

OKOGreen (生態綠) is a haven for environmental activists who need a buzz.

The company was founded in late 2008 and bills itself as the first fair trade-certified coffee brand in the Chinese-speaking world. The OKOGreen cafe near the corner of Shaoxing South Street (紹興南路) and Renai Road (仁愛路) features a classroom where seminars on environmental issues are held regularly. A shower encourages customers and employees to bike over even in hot weather. One wall of the cafe is lined with shelves selling books, fair trade cocoa, handmade bags and dolls from Nepal, organic cotton T-shirts and, of course, coffee beans. Wide tables and comfy chairs invite customers to linger. On a recent afternoon, one woman worked on a laptop that had a sticker stating, "I only date boys who live green."

OKOGreen also sells coffee beans to cafes throughout Taiwan, but when the company opened two years ago, its mission was seen as a long shot.

"Other Taiwanese coffee importers thought we were crazy, that the market was too small to support the idea of selling nothing but fair trade coffee beans. We founded our company without any previous experience in the coffee trade," says Karen Yu (余宛如).

European and American customers have had four decades to become familiar with fair trade goods, but Yu says the concept has only made a made here over the last few years. Part of OKOGreen's mission is to serve up awareness with their lattes and espressos.

"We want to educate consumers about how to identify goods that are truly fair trade and what goes into the process of certification," says Yu. The term "OKO," which means "eco" in German, was chosen as a nod to the Germany-based inspection agency FLO-CERT, which certifies OKOGreen's coffee beans.

Making sure farmers receive adequate compensation for their crops is one of the basic tenets of fair trade. To qualify as fair trade, coffee beans must be sold for at least US\$1.26 per pound (1kg = 2.2 pounds). The average price for ordinary coffee beans is about US\$0.60 to US\$0.70 per pound. Four companies that fair trade advocates refer to as the "Big Four" roasters — Sara Lee, Nestle, Kraft and Procter and Gamble — control most of the worldwide coffee market.

"When the prices of coffee beans are driven down by competition, it's the farmers who start to suffer," says Yu.

"Customers need to understand that if you want



OKOGreen co-founder WenYen Hsu handpicks coffee beans.
PHOTO: CATHERINE SHU, TAIPEI TIMES

products that are produced ethically it will cost a bit more," Yu adds.

But that doesn't mean prices are unaffordable. Most of OKOGreen's coffee beans cost NT\$280 to NT\$400 for a 250g pack. The coffee beans are handpicked for quality and roasted in small batches by OKOGreen employees. The company does not store coffee beans for long, serving or selling them to customers and other cafes as quickly as possible after they are roasted so the flavor does not fade.

"We think the idea that fair trade coffee has to be very expensive is just a myth," says Yu. "Coffee is cheap to produce. It's not a big deal to pay farmers a bit more."

OKOGreen's events include workshops on how to brew a tasty cup of joe and screenings of films like *Black Gold*, a documentary about the coffee trade. The cafe's staff also gives customers a deeper look into how a fair trade product is produced.

"Fair trade standards aren't just about making

sure people receive fair pay for their products," says Yu. "Working conditions have to be safe, men and women have to receive equal pay and the rights of child workers have to be guaranteed. The environment is also protected. And the work must be long term."

OKOGreen imports coffee beans from countries including Honduras, Brazil and Ethiopia, but the founders were originally inspired by the plight of Taiwanese farmers. The company supports Good Green (好樣綠), an organization that works with farmers in southern Taiwan to reduce the amount of pesticides they use and help them get fair prices for their crops. Customers who order produce from Good Green can pick up their vegetables and fruit at OKOGreen. The company also donates 10 percent of its profits to environmental groups, including Green Party Taiwan (台灣綠黨) and Taiwan Environmental Information Center (台灣環境資訊協會).

"We hope consumers understand that fair trade is not just about getting fair prices for workers, it's also about consumer well-being," says Yu.

Buzzed on fair trade

BY CATHERINE SHU
STAFF REPORTER

OKOGreen is the first fair trade coffee brand in the Chinese-speaking world. Its Taipei cafe is a center for fans of the earth to get their daily jolt



OKOGreen's cafe is enlivened with murals and postcards and artwork by customers.

PHOTO: CATHERINE SHU, TAIPEI TIMES



STORE NOTES

OKOGreen (生態綠)

Where: 16, Ln 14, Hangzhou S Rd Sec 1, Taipei City (台北市杭州南路一段14巷16號)

Telephone: (02) 2322-2225

Open: Mondays to Saturdays from noon to 10pm

On the Net: www.okogreen.com.tw, www.facebook.com/okogreen



▲ OKOGreen's cafe carries fair trade bags and dolls from Women's Skills Development Project in Nepal.

▶ OKOGreen's coffee beans are certified fair trade and roasted in small batches.

PHOTOS: CATHERINE SHU, TAIPEI TIMES

