



C O L O M B I A



BY TIMOTHY J. CASTLE AND JOEL STARR



■ El Descanso—A view from a farm outside La Plata, Huila.

COLOMBIA FACTS

Capital City Bogotá

Location Northern South America, bordering the Caribbean Sea, between Panama and Venezuela, and bordering the North Pacific Ocean, between Ecuador and Panama.

Area 1,138,910 square km, nearly twice the size of Texas.

Languages Spanish

Currency Colombian peso (COP)

Population 44,379,598

Climate Tropical along coast and eastern plains. Cooler in highlands

Terrain Flat coastal lowlands, central highlands, high Andes Mountains and eastern lowland plains

Agricultural Products Coffee, cut flowers, bananas, rice, tobacco, corn, sugarcane, cocoa beans, oilseed, vegetables; forest products; shrimp

IT IS HARD TO imagine the world of coffee, much less the world of single-origin coffees, without including those of Colombia. In a large part due to the efforts of the Federacion Nacional de Cafeteros (FNC), Colombia's coffees are synonymous with high quality. Yet, while there are some unifying characteristics to the taste and aroma of Colombian coffee, these coffees are hardly monolithic in their cupping characteristics. Even within the several significant producing areas, there is great variation in style and quality from one microclimate to another.

Colombia boasts more than half a million coffee farmers producing anywhere from 10 to 25 bags on 870,000 hectares, with many lots as small as 50 kg. Due to the small size of the farms, it is necessary to complete thorough cuppings of every lot tendered by growers in order to obtain a good blend. This makes cupping Colombian coffees at origin both time consuming and expensive, but ultimately worthwhile in order to guarantee quality and consistency.

Two million Colombians rely directly on coffee for their livelihoods. There are very few estate coffees—sixty percent of Colombian coffee farmers cultivate their bushes on less than one hectare of land while only .5 percent have more than 20 hectares. Most of the coffee shipped from Colombia is a blend of the production from 50 or more individual farms. While this situation is typical of cooperatives in various regions of various coffee producing countries, it is unusual, and on Colombia's scale, unique for it to be the predominant arrangement.

Generally, given the vast complexity and variety of coffees coming from this origin, Colombian coffees can be characterized as sweet and big bodied with notes of caramel and balanced fruitiness. They have a long-held reputation as “self-drinking” or not in need of blending

in order to fill in any lack of balance. Conversely, some coffee blenders and roasters believe that Colombians, *because* of their great balance, are not the best blenders because they do not add single, identifiable notes, but rather a broad range of qualities and they can therefore muddle a blend when they are added.

Coffee farming in Colombia is, to put it quite simply, woven into the fabric of everyday life. People farm the land, producing most of the food and raising the animals that they eat. Money from coffee farming provides cash to improve homes, buy clothes, maintain cars, motorcycles and equipment and buy necessities for their children—and they always have children! Without the extra income that coffee provides, these farmers would be subsistence farmers. It is for this very reason that Colombian coffee farmers are so willing to try and please coffee buyers from North America. It is not uncommon to find a wet-mill architecturally integrated into a coffee farmer's home.

Selected Department Notes

Colombia's geo-political map is divided into departments, which also serve as more specific indicators of origin for Colombian coffees.

CAUCA—This department includes coffees from the Inza region and those areas surrounding the colonial city of Popayan. Cauca can be generalized as floral and feminine with great depth of complexity and lingering sweetness. They have low to medium body with delicate notes of peach, apricot and sugar cane.

HUILA—The department of Huila is more rural than Cauca. The coffees here have massive body and a heavy, syrupy texture, strong fruitiness and occasional tropical notes. Pitalito and its surrounding areas are becoming the largest coffee-producing region in Colombia. Huila

coffees can be bold, nutty, chocolaty and citric, with sweet caramel notes and have medium to high acidity.

NARIÑO—Further South, nestled atop rugged mountain peaks lies Nariño and its hub township La Union. Specialty coffee production here is in high demand, as evidenced by the Starbucks CAFÉ Practices plaques that grace the facades of many coffee farms. A satiny mouth feel along with a creamy, often buttery body accompanied by deep rich, dark fruity flavors, hints of spices and stone fruits can be tasted in the best coffees of Nariño.

SANTANDER—Large amounts of typica and shade coffee are grown here and much of it is Rainforest Alliance certified. With a drier micro-climate and a lower growing altitude, Santander coffees range from medium bodied, floral, soft and delicate with crisp acidity, to low acid, big bodied, earthy coffees with notes of tobacco.

SIERRA NEVADA—On the north coast of Colombia, at a relatively lower altitude and close to the Caribbean, lies the Sierra Nevada de Santa Marta, a mountain range isolated from the Andes chain that reaches an altitude well over 18,000 feet. The coffees here have big body, medium to low acidity, caramel, tobacco and spice notes. In Sierra Nevada, many farmers are part of either the Arhuaco or Kogui native tribes, both of which produce organic coffee.

TOLIMA—The coffees here are floral and crisp with bright acidity and a good, refreshing mouth feel. The South of Tolima is currently a center of FARC Guerilla activity and it is of strategic importance in Colombia's ongoing civil war. At the present moment it is not advisable to travel to South Tolima. North of Tolima's capital, Ibagué, however it is relatively safe and coffee is being produced and exported without incident.

Impending Problems

Drying coffee efficiently is a sticky point in improving coffee quality overall. Promoting the use of raised “Kenyan” drying screens for multitudes of quality minded farmers in the past year. Raised Kenyan beds allow more even and efficient drying than the patio method of drying but require some investment to build and install.

Global warming, or climate change is perceived as a very real threat by many Colombian coffee farmers and some are planting their coffee higher and/or buying land on which to do so. Additionally, many farmers are dependent on glacial ice as a source of irrigation water and a buffer between heavy rains and dry periods.

Erosion is the silent killer of valuable topsoil, especially as many coffee farms are situated on steep mountain sides. Once the rains come, fertile topsoil simply washes away to where gravity takes it. Planting perennial herbs, such as *Arachis Pinto*, adds structural integrity to the fragile topsoil without draining precious nutrients.

Cocaine production has tarnished the reputation of Colombia for decades. Colombia has strict security and a highly visible anti-narcotics police force. The thorough job that the anti-narcotics police do, however, creates problems for specialty coffee buyers. It is fair game for the anti-narcotics police to cut open freshly sealed vacuum-packed micro-lot to see if any contraband is stowed away inside. Once opened, the micro-lot cannot be resealed or even transported for that matter. A viable solution must be found to preserve the integrity of these painstakingly cultivated coffees while still addressing the concerns of the anti-narcotics police.

Security is a concern everywhere in the world today and Colombia is no exception. Colombia's image of being unsafe has certainly hurt its tourist trade and kept many coffee roasters from understanding this unique and prolific producer of quality coffees.

Café de Colombia

The coffees of Colombia have been good for decades and right now they are better than they have ever been. With the influx of quality-minded roasters taking an active part in coffee selection processing and packaging, the coffees of Colombia are quickly becoming the world's finest. It should be said that although we've mentioned some of Colombia's deeply rooted problems, Colombia is much safer to visit now than ever before.



■ Alipio's Tank—Narino Farmer Jose Alipio Munoz's has integrated fermentation tanks into the design and construction of his home.

COLOMBIA COFFEE AT A GLANCE

Farm Size One to two hectares

Main Growing Regions Antioquia, Caldas, Tolima and Huila

Flowering First semester around September, second semester around March. Lots of minor flowering occurs between.

Harvest First semester April–July, second semester Sept.–Dec.

Shipping Year round, except for regions with only one harvest, which are mainly Sierra Nevada, Santander, Nariño, Cundinamarca and Boyaca.