

N I C A R A G U A

By Joe Sinclair



NICARAGUA FACTS

Name Republic of Nicaragua

Location Central America, between Costa Rica and Honduras. Borders both the Caribbean Sea and the North Pacific Ocean.

Area The largest country in Central America at 129,494 sq. km. Slightly smaller than New York State.

Largest City Managua

Language Spanish

Monetary Unit Córdoba

Population 5,570,129

Terrain Both Atlantic and Pacific coastal plains rising to volcanoes and interior mountains.

Climate Tropical in the lowlands, cooler in the highlands.



Flag of Nicaragua

OF ALL THE PEOPLES in Central America, the Nicaraguan people are often referred to by their neighboring countries as *muy simpatico*. English translation: very pleasant. This is pretty amazing considering what the people of Nicaragua have endured over the past 40 or so years. From personal and political turmoil to poverty and natural disasters, Nicaragua has been through more than most of us can begin to understand. And yet, it is filled with people who continue to care deeply about what they do, but who have intense pride, not only in their country, but also in their work. Exceptionally high-quality coffee starts with this kind of care and dedication as it's passed from generation to generation. This, to me, is Nicaraguan coffee in a nutshell, or should I say, *in pergamino*.

My journey into Nicaraguan coffee started in 1986 when I met a girl. Ah, now that I have your attention, let me continue. This girl was from Nicaragua, and to make a long story short, she eventually became my wife. It just so happens that I have lived in Seattle my whole life and this girl from Nicaragua comes from a third-generation coffee farming family. Thus it was not long before we made the obvious connection between the family farm in Nicaragua and the exploding specialty coffee market in Seattle. Thus, it should come as no surprise that I am passionate about the people of Nicaragua, the beautiful country they call home, and the exceptional coffees this region is capable of producing, and indeed, that it is increasingly becoming known for.

History

Before we talk about the Nicaraguan coffee of today, a bit of recent history is in order. In the 1980s and '90s, the specialty coffee industry fell in love with some of the wonderful estate coffees from Central American countries, such as Guatemala, Costa Rica and El Salvador. However, prior to that, Nicaragua was also seen as a leader in Central American coffee production and quality. And yet for most of the specialty coffee industry, which grew up during that period, Nicaragua was not on the coffee radar.

So what happened? Volumes have been written regarding the past 40-plus years of Nicaraguan history. For those of us old enough to remember, we recall much of this history being played out on the nightly television news and in the newspapers during the '70s and '80s: back-to-back dictatorships, a devastating earthquake in 1972 leveling the capital city, the Sandinista revolution in 1979 ushering in an era of communism, the Reagan-backed Contra vs. Sandinista civil war to oust communism—the era was rife with political instability and corruption. The combination of these factors virtually devastated Nicaragua's coffee production, quality and, ultimately, its reputation.

I recall my first harvest on the family farm in 1987 and my father-in-law telling us he and all other

farmers were forced by law to sell their coffee at 10 cents per pound to the Sandinista government, which would then turn around and sell it on the international market for as much as \$2 per pound. It does not take a financial analyst to see that too many years of this led to production and quality taking a hit because no one could afford to reinvest in their farms. Only the very largest estates could invest and, ironically, many of these were seized in the name of the people by the government.

Amazingly though, even with these extreme circumstances, I still recall third-, fourth- and fifth-generation farming families taking a great deal of pride in doing whatever they could to produce the very best coffee they could, sticking with the production and processing practices that had been passed on through generations and helped them produce great coffees in the past.

Today

Enough of the dark past. The good news is that all of this changed in 1990 with free and open elections, which I am happy to say continue today. I say this even though Daniel Ortega, the former Sandinista president who was ousted in the 1990 election, was reelected 17 years later as the newest freely elected President of Nicaragua, just this past January. A free and peaceful transfer of power with open trade agreements and capital opportunities is now driving Nicaragua's coffee industry.

Even though Nicaragua remains the second poorest country in the western hemisphere, just ahead of Haiti, Nicaragua has clearly emerged from its darkest hour. Politics aside, there is real evidence of progress in all facets of life and notably in the coffee industry and how it is approaching new ways of producing coffee, processing coffee and supporting its farm workers through a variety of new and innovative programs.

A new breed of coffee producers is emerging and showing the way for the long time family producers of this region. These producers are taking aggressive steps and personal financial risk in order to drastically improve living conditions on their farms for workers, increase the size of their employment via state-of-the-art technology in their production, and by introducing the latest quality control checks to ensure they are producing exceptional coffee each year.

An example of these improvements is setting up labs at the farm and conducting regular cupping as a part of their quality control processes so that producers may taste the coffees they produce. Case in point: I took a mid-sized farmer with me to visit Victor Janovich's operation at State Street Coffee. This was the first time the farmer had ever cupped Nicaraguan coffee, and he is a fourth-generation farmer. Having seen the benefits of the process, he is now working to set up his first cupping lab on his farm.

This new breed of producers has something in common: they want to increase Nicaraguan coffee

in general, not just that from their own farms. They were all genuinely interested in telling the story about all Nicaraguan coffee and openly shared with each other about best practices. One example is Henry Heuck, who is part-owner of three farms and who runs an organization called RAMACAFE, which is all about advocating for Nicaraguan coffee. Heuck is incredibly passionate about getting the word out about Nicaraguan coffee and has been hosting a rapidly growing annual event in Managua, Nicaragua which is attracting attendance from around the globe. In just five years, he has gone from 75 attendees to nearly 600, including several international guest speakers and venders.

Growing Regions and Processing

Within Nicaragua, there are three main growing regions, all in the northern part of the country. The largest producing region is Jinotega, closely followed by Matagalpa, then much smaller in production but not in quality is the region of Nueva Segovia. All three of these regions produce some truly fine coffee with distinct characteristics.

Two of the local farmers—Victor Robelo of Finca Las Nubes and Edgar Arguello of Hacienda El Socorro—estimate there are some 30,000 coffee farms among these three regions, and that about 80 percent are of the smallest farm size of less than three hectares. The vast majority of the smaller size farmers are now joining cooperatives in an attempt to bring some predictability and survivability to their growing operations. During the most recent coffee crisis, Nicaragua produced just over 1M quintales (100 pound sacks) of coffee. Since then, the production has doubled, with the 2005/2006 crop equaling 2M quintales.

Nicaragua produces 100 percent arabica coffee, primarily of the caturra and bourbon varieties. There are other varieties, such as Pacamarra, produced in much smaller quantities. The majority of coffee is grown between 800 and 1400 meters in altitude and has the distinction of being strictly high grown (SHG).

The majority of coffee grown in Nicaragua is organic, mainly due to the simple fact that year-round fertilizing is far too expensive for most farmers. According to a January 2007 *Reuters* report, 80 percent of the 5.5 million inhabitants live on \$2 or less per day. So the decision between fertilizing the crop or feeding the family is an easy one. Thus, this organic farming has nothing to do with “certified organic.” I have talked with many farmers in Nicaragua and most will tell you the same thing about certification: that it is a burden thrust upon them by the neighbors to the north. It is yet one more expensive hoop for them to jump through, which they do not see as necessary and certainly cannot afford. I know this is controversial or perhaps even politically incorrect, but I am simply reporting what I witness and hear from a diverse cross section of small, medium and large farmers in Nicaragua.

Edgar Arguello of Hacienda El Socorro is a prime example; he has been farming organically for many years due to economic necessity and has a very impressive symbiotic operation between his small dairy on the lower part of the mountain and his coffee on the high side of the mountain. He is very proud to call his operation 100 percent organic but has no intention of certifying; he does not feel it is worth it for him.

In terms of cultivation and processing, not much has changed from generation to generation. The vast majority of coffee is wet-processed on the farm, soaking in fermentation chambers of clean water for up to 36 hours before heading to the patios for sun drying. From there it is off to the beneficio for final dry milling of the pergamino, sorting and grading the bean, and into the burlap exportation sacks.

Cup Profile

If you have not worked with or cupped much Nicaraguan coffee, you will want to know what is in this cup. Philip Meech, owner and roast master general of Caffè Lusso Coffee Roasters, who has roasted a number of different coffees from each of the three main regions, finds that Nicaraguan coffee “possesses a noteworthy spectrum of citrusy top notes.

Pronounced lemony or tangerine hints are common, but once in a while you get some apple or pear in there, too. This is on top of the usual suspects: A concentrated explosion of aromatics, bright acidity, mid-palate seduction, and a delicate floral finish.”

To highlight these flavors, along with the honey burst that can be found in really good Nicaraguan coffees, Meech suggests dropping a roast right at the first snap or two of second crack. “If you push the roast, you're going to push all the delicate nuances out of the bean and end up with commercial boring coffee,” he says. “The longer time in the washing tanks adds to great clarity in the cup, but simultaneously pulls a bit of thicker body and sweetness away. If you are familiar with pulped natural processing, you know what I'm talking about.”

Nicaraguan profiles, like most coffees, can be altered significantly with roasting techniques, says Meech. “I have experimented with drawing the sugars out between first and second crack, even closing the air damper and chopping the flame and letting the last 30 seconds of the roast move along a bit more leisurely, rolling the coffee around in its own pleasant smoke leading up to the beginning trace of second crack. This has produced more complexity, body, and lowered the acidity, without any sort of ‘baked’ flavor or residual smoky tang. However, it took me years to figure out how to get it right.”

So is a Nicaraguan coffee like a big bodied Guatemalan coffee? “Nope, but that is what my customers love about them,” says Meech. “You get a light, clean, refreshing cup of coffee with subtle nuances, and the instant it rolls down the back of your palate, the coffee is gone. Long gone. It finishes so quick that it's now just a memory, like the memory of the last perfect sunset you took in, a memory so perfect you long to find it again.”

Future

After spending time in Matagalpa during the 2007 harvest, I believe that Nicaragua is well positioned for a future of producing exceptional coffees. It's worth giving these citrusy, aromatic coffees a shot. And for those of you who've never been to Nicaragua, I strongly encourage you to come for a visit, and to start a conversation with the producers who are working so hard to produce amazing quality coffees in this area.

JOE SINCLAIR and his wife Katia (Arguello) Sinclair are owners of *Café de Apante* in Bothell, Wash., selling coffee (green and roasted) from their third-generation family farm located in Matagalpa, Nicaragua, in the Cerro Apante National reserve. You can reach them at joe@cafedeapante.com or www.cafedeapante.com.



NICARAGUAN COFFEE AT A GLANCE

Coffee Arabica, mainly caturra and bourbon

Cup Profile Bright, citrusy with a medium body

Main Growing Regions Jinotega, Matagalpa, Nueva Segovia

Altitude 700 to 1,700 meters

Farms Most less than three hectares

Processing Wet-processed, sun-dried