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## Kenya – Mchana AB

**Mill:** Mchana Estate  
**Varietal(s):** SL28 & SL34; some Ruiru 11 & K7  
**Processing:** Fully washed & dried on raised beds  
**Altitude:** 1,600 to 1,766 metres above sea level  
**Managed by:** Coffee Management Services  
**Town:** Ruiru  
**Region:** Kiambu County  
**Country:** Kenya  
**Total size of farm:** 906 hectares  
**Area under coffee:** 458 hectares



### Additional information:

After the Second World War, the situation in the Far East remained unstable and the future of foreign investments was quite uncertain. A French Group with large interests in palm oil and rubber plantations in Malaysia decided to look for agricultural investments in East Africa as a security in case of adverse development in Asia.

In February 1950, they sent their agent, Mr. Jas Nicoll, with a comfortable check book and a very large mandate (any country and almost any crop) to East Africa. Very quickly he came to the conclusion that an investment in coffee plantations in Kenya was the answer to his quest.

In a few months he managed to set up a company (Socfinaf) and acquired the first coffee estate in April 1950. It was N'gewe Estate (619 acres with 200 acres planted with coffee). In the description of this estate that he sent to his colleagues in Malaysia, we read: *"N'Gewe means "Little Paradise" as it should be since it is a sort of Rantau Panjang with a replica of the Maison des Palmes in White Highlands style: Orchids are only replaced by roses and carnations, flame of forests by sugar blooming jacarandas and wooden floor are made of cear instead of Changai while the Bukit Fraser range is replaced by the snow clad Mount Kenya."*

Jas Nicoll acquired the neighbouring Mchana Estate in May of the same year. Mchana – with 1,090 acres, 659 of them under coffee – was already one of the larger estates in Kenya. He didn't stop there, however. In January 1951 he managed to acquire two other estates close to Mchana and N'Gewe. Kiki Estate (412 acres with 100 acres under coffee) and Mukuyu Estate (325 acres with 136 acre under coffee) were added on.

The four estates were regrouped into one entity, called Mchana (seeing as it was the largest of the four units). By doing so, Mchana Estate became the largest single coffee plantation in the whole of Kenya and was in "full bearing". In 1950, the newly created Socfinaf produced 267 tons of clean (or Washed) coffee and 21 tons of Mbuni (as natural coffee is known) out of 9,700 tons produced that year in Kenya. In 1950, the yield was 450 to 500 lbs an acre as against an average of 250 lbs for the whole of Kenya.

### Mchana today

Today's Mchana Estate is 906 hectare with 458 hectare under coffee - almost the same original amount of hectare used to grow coffee as in 1950, making it one of Kenya's largest. However, throughout the latter part of the 20<sup>th</sup> and early part of the 21<sup>st</sup> centuries, areas of the farm went into disrepair and some plots became semi-abandoned. Irrigation was installed on Mchana Estate in the sixties, and this kept production viable, but productivity per tree dropped, and the farm struggled to produce the optimal quality for which it had previously been known.

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The potential for high quality, however, was there and was part of the heritage of the farm. 2/3 of the trees still bearing at Mchana were planted before Socfinaf's acquisition, and they are mostly SL28. Small subsections of the farm have been planted under Ruiru 11 and K7<sup>1</sup>, but the majority of cultivars are the 'traditional' SL28 & SL34, known for their great cup profile. Indeed, all the potential for exceptional quality has been there from nearly the beginning – it just needed a helping hand.

Coffee Management Systems (CMS), one of Kenya's premier marketing and agricultural extension services, took over the farm from Socifaf management in late 2017, and they are making the most of that potential. Today, Mchana's management has been placed safely in the hands of Mr Wambungo, who has worked for CMS since 2009. He is an innovative and expert farm manager and is committed to maintaining Mchana's reputation as one of the best producing estates of in Kenya while also adding 'best quality' to that reputation. He has renovated areas that had been underutilised, put attention into processing and post-harvest infrastructure and focused on staff training.

Mr. Wambungo began immediately with renovation activities: old trees were pruned or replaced so as to ensure a better harvest in a couple of years' time. He has also put effort into systematising the agricultural management of the farm, dividing the whole farm into different operational 'blocks' and mapping out activities per block to ensure each is receiving the best and most appropriate treatment in a timely fashion. He has implemented crop development charts, which track each block from flowering to maturity. By tracking cherry development in this way, the farm is better able to plan and prepare: from preventative measures through to implementing harvest and post harvest activities at the optimal time. This sort of planning also ensures a very efficient, lean management, which frees up other resource for more experimental practices (such as a honey processing project currently in its beginning stages).

Mr Wambungo's efforts are already seeing results. Productivity has increased significantly, and lots from Mchana now fetch good prices at auction. The farm is expected to continue to improve as his expertise is put into effect.

As of late 2018, the farm employs 200 permanent workers, all of whom are all housed on the estate. Some 2,000 additional workers are brought in during the harvest season, and all of them receive stringent training in harvesting and sorting coffee cherry. A dispensary, a creche and a primary school are also available on the Estate. Mchana Estate has been UTZ Certified since 2005 and is also certified Rainforest Alliance.

### **Screen sizing in Kenya**

The AA, AB and other grades used to classify lots in Kenya are an indication of screen size only. They are not any indication of cup quality. The AA grade in Kenya is equivalent to screen size 17 or 18 (17/64 or 18/64 of an inch) used at other origins. AA grades often command higher prices at auction though this grade is no indication of cup quality and an AB lot from a better farm may cup better.

PB denotes 'peaberry.' Most coffee cherries contain two seeds that develop with flattened facing sides (the familiar 'coffee bean'), but sometimes only one of the two seeds is fertilized, and the single seed develops with nothing to flatten it. This oval (or pea-shaped) bean is known as peaberry. Typically around 5% of all coffee beans harvested have experienced this peculiarity.

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<sup>1</sup> Ruiru 11 is named for the station at Ruiru, Kenya where it was developed in the '70s. The variety was released in 1985. The variety is becoming more widespread across Kenya due to its resistance to Coffee Berry Disease and Coffee Leaf Rust. K7 cultivar was selected at Legetet Estate in Muhoroni from the French Mission Coffee. K7 has resistance to some races of Coffee Leaf Rust as well as partial resistance to Coffee Berry Disease while maintaining good cup quality.