fulcrum Productions/Speak-it Films. The Emmy Award-winning series *Independent Lens* is jointly curated by ITVS and PBS and is funded by the Corporation for Public Broadcasting (CPB) with additional funding provided by PBS and the National Endowment for the Arts.**

**ITVS COMMUNITY is the national community engagement program of the Independent Television Service. ITVS COMMUNITY works to leverage the unique and timely content of the Emmy Award-winning PBS series *Independent Lens* to build stronger connections among leading organizations, local communities and public television stations around key social issues and create more opportunities for civic engagement and positive social change. To find out more about ITVS COMMUNITY, visit [www.itvs.org/outreach](http://www.itvs.org/outreach).**

