

**After water, coffee is the most consumed drink worldwide. In the Philippines, coffee is more than that. It is a high-value crop grown mainly by small farmers. The small town of Atok in Benguet province gets its name from the local phrase nay patok shi chontog (“on the mountain top”).**

**Growing coffee has since become a common backyard practice. Coffee often shares space with other plants in a farmer’s yard like alnus, avocado, and sayote. Coffee has also become associated with certain cultural practices. When a man marries in Atok, he is expected to plant coffee trees around his new house. More than being a morning beverage, coffee means healthy living, something to serve to visitors, fostering good relationships and, most important, signifies dignity and honor.**

**Atok is slowly gaining a reputation for its splendid Arabica coffee variety. Today the town grows four types, namely Arabica typica, red bourbon, yellow catura and granica. Its local brand is Atokape, roasted and packed in the town by the Atok Arabica Coffee Growers Marketing Cooperative (ACoGMaC).**

**It started in 1995 as the Atok Coffee Growers Association with 30 members. It went into hiatus for some years, and returned in 2009 with its new and expanded name. Today the cooperative has 237 individual members. The Cooperative now supplies green coffee beans—those that will be for roasting—to key coffee producers such as Gourmet Café in Cavite and Café Kalsada in Manila.**

**Coffee-growing is an important source of livelihood in the Cordillera. To sustain it, the Cooperative has helped raise the buying price of green coffee beans, which middlemen had controlled for so long. Now the cooperative consolidates all the available beans in the area, fetching for each member a price of PhP180 per kilo per ton as against Php120 per kilo by retail. One of its prime buyers is the ECHOstore, also a PEF partner in scaling up the coffee industry.**

**The cooperative sees several challenges, however. Private traders remain a strong competition. Some traders would come up to a farmer and offer to pick up the farmer’s green beans in exchange for cash. “We cannot compete with that,” says Oliver Odiem, the cooperative manager. “We can’t blame farmers who need cash for their daily expenses.” Another challenge for ACOGMAC is on how to capitalize on its being a homegrown Cordillera enterprise so it can profit from traders’ growing preference for green, rather than roast coffee. This will open the cooperative to opportunities in the coffee industry beyond Cordillera. Pests like stem borers and berry borers are also a potential threat. Odiem says that pests could be managed better by the timely pruning of shade trees. This can also increase yields. A coffee tree can produce about 200 grams of green beans but it could produce 2 kilos if pruned. Coffee growers should learn good growing practices, including pruning, capping and fertilizing, Odiem says. Yet another challenge is to encourage young people to go into coffee farming. Not too many young people want to pursue coffee farming because the process is long and backbreaking.**

As the old generation struggles to pass on its coffee growing culture to the new generation, more people in Atok are now optimistic that producing coffee, despite its problems and challenges, is becoming a rewarding proposition to Atok’s indigenous population. Perhaps, all it will take is a bit of re-framing: this good old cup of coffee could be seen as a potential pot of gold.