



Navigating Origins

M E X I C O



MEXICO FACTS

Location Middle America, bordered on the north by the United States, on the east by the United States, the Gulf of Mexico and the Caribbean Sea, on the south by Belize and Guatemala and on the west by the Pacific Ocean.

Area Just over 761,000 square miles. Nearly three times the size of Texas.

Capital Mexico City

Languages Spanish

Monetary Unit Mexican Peso

Population 104,959,594

Terrain Varies from high, rugged mountains to low coastal plains, from high plateaus to desert.

Climate Throughout much of Mexico, the climate is characterized by high temperatures and moderate to low rainfall. The climate varies according to altitude—the coastal and lowland areas tend toward hot and steamy with high humidity, while inland is mostly mild.

Agricultural Exports Corn, wheat, soybeans, rice, beans, cotton, coffee, fruit and tomatoes.



Coffee

Mexican coffees are known for being light to medium in body with mild acidity and good balance. But because they often lack the richness and body many buyers look for, Mexican coffees were traditionally used in blends and as a flavoring base.

Today Mexico, like many other Central and South American countries, is gaining new attention for its single-origin, fair-trade and organic coffees. Some of this is due in part to the Mexican Coffee Council (Café de Mexico), which has been working to increase Mexican coffee's reputation by implementing an official quality certification program.

This is also partly due to consumers' increased interest in high-quality single-origin coffees from many of the coffee-producing countries. "We've seen the same things happening in Mexico that we've seen in other regions," says Andrew Miller, president of Café Imports. "People have started understanding the uniqueness of different regions. Mexico has recognized that it has different regions and that each region has its own flavor."

Mexico also has a long history of offering organic and fair-trade coffees, something that helps set it apart from other newer-to-the-fold countries. Currently Mexico is the main producer of organic coffee in the world, according to the Mexican Coffee Council.

"I think [Mexico] was one of the first countries doing organic and fair-trade," Miller says. "They were early on the roster of fair-trade producers. Part of what happened had to do with the coffee crisis—people who wanted to stay in the game had to differentiate."

Mexican coffee is also popular in the United States for one of the same reasons that coffee from Hawaii is popular. "Mexico is accessible," says Miller. "It's easy to get there and it's safe to go there." And once people visit a place, they often purchase coffee from that place, regardless of taste or quality.



Cultivation

Coffee is grown in 12 states of the Mexican Republic, according to the Mexican Coffee Council.

Much of Mexico's specialty coffee is grown in the regions of Chiapas, Oaxaca and Coatepec. The Chiapas area, a tropical jungle in the southeastern-most corner of Mexico, yields coffees that are bright and sweet with a hint of clove and apricot. The Oaxaca region, located on the southern Mexico Pacific coast, is known for medium-bodied coffees with chocolate and almond flavors. Coatepec, a mountainous region on the gulf side of the central mountain range, produces coffees with a light, nutty flavor and medium acidity.

It is estimated that about three million people are involved in coffee-related activities in Mexico, with more than 280,000 growers taking part. The majority of farms are small-holder, mostly less than 25 acres. Many farms are co-ops, and many of the country's farmers

are indigenous peoples of such groups as Amuzgos, Zapotecos, Nahuas and Tepasahuas.

Ninety percent of the coffee is washed and then fermented in tanks for approximately 36 hours. Coffee is sun- and machine-dried and then sorted both

electronically and by hand.

Coffee is an important agricultural product for Mexico, yet many small farmers are struggling to survive due to problems of



low yields and productivity, little access to credit, inefficient transportation and communication and lack of technical assistance.

"Some of these co-ops have been very successful," says Al Liu, director of culture and communications for Alterra Coffee Roasters, which has a partnership with a group of 70 coffee growers from Chiapas. "I think that getting the fair-trade certification has really helped them survive, especially through the coffee crisis."

Exporting

Although a large producer (the third largest on the American continent, after Brazil and Columbia), Mexico's exports are proportionally smaller than other coffee-producing countries in Latin America. That's because more than half of the coffee produced in Mexico is consumed within the country. This is something of an enigma, because Mexicans drink a great deal of soda, but not much coffee. In fact, it has more to do with Mexico's population than it does with the citizens' affinity for coffee. The Mexican Coffee Council, as well as other groups, is attempting to change this dynamic through education and advertising.

The coffee that does make it outside the country is consumed in 58 countries, with 80 percent of the exports being sent to Europe, according to the Mexican Coffee Council.

Future

The future of Mexican coffee lies in many ways in the hands of those co-ops and farmers who are producing single-origin, organic and fair-trade coffees. In addition, Mexican coffee may play a special role in the growth of specialty coffee despite—or perhaps because of—its mild flavor and acidity.

"In our industry, people are always looking for bold, bright flavors, and it's easy to write Mexican coffee off as not being bold enough," suggests Liu. "Mexican coffee is especially good to recommend to people who may be recent converts to the specialty coffee industry, because the flavors aren't that challenging and you want to ease people into this thing. I think that could really be a niche for Mexican coffee because it is so mild and easy to drink."

Resources

Mexican Coffee Council (Café de Mexico), www.cmcafe.org.mx

National Association of the Industry of the Coffee (ANACAFE), www.anacafemexico.com



MEXICAN COFFEE AT A GLANCE

Coffee Mostly arabica. Varietals include bourbon, typica, caturra and mundo nuevo.

Flavor Mexican coffees are typically well-balanced coffees with light to medium body and mild acidity. Sometimes offer delicate overtones of fruit and spice.

Main Growing Regions Chiapas, Oaxaca, Coatepec

Elevation 800–1,700 meters

Flowering January–May

Harvest August–March

Processing Mostly wet-processed. Sun- and machine-dried.

Shipping All-year, but mainly December–May

Main Buyers United States, Europe

