



FIELD REPORT

COLOMBIA

BY GEORGE VUKASIN JR.



PHOTOS BY ALEJANDRO LOZANO ROJAS + GEORGE VUKASIN JR.



COLOMBIA

LONG BEFORE CRAFT COFFEE was a trendy glimmer in the eye of retailers, my father and grandfather were steadfast in their commitment to establishing direct-market relationships with the producers from whom their company, Peerless Coffee & Tea, did business. Since the modest birth of Peerless Coffee in 1924 in Oakland, Calif., we've been passionate about sustainability through significant financial and educational contributions to coffee farmers and farm co-ops all over the world.

Peerless' second-generation CEO, and my father, George Vukasin Sr., was awarded the Manual Mejia Coffee Medal of Honor by the president of Colombia's National Federation of Coffee Growers (FNC) in 2001. In the elaborate medal ceremony, Peerless was singularly recognized "for major contributions to furthering sustainability education and supporting farmers far beyond price negotiations."

This distinction was a great honor to my father, and he took the responsibility to continue operating a business that lived up to it with a tremendous sense of duty. When he passed on at the age of 82 in February of 2016, my sister, Kristina, and I—having studied the family business and ethos under my father—assumed the same intensity of accountability to our producer partners that our dad had modeled.

This commitment has come at no small expense to Peerless: We pay a considerable premium for coffees that, by the typical hospital-ity roaster's quality standards, can't score below 84. As one of North America's top contributors to countless Fair Trade-directed humanitarian efforts to aid impoverished coffee farmers in some of the poorest regions of the world, Peerless has always been as dedicated to quality for customers as to quality of life for producers. This was the norm under my father's direction, and we're determined to not only continue this legacy, but to strive to make it even more effective moving forward.

Opposite page, top: The lush coffee fields in Huila are perfectly situated to produce some of the world's most prized coffees. Views like this always remind me of what could be. The coffees grown in this field will one day make it to my cupping spoon, and I will have the honor to taste all that went into creating that one sip. Below: Yours truly at the Colombian Coffee Federation (FNC) cupping lab trying desperately not to miss the spittoon. The breadth and quality of coffees that I have been fortunate enough to cup in that room is truly amazing. I admire and support the FNC's goal of achieving 100-percent sustainability for all Colombian-grown coffee by their 100th anniversary in 2027. This page: As the owner of a 1985 Jeep CJ7, I fell in love with this beauty—especially when I saw it loaded up with coffee. While Jeep "Willys" were only produced from 1941-45, I guess the owner of this 1974 four-wheeler is named Willis?

In Colombia—just as in the 17 other countries within which we nurture long-standing farm-direct relationships—the local population survives on agriculture, with coffee as their predominant cash crop. Often when I'm on a buying trip, I'm fortunate to travel alongside partners like Sustainable Harvest's David Griswold, who demonstrate exceptional practices in helping and guiding farmers to grow and process the best coffees they can.

I'm so proud to share that from 2013–2015, Peerless, via Fair Trade-certified programs, contributed \$89,389 to educate farmers on surviving the effects of *roya*; and providing technical assistance, price-risk management, and infrastructure improvements. During those same years, Peerless also donated \$91,174 to scholarships for children, women's empowerment programs, and agricultural sustainability training in Colombia and other countries of origin.

I went to see the results of these contributions myself on a recent trip through three Colombian growing regions, and I couldn't have come away more inspired.

NEIVA, HUILA

My return to Colombia was filled with excitement and emotional nostalgia. The last time I was in the country was when my father



The team triumphantly arrives at the worldwide headquarters for Cadefihuila Co-op. This co-op has had an enormous social impact on the local coffee community.

was awarded the Manuel Mejia award from the FNC. That was a magical trip with numerous fond memories, as many of Peerless' top Colombian and international partners attended the ceremony out of respect for him. My father was awarded the medal of honor for all his work to improve the lives of Colombian farmers. I was so proud.

Fast forward to 2016, which sadly is the year I lost my father. It's also the year I received an invitation from one of our top suppliers, Arnoldo Leiva of the Coffee Source, to join him on a visit to one of Peerless' producer co-ops in Huila. I relished the idea of going back, particularly since this would represent a continuation of what my father helped build many years ago.

Colombia is an amazing coffee producer for many reasons. I still remember from my first cupping at the Federation offices in Bogotá years ago, learning that Colombia is able to provide freshly harvested and milled coffees year-round due to its proximity to the equator. While Colombia has many departments that produce great coffee, Peerless focuses on two: Huila and Nariño. While we source from both, the largest supplier to us is Huila. Subtle floral notes, lemony bursts, bright cane sweetness, and an undeniable smoothness are the common attributes we love so much about coffees from Huila—and we're not the only ones. In the past six years, every single major coffee exporter has opened an office in Huila.

Arnoldo and I met up in Bogotá and immediately flew to Neiva, the capital of Huila. Out of the 1.3 million people who live in Huila, roughly 450,000 are directly involved in the growing or milling of coffee. There are 37 municipalities in Huila, and 35 grow coffee.

Our first stop was Cadefihuila, which is one of two co-ops in Huila. We tagged along with Steven Diaz, who heads up quality control for Expocafe, which is the export arm for the co-ops in Colombia. We source from Cadefihuila due to the strong, consistent quality we have

seen with our deliveries over the past several years. Great quality as per spec is wonderful, but consistent deliveries of great quality as per spec is something special.

The co-op has member farms north and south of Huila. The crazy thing is that north and south crop times are different. Colombia has two crops: main and *mitaca*, or secondary crop. In the north, the mitaca harvest was ending while the main crop was just about to begin in the south.

While I was there, the fields in south Huila were bursting with cherries. There was chatter that farmers would have trouble finding enough labor since the crop was so large. For reference, 60 percent of Huila's total crop comes from the south, while 40 percent comes from the north.

We spent a morning with the general manager, Saul Sanmiguel, and learned the co-op provides members with free school supplies, free cervical and prostate testing, university scholarships (950 scholarships to date), medical emergency funds, funeral funds, and a lot of crop education. Twelve staff agronomists are available to advise members, and lines of communication are constantly alive via cell phone. I was amazed to learn that the cost to join the co-op is roughly \$250 USD, which is held in an escrow account when paid. If the farmer chooses to leave the co-op, that money is returned to them.

While this seems extremely reasonable and the added value the co-op brings is impressive, many farmers choose not to join. They prefer to stay independent and choose who purchases their coffee.

There are three things to keep in mind when thinking about Colombia's farmers: The farmer profile in Colombia is typically small landholders who average 1.6 hectares per farm, or slightly under 4

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acres. Compare that to the average farm size in the United States, 400+ acres, and you can better appreciate how so many Colombians are involved in coffee.

Second, some 99 percent of Colombian farmers grow and wet mill their own coffee. This gives them control of their coffee and the costs associated with it. It also allows those who strive for coffee-quality excellence to achieve it individually.

Finally, the average age of the co-op's members is 57. Every year, that average number increases due to the departure of youth from the family coffee farms. This is a story I hear in just about every coffee country I have visited. At some point, this could become a worldwide production crisis.

We traveled by road to one of Cadefihuila's buying stations, which is one of several that collects the *pergamino*, grades the coffee, and pays the farmers. Prior to export, the dry mill and the central office in Bogotá will re-grade the coffee to ensure it matches the quality profile of the customer. These checks act as a guarantee of quality, which translates into happier customers. The combination of the grade and weight is what makes up most of the price paid. If the coffee has a certification, there is an additional premium added, finalizing the price.

On the day we visited, the co-op was paying the highest prices for 4C (regional designation) and FLO/Fair Trade. They pay premiums for roughly nine certifications. One certification you don't see very often in Colombia is organic. The Federation's focus has been on improving yield, which means they do not encourage the low-

Colombia as a whole, and specifically Huila, is having a big crop this year. It's obvious from how weighed down the trees are with cherry. Castillo is the leading variety now grown within Colombia. While rust resistance was the key driver for the switch from heirlooms to the FNC-designed Castillo, the cups that I tasted showed minimal if any quality difference from their other varieties. Win-Win.

er-yield practice of growing organically. Because Peerless is big into certified-organic coffees, I'm disappointed there's not more available here, but we continue to source some organics from Colombia, primarily in the north.

One of the farmers I met had traveled by bus to the station. She has a small, 5-acre farm and takes pride in producing a quality coffee—and she received the highest quality premium offered that day for her coffee.

From the buying stations, the *pergamino* is trucked to Neiva, where Cadefihuila operates a large dry mill called CafeTrilla. This dry mill is co-owned by the two co-ops in Huila. If you're lucky, you will be greeted at the mill by their pet iguanas, which are the size of small dinosaurs!

CafeTrilla has a stringent quality program and will sample a lot numerous times. This is the second of three checkpoints where a lot's quality is confirmed. They then bag the green coffee and ship it off to the port, where it boards a ship to far-off places like Oakland.

At the stencil station, they apply the individual lot marks and any other notes to the jute bags, including logos like ours. The white jute bags are fairly unique to Colombia. Most other countries have a brown jute bag, but every bag of Colombian green coffee from this mill gets

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Top: Parchment arriving at the co-op's dry mill to have the pergamino separated from the green beans. Since southern and northern Huila crops ripen at different times, this mill is twice as busy as others around the world. The last step after this is to bag and ship the coffees so we can enjoy them. Below: CadeftHuila operates a large retail store chock full of the tools farmers need to grow and process coffee effectively. The co-op buys in bulk so they can offer 20-30-percent discounts to their members. Not only are there thousands of items for sale, the team behind the counter comprises equipment experts, so they're a super resource to the co-op members.

shipped in Colombian-grown white jute.

Pergamino is delivered to the mill 24-hours-a-day during the harvest. With such a busy operation, it's no wonder more than 30 percent of the city population is tied to the coffee industry.

BACK TO BOGOTÁ

We ended the trip in Bogotá with a terrific cupping at another exporter, this one a specialist in microlots. No surprise to me that one of my favorites was from Huila, and I made a note to buy it.

We also visited the Colombia Coffee Federation offices in Bogotá, and were treated like VIPs. I was thrilled to learn that Juan Esteban Orduz, the head of the Federation's North America office, was in town. Juan Esteban knew my father and was at the awards ceremony a few years back. I've also had the pleasure of serving with him on the National Coffee Association board.

We watched an hour-long presentation focusing on all the great work that the FNC does for farmers. Established in 1927 by coffee farmers themselves, the organization focuses on making technology available to producers, expanding crop research, improving quality, premiums, and pushing sustainability. Their constituents include more than 500,000 Colombian families who grow coffee.

We discussed the quality focus and their exciting plan to only grow

100-percent sustainable coffee by 2027. Most of the conversation centered around how the Federation is working with the Colombian government to offer opportunities to the rebels who are close to signing a peace agreement. This agreement will include support for farming coffee in areas where coffee has not been traditionally farmed. This is rebel territory, which could open up a new coffee zone. I was fortunate to cup some coffee from this target area. While primitive, it showed great promise.

After, we cupped coffee from six regions with Nestor Perilla, who heads up quality control for the Federation. Every cup on the table was top-notch, but we all agreed the Huila and Nariño were the most exceptional.

Before heading home, Arnoldo and I had a chance to visit some specialty cafés in Bogotá—I was blown away! Café Devoción, which is in the modern Hilton Hotel, featured cold-brew Oji Japanese Drippers and a selection of Geshas and other exotic Colombian-grown coffees, any of which could be brewed by whatever method a customer requested.

The next two cafés we visited were stylish and offered exceptional hand-poured coffees. The smaller one, Libertario Coffee, is actually owned by a coffee farmer who has been experimenting with different varieties. At Bourbon Coffee Roasters, we both had delicious cups brewed through a dripper with water dispensed by a Marco Über Boiler.

The last café we visited though was the most impressive. Owner Jaime Duque worked for the FNC in their quality-control department for many years. He also was the Colombian representative for the Coffee Quality Institute, on whose board my father served. His café is called Catación Publica, or Public Cupping, and the name speaks for itself.

Behind the sparkling Synesso machine, the café walls are lined with signage extolling the health benefits of coffee. We spent time in Jaime's small roastery, where he hand tracks all of his roasts to document small shifts in taste variations.

Jaime offers coffees from 16 different microregions, with the goal of roasting coffee from every microregion in between Colombia's three *cordilleras* (mountain ranges). He's at about one-fifth of the way to his goal right now, and proud to be offering a newer region on the scene, Meta, which he feels could become exceptional. This is the same area the FNC hopes to engage rebels to allow coffee farming.

We talked coffee over several hand-poured tastings. Jaime and I bonded over the challenges in hospitality/foodservice when trying to convince clients to upgrade their quality. He told me about a fantastic restaurateur who visited him earlier that day whose wine by-the-glass list averages \$18 per glass. However, the restaurateur didn't understand why he needed to pay slightly more to get a much better specialty coffee versus the low-grade stuff he was currently buying. Anyone who has worked in hospitality has had those kinds of experiences, but if anyone is going to convince the customer to rethink restaurant coffee, it's Jaime.

I spent my long flights home reflecting on the experiences, images, and conversations I had on this return to Colombia. By the time my plane touched down in San Francisco, three things stood out in my mind:

Colombia is a country blossoming into its true vibrant, amazing self with an impressive café culture helping to lead the way.

The quality of coffee I cupped at every stop was exceptional.

The impressive consistency, especially out of Huila, was a marvel.

I couldn't wait to get back to Peerless headquarters to share what I'd learned with the team. **b**

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