

# STRONG BLACK COFFEE



# WHY AREN'T AFRICAN-AMERICANS MORE PROMINENT IN THE COFFEE INDUSTRY?

BY PHYLLIS JOHNSON

**RESEARCH SHOWS** that African-Americans are less likely than other ethnic groups in the United States to select coffee as a beverage of choice. Yet coffee's history links major contributions not only to Africa but the diaspora around the globe. Ethiopia is praised as the birthplace of coffee, and for giving us some of the most prized coffees in the world. African enslavement was the original source of labor for coffee's production in Brazil, the Caribbean and the West Indies, and farmers of African descent continue to play a key role in its production. So how is it that African-Americans are only loosely connected to this long-standing historical continuum in coffee, finding themselves underrepresented as consumers as well as professionals in the coffee industry? And how can we as an industry bridge this gap?

CONTINUED ON PAGE 42

"I'm not outspoken because it's fun. I'm outspoken because I want coffee to be better. Extraction and racism are both terms that need to be fully understood by coffee professionals. The greatest opportunity I see in building a black community in coffee is that we're finding each other, and we're helping each other."

—D'Onna Stubblefield, coffee consultant,  
New York



Photo courtesy of D'Onna Stubblefield

## STRONG BLACK COFFEE

In close to 20 years of working in coffee, I have met too few African-Americans employed in the industry, whether in international development, trade, retail, roasting, equipment manufacturing, training/education, marketing or other areas. Recently, however, I am starting to see some changes as more African-Americans are becoming visible in the industry. As part of my research for this article, I interviewed 14 other black coffee professionals, and they confirmed many of my personal thoughts about the industry and how we can improve. (You'll find their photos and quotes throughout the article.)

"You have to unearth history yourself to avoid ignorance. For some it hurts; for others, it's shameful, and no one wants to be hurt or ashamed, but we have to know this history in order to understand what's happening today and grow from it."

—Denis Ngochi, co-founder and managing member of Elephant Coffee Importers, Denver



Photo courtesy of Denis Ngochi

## THE PAST INFORMS THE PRESENT

Racism, inequality and the effects of slavery are human diseases that have left crowded rooms filled with little gender or racial diversity. The coffee industry must not shy away from these difficult subjects. These are not sidebar issues to be discussed from time to time by the few diverse individuals who sit outside these rooms, falling onto the ears of the highly empathic to the unconcerned and everywhere in between, yet left without action. These issues are major contributing factors to the state of our industry and society at large. Shying away from understanding or acting against these difficult realities is like pretending coffee rust disease doesn't exist—what devastating impact this would have on the livelihood of farmers, local economies and the global coffee world. Similarly, when we continue to ignore and normalize the effects of racism and inequality within the industry, we cannot expect positive outcomes.

Dr. Bryan Stevenson, founder of the nonprofit Equal Justice Initiative, offered his perspective on *PBS NewsHour* in 2017, saying, "I don't think slavery ended in 1865, it just evolved. We

"I don't want to take anything away from anyone. I only want a seat at the table, to be heard and thought of when decisions are made."

—Cameron Heath, Q grader, director of coffee operations at Revelator Coffee, Birmingham, Alabama



Photo courtesy of Cameron Heath

are burdened by our history of racial inequality. ... We have made progress, but our silence has condemned us.”

The absence of African-Americans attending coffee industry conferences, serving on boards and working in coffee in general goes hand in hand with lower levels of consumption. While targeted marketing programs may improve consumption, I believe employment and education will provide a greater return on investment. Greater engagement from African-Americans throughout the industry will provide more ideas and new ways to overcome challenges. I am aware of a few programs starting to address such issues (see “Increasing Diversity & Access,” at right, for more information), but we must do more to build an industry that can rely on the talents of the whole society.

When I began discussing the idea of starting a coffee company, the business development director in the city where we lived, an African-American man, offered an interesting perspective: Black people don't drink coffee. My plan was not to sell coffee to black people. I didn't think much of his comments at the time, but over the years I have reflected on the challenges associated with the lack of representation in the industry.

## AFRICAN-AMERICANS CHOOSE COFFEE LESS OFTEN

The National Coffee Association USA (NCA) provides research data on U.S. coffee consumption through its annual National Coffee Drinking Trends (NCDT) survey. Established in 1950, it's the longest-running coffee survey in the United States. The NCDT consistently shows that, in comparison to other ethnic groups, African-Americans are less likely to choose coffee as a preferred beverage.

As an example, in the category of “gourmet coffee beverages (net)—which includes espresso-based beverages, non-espresso-based beverages, traditional coffee-gourmet and ready-to-drink coffee beverages—the 2018 survey indicates 42 percent of African-Americans drink beverages in this category, compared to 64 percent of Hispanic-Americans, 53 percent of Caucasian-Americans and 59 percent of Asian-Americans.

A summary of the NCDT notes that African-Americans always have reported lower percentages of coffee consumption when compared to Hispanic-Americans and Caucasians.

CONTINUED ON PAGE 44

## INCREASING DIVERSITY & ACCESS

THERE ARE NUMEROUS ORGANIZATIONS that support and promote black- and minority-owned businesses in the United States. Among the most prominent are the **U.S. Black Chambers** ([usblackchamber.org](http://usblackchamber.org)), the **Black upStart** ([theblackupstart.com](http://theblackupstart.com)), and the **Minority Business Development Agency** ([mbda.gov](http://mbda.gov)).

The specialty coffee industry also has begun to develop programs focused on increasing diversity and access. While more programs and resources clearly are needed, supporting these current efforts can be a good place to begin:

### DIVERSITY, EQUITY AND INCLUSION COMMITTEES

Get involved with these relatively new committees of the Specialty Coffee Association (SCA), Coffee Roasters Guild (CRG) and Barista Guild. To learn more, visit:

- SCA: [sca.coffee/about/equity-diversity-inclusion](http://sca.coffee/about/equity-diversity-inclusion)
- CRG: [crg.coffee/committees](http://crg.coffee/committees)
- Barista Guild: [baristaguildofamerica.net/about/who-are-we/committees/equity-diversity-inclusion-committee](http://baristaguildofamerica.net/about/who-are-we/committees/equity-diversity-inclusion-committee)

### SCA LEADERSHIP EQUITY AND DIVERSITY (LEAD) SCHOLARSHIP PROGRAM

This two-year program, supported by S&D Coffee & Tea, seeks to increase the diversity of leadership in the specialty coffee community through professional development and networking opportunities. Applications are closed for the initial round (2018–2020). At press time, it was not clear if another group will be selected in 2020.

- [sca.coffee/about/leadership-equity-diversity-scholarship-program](http://sca.coffee/about/leadership-equity-diversity-scholarship-program)

### COMPETITOR PRODUCT SPONSORSHIP FROM ACAIA

The coffee brewing equipment maker offers product sponsorships to support a more diverse lineup of competitors in barista and brewers cup competitions around the world. Acaia is seeking competitors who are women, racial and ethnic minorities, queer coffee professionals, refugees, people with disabilities and veterans. Applications must be completed one to six months before a competition.

- [acaia.co/pages/competitor-sponsorship](http://acaia.co/pages/competitor-sponsorship)

# SIMPLE QUESTIONS TO BUILD A MORE DIVERSE ORGANIZATION

Consider these questions and discussion points to assess how your company can work toward increasing diversity, access and representation.

● **QUESTION:** Do your company's hiring policies and practices keep you from building a more diverse organization?

■ **Possible Response:** "We hire the right person for the job, regardless of race or gender."

▶ **Looking Deeper:** In many cases, individuals are hired based on their connections, and there's more than one "right" person for each job. Making an effort to encourage a more diverse applicant pool can help you expand your company's outreach and develop a more representative talent base. Major League Baseball believed it hired the best players until Jackie Robinson showed up and introduced more creative ways of playing and winning the game.

● **QUESTION:** Are minorities occupying a higher percentage of lower-level positions in your organizations compared to other levels?

■ **Possible Response:** "Positions are held based on qualifications and interest."

▶ **Looking Deeper:** Be mindful of the additional burden one carries by being a minority in a group setting. Without mentors, a minority employee may feel they will not be considered for higher-level positions, and that can become a self-fulfilling prophecy.



*Photo courtesy of D'Onna Stubblefield*

● **QUESTION:** Is doing business with minority-owned companies a priority for your business and your customers?

■ **Possible Response:** "No, we're a small organization with no requirements from our customers."

▶ **Looking Deeper:** A 2018 report from the U.S. Small Business Administration states that 30.2 million small businesses make up 99.9 percent of all U.S. companies. Small businesses employ 58.9 million people, which is 47.5 percent of the U.S. workforce. It's up to small businesses to make the difference in building more diverse work environments. In addition, 2017 U.S. Census data show that almost 25 percent of the U.S. population is non-white. The country is becoming more diverse, and we all need to better understand the needs of our changing demographics.

● **QUESTION:** Do minority employees have mentors for growth within your organization?

■ **Possible Responses:** "No," "Yes" or "I don't know."

▶ **Looking Deeper:** Mentorship can help you retain good employees. Be encouraging and supportive of employees' involvement with other groups or individuals that may provide opportunities for mentorship outside your organization.

● **QUESTION:** Do you have less than 25 percent minority representation/perspective in your meetings?

■ **Possible Response:** "Yes, but we have a very experienced executive team that understands our business."

▶ **Looking Deeper:** In addition to the country becoming more diverse, the National Coffee Association USA's most recent annual drinking trends survey shows Hispanic-Americans as the largest ethnic consumer group. If you are not including a diverse perspective in your business decisions, you might not be representing your current or potential customer base.

One of the key areas that may explain lower participation among some African-Americans is a misperception of the health effects of coffee, as the summary further states that there is a general desire to limit caffeine intake in exchange for beverages that are thought to contain more healthful ingredients.

Marketing also plays a key role in this equation. Producers of carbonated beverages and juices have been quite successful in targeting marketing campaigns toward African-American communities, and African-Americans over-index on consumption levels in these product categories. According to the Technomic Consumer Tracker Survey, African-Americans over-index on overall consumption at home and away from home on fruit juices, with 68 percent of African-Americans drinking fruit juices once a week versus 55 percent of consumers overall. In addition, 60 percent of African-Americans consume carbonated soft drinks once a week versus 51 percent of consumers overall.

Celebrity endorsements for coffee tend to come from middle-aged white men, while celebrity endorsements for carbonated beverages and fruit juices more often come from young black athletes or musicians. Research shows that more women drink coffee than men, and Hispanics are the largest coffee-consuming ethnic group in the United States. As U.S. demographics continue to evolve, it will be interesting to see how marketing will follow.

The data clearly reinforces the fact that African-Americans aren't major coffee consumers, and I believe the coffee industry is missing out on several fronts because of this lack of engagement. African-Americans are underrepresented in an industry in which they should have prominence and great pride.

When I pick up a cup of coffee at the airport, I notice the large number of black employees working in cafes and food service. The majority of the customers being served are not black. Standing in line, I think about my journey in coffee. I wonder about the employees' understanding of coffee beyond the preparation of beverages with fancy names and complex recipes. Do they understand the history of coffee? Not the watered-down version that makes everyone comfortable, but the uncomfortable parts also. Would understanding

CONTINUED ON PAGE 46

Diversity must extend beyond the coffee bar and into middle and upper levels of management. It's important to listen, sit back and realize that a lot of people aren't gaining the same opportunities. Stop saying you're trying to build a culture at your shop, and stop saying diversity and inclusion are important. Just do it.

—Ezra Baker, coffee consultant, New York



Photo courtesy of Ezra Baker



Photo by Danielle Serejo

"Coffee is important. It provides us with all that we own. We have worked for generations on coffee farms feeling invisible—my mother, grandmother and their mothers before them. ... My dream is to empower other women in coffee like me who are invisible."

—Daiane Vital, Minas Gerais, Brazil (translation by Josiane Cotrim; pictured on the left, with her mother)

## WHY AFRICAN-AMERICANS BELONG IN THE COFFEE INDUSTRY

- ✓ Coffee originated in Africa.
- ✓ Africans and the diaspora contribute significantly to coffee production around the world, with great opportunities as consumers and entrepreneurs.
- ✓ African coffees are among the most appreciated and are thought to have greater distinction by discerning coffee professionals and consumers.
- ✓ Changing demographics in the United States mean previously underrepresented communities likely will have more prominence and more economic power moving forward.
- ✓ According to research compiled by the National Coffee Association USA, coffee has significant health benefits in many areas—including improved longevity, cardiovascular health, liver health, diabetes, cancer and stroke—all of which are significant issues for African-Americans.
- ✓ There is great opportunity within the industry to develop connections and empathy with farmers, and to better understand the shared culture.
- ✓ Coffee isn't just big business—it's small entrepreneurs working with small-scale farmers to improve the livelihoods of entire communities.

this history offer more freedom, permission and pride? Could this foster a feeling of empowerment, and thus cause greater interest to do more in coffee?

## UNDERSTANDING COFFEE'S HISTORY

The history of coffee is both fascinating and tragic. Working through this unpleasant history is necessary for everyone involved in coffee. For some, this history is a source of empowerment; for others, it is a source of anger, hurt and shame. Unfortunately, for many this history is unknown.

It's important that we understand and acknowledge this history. We must not let the historical perspective of those who carried the bean to different parts of the world—the missionaries, travelers, traders and colonists—overshadow the contributions of those who labored in coffee production. The first coffees exported to North America and Europe were harvested by slaves. Later, enslaved Africans prepared and served coffees for their slave owners, when they were not laboring in the fields. In the book *Slavery in America: From Colonial Times to the Civil War*, authors Dorothy Schneider and Carl J. Schneider quote slave owner Henry Watson referring favorably to his house servant's coffee-making skills, saying, "Ellen is a good milker, a negro rarely is. She makes good bread ... She makes excellent coffee."

According to *Uncommon Grounds: The History of Coffee and How It Transformed Our World* by Mark Pendergrast, coffee first came to what is now the United States and to Europe between 1650 and 1700. As we trace the bean that started in Africa and spread throughout the world, slave ships departed West Africa to put in place forced labor to ensure an adequate supply of production to meet demand. As demand for coffee grew during this period, so did enslavement, which was used to sustain production.

For decades, this tragedy played out. In Brazil, slavery ended in 1888; in the United States, in 1865. It's important to note that the United States did not ban the import of goods produced from forced labor until 2015, with a bill signed by America's first African-American president, Barack Obama.

While I could focus on the horrid treatment and shortened life expectancies of the enslaved, I will instead reflect on an incredible lady I recently learned about, Rose Nicaud, an enslaved woman in the United States who bought her freedom by selling hot coffee. Nicaud is credited with being the first person to set up a mobile shop near the New Orleans French Market. She was successful in selling enough coffee to purchase her freedom. Her success further allowed her to move into a permanent shop. Nicaud inspired other enslaved women to follow her example, developing their own coffee blends. In her book *Women in New Orleans: A History*, author Mary Gehman credits Nicaud with starting the growth of coffee shops throughout the city.

"When I told my family I wanted to pursue a career in coffee as a barista, they said, 'There's no future in that.' I showed them a magazine about baristas competing, [but] they didn't see anyone in the magazine that looked like me. I guess that's why they didn't think it was a career for me."

—Shakir Yates, supervisor at Urban Grind, Atlanta



Photo courtesy of Shakir Yates

## COFFEE WILL MAKE YOU BLACK: MY CHILDHOOD RELATIONSHIP WITH COFFEE

Myths or strong negative beliefs about coffee aren't known to be widespread in the African-American community, but they do exist. In reflecting on my childhood memories and first interactions with the beverage, I recall Sanka instant coffee in our kitchen cabinet and, from time to time, I would sneak a sip of my mother's coffee. My mom always added sugar and milk, and I loved the taste of her coffee. Coffee was forbidden for children in my household, and sneaking a sip when she wasn't looking was a thrill. My mom repeated a myth about coffee that had been passed down from previous generations: "That coffee is gonna make you black," she would say when I was caught sipping from her cup.

It's a clear and familiar warning that resonates among some African-Americans. The idea that coffee could permanently change the pigment of a child's skin into a darker shade was clearly an undesirable feature.

"I have to consider that my references may not be understood by white judges during competitions, therefore it's necessary for me to be able to code-switch and rethink my strategy."

—Adam JacksonBey  
barista and entrepreneur,  
Washington, D.C.

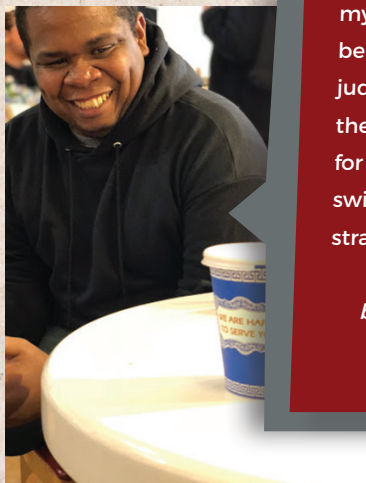


Photo courtesy of Adam JacksonBey

Colorism, a prejudice favoring lighter skin within an ethnic group, was alive and well in my childhood, and remains prevalent throughout the world among many ethnic groups. The sad notion that physical characteristics linked to race have negative connotations dates back much further than a few generations in my family's history—such misleading thoughts can be traced back to what at the time were respected but highly confused American physicians who wrote broadly on the subject during the mid-19th century, erroneously tying skin color (and shades of color) to inherent physical and mental abilities.

## CHAMPIONS

I moved past these childhood myths to start a coffee company, with little knowledge about the product or the industry. Somehow, I knew I could learn what I needed. My first international business trip in coffee came in 2001. Although my initial plan was to focus on coffees from Africa, I had never traveled to Africa, and I was afraid. It was suggested that I travel to Costa Rica first.

I started second-guessing my decision to attend the Costa Rica coffee conference soon after I arrived. I don't speak Spanish, and the attendees were predominantly men in suits. I stepped outside to take a break—and to seriously reflect on the bad idea of starting a coffee company and traveling to Costa Rica—when a nice lady walked up to me.

"Here's a lady with the right idea, sitting in the sun," she said. Then came a barrage of questions and excitement, as she asked me, "What do you do in coffee, and where are you from?" She invited me to join her, her husband and their friends for lunch. Eunice Salter didn't work in coffee. Her husband did, and she was

CONTINUED ON PAGE 48



“I don’t feel like I have to change who I am to fit into an idea of who a coffee professional is or what they look like. I feel like so much of people’s validation of others in this industry is based on perception, and I reject that. I don’t need to pull out my résumé or look a certain way to be deserving of respect within this industry.”

—Michelle Johnson, *The Chocolate Barista*, Phoenix

tagging along on the trip. After lunch, this woman I had never met before, and haven’t spoken to since that day in Costa Rica 17 years ago, went on to share some encouraging advice.

“You have a great purpose in coffee,” she told me. “Center yourself, and build a business.”

Looking back, I realize how important it was for me that she acknowledged my challenges and recognized that I was an African-American woman with a big dream that I didn’t fully understand at the time. I believe that was instrumental in my having the courage to make my trip a success and continue toward my dream. Encouragement and recognition of my humanity was all I needed that day, and she was there to provide it.

A few months ago, when I ran across my diary from that trip, I thought about the many trips I’d made to Africa and other parts of the world since I met Eunice Salter. I thought about all the boards I’ve had the pleasure of serving on, and I thought about the hope I still carry for our industry. I’ve had numerous champions throughout my life who have invited me to the table. I encourage you to look for opportunities whenever possible to invite more people to your table.

## MOVING FORWARD TOGETHER

In some ways, we have moved on from the past and operate with a new sense of awareness. While we could never imagine



Photo courtesy of Candice Madison

“If people were not so naturally exclusionary, no one would need a ‘community,’ because we would all be one. Anyone who thinks specialty coffee is devoid of all the political and social issues of today is lying to themselves and enabling a toxic culture.”

—Candice Madison, *coffee education consultant*, New York



Photo courtesy of Michelle Johnson

enslaved workers harvesting and preparing our coffees, we must responsibly ask ourselves questions and consider where African descendants are in coffee today. This is a question that rings in my head in most large business gatherings. What is the status of this group of people that contributed so significantly to what we enjoy? Coffee is an important industry in the United States. In 2015, for example, coffee was responsible for 1.7 million U.S. jobs, represented 1.6 percent of the gross domestic product (GDP), and had an annual economic output value of \$225 billion, according to a report published by the NCA that year.

Our connections to products we purchase may run deeper than we realize, and span generations and across oceans. Time and again multi-generational coffee companies tell their stories, connecting the present

CONTINUED ON PAGE 50

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"Typically, people hire the same people, which causes stagnation. This flies in the face of logic, when there's proof that diverse work environments yield better performance. Until there's equal pay, advancement in job opportunities and good retention for people of color in the industry, I'm not certain there's change."

—Tymika Lawrence, East Coast sales for Genuine Origin, New York



Photo courtesy of Tymika Lawrence

day to an ancestor or ancestors who came to the United States and began roasting and selling coffee. These immigrant-owned businesses served as a basis for what we see today as companies deeply rooted in the industry.

We must consider the need for greater engagement by African descendants beyond the lens of securing a new market and gaining new consumers. The industry misses out on opportunities to gain knowledge and creativity from an ethnic group that represents more than 13 percent of the U.S. population, with deeply rooted contributions in coffee.

Almost two decades ago, a black Kenyan coffee exporter asked me why he had not seen any African-Americans in the coffee industry, something he had noticed when attending conferences in the United States. He thought I would know the answer, as my husband and I were the only African-Americans he'd met working in coffee. Unfortunately, I was unable to offer much of an explanation at the time, and I would bet his interactions with African-Americans in coffee haven't increased significantly over the past two decades.

Over the years, I've come to realize that the challenges African-Americans face in building a business in coffee aren't so different from the challenges others face; however, the additional burden of having a lack of representation, little sense of belonging, and virtual invisibility within the industry have a profound impact on the success of an individual and their business.

My hope is that more African-Americans and those from the African diaspora will continue joining the industry throughout the supply chain, bringing incredible talent while understanding our deeply rooted connections. We all share in the tragic history of coffee. We are part of a society that will advance when we start to see value in our history, push toward a better understanding of what's behind the numbers and the actions, and find greater ways to foster

CONTINUED ON PAGE 52

"Once you break down barriers, then education can start. I believe more blacks should be introduced to coffee and made aware. I'm not sure if I can say they should go into coffee, but be aware of the opportunity."

—Cassandra Ingram, owner of Urban Grind cafe, Atlanta



Photo courtesy of Cassandra Ingram



Photo courtesy of Tinuade Oyelowo

"It's not just about hiring people of color. It's about helping those employees understand the biases they may face because of a lack of representation. Customers may not be used to a person of color preparing their drinks. Understand the dynamics around relationships so no one feels out of place. When you have more diversity behind the counter, in management and in upper management, it comes in the door."

—Tinuade Oyelowo, senior barista at Café Grumpy, New York

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Photo courtesy of Gisele Coutinho

"As a small business owner and one of the few black Brazilians in the consumption market, I am often asked whose brand it is and who I work for. I am not thought to be the owner of the business. This universe is so wonderful, but it can improve a lot by being diverse. ... I already see a lot of people talking about it, and it's the beginning, [but] it's just the beginning. We are watching. We are fighting for diversity."

—Gisele Coutinho, founder of Pura Caffeina, São Paulo, Brazil (translation by Kellinha Stein)

meaningful engagement—but it has to start with understanding and acknowledging coffee's complex and often uncomfortable history.

Driving progress within the industry to solve this complex issue will not be simple. I believe the best way to find solutions is to start by asking questions. "Simple Questions to Build a More Diverse Organization" on page 44 offers some sample questions for business owners and others in positions of power to use as a jumping-off point.

It is my hope as an African-American and member of the diaspora that together we can build connections from a torn past that will allow us to uplift each other through understanding and respecting our shared history. Coffee is a major part of our history, and it has a way of bringing people together. I am proud and respectful of Africa's contributions to coffee around the world.

"It's uncomfortable being in a spot where you believe people may wonder why you're there or how you got there. The imagery is for everyone. Not only do we need to see ourselves, others need to see us."

—Maliesha Pullano, founder of Mamaleelu Cold Brew, Kalamazoo, Michigan (pictured with her daughter, Lulu)



Photo courtesy of Maliesha Pullano

In 2019, the African Fine Coffees Association (AFCA) conference will be held in Kigali, Rwanda. I hope to share some of what I have learned on my journey in coffee, as I am honored to serve as keynote speaker. As an African-American woman, I am especially proud of this honor. I no longer have to dream of traveling to Africa, but I do dream of sharing what has empowered me in my journey. My wish is to help empower others who are trying to find their way and understand their story.

## PHYLLIS JOHNSON

is president of *BD Imports* and the recipient of the 2018 *Responsible Business Supplier of the Year* award from *Radisson Hotel Group*. Her story has been featured in several books and articles. She's an advocate for diversity and inclusion in the coffee supply chain, gender equity, economic opportunities, and the complex issues of race and coffee. She's a graduate of the University of Arkansas at Fayetteville with a degree in microbiology, and the John F. Kennedy School of Government at Harvard University with a degree in public administration. Johnson is a current board member of the National Coffee Association USA and has served on numerous other coffee industry boards. She lives in Georgia with her husband, Patrick. They have three children, Marcus, Matthew and Maya.



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