

HONDURAS BY ELLEN MICKLE

HONDURAS IS A country of contradictions. Dense, low-lying jungles skirt its interior, cloud-scraping mountains. Mayan ruins evoke a past civilization's achievements in what is now the third-poorest country in the Western hemisphere. The country's flag itself embodies the two faces of Honduras, with its two blue horizontal stripes symbolizing the two coasts (Caribbean to the north and Pacific to the south).

Similarly, Honduras enjoys all the physical features necessary for growing quality coffee, but because it lacks the infrastructure benefiting growers in nearby Costa Rica and Guatemala, most of its exports end up as filler for inexpensive blends. As Central America's second-largest coffee producer, with a 2008–2009 harvest of nearly 4 million 60-kg. bags, Honduras has great potential to develop into a more widely recognized origin for quality coffees.

HISTORY AND PRODUCTION

Coffee is grown in 15 of the country's 18 provinces. Yet about 55 percent of production comes from just three provinces: Santa Barbara (in the northwest, bordering Guatemala), El Paraiso (in the southwest, bordering Nicaragua) and Comayagua (a centrally located province east of Santa Barbara). At a glance, Honduras seems geographically disadvantaged

for growing coffee because it lacks something common to renowned Central American origins: a Pacific coastline. Indeed, Honduras' best coffee-growing region borders Guatemala's less renowned origins in the Izabal, Zacapa and Chiquimula departments, and the country's lengthy Caribbean coastline to the northeast makes it especially vulnerable to tropical storms like Hurricane Mitch, which struck in 1998. However, the country's latitude and elevation provide the necessary climate (with a temperature range of 66–82 degrees F) to produce excellent quality coffees, evinced by the fact that some national coffee competition lots auction for more than \$18 per pound and that every year an estimated 85,000 bags are smuggled to Guatemala or El Salvador and sold under the names that have been

established for those regions. Honduras' main obstacle is a disorganized trade infrastructure that often causes producers to grow for quantity rather than quality, but a national will and commitment over the next 10 to 20 years can make good things happen for Honduran coffee and coffee families.

Historically, Europeans have been involved with quality Honduran coffee-growing: the Spanish brought coffee plants to the Americas in the 18th century, and the expertise of 20th-century German immigrants helped Marcala (in the La Paz department) to become the first denomination of origin registered in Central America. In recent years, growers' cooperatives and NGOs have helped acquaint roasters worldwide with specialty Honduran coffees coming out of departments other than La Paz, and have helped double the country's quality coffee production from 2005–2008.

Many cooperatives, such as the Fair Trade Cooperativa Agropecuaria Regional Nuevo Eden (COARENE), with 192 member farmers in the western Intibuca department, have

helped connect Honduran quality coffee farmers with their markets since the 1990s. The larger-scale La Central de Cooperativas Cafetaleras de Honduras (La Central) organized 61 coffee cooperatives throughout 10 departments in 1997 and helps its 6,000 small- to medium-sized growers not only market at premium prices, but finance increased production or value-adding activities with credit assistance. The Honduran Coffee Institute (IHCAFE), established in 1970 and privatized in 2000, provides coffee producers with assistance in order to improve coffee production methods and marketing. IHCAFE

helps organize the Cup of Excellence (COE) competition, now in its sixth year in Honduras, which showcases small-scale coffee farmers' harvests to North American and European roasters, who

judge and purchase the coffees in an auction. IHCAFE also actively researches improving production methods; the institute has established a coffee cupping school, numerous agricultural centers, and developed a high-yielding, disease resistant variety of the catimor tree (otherwise known as robusta). Paul V. Songer, head judge for Cup of Excellence Honduras 2009, considers increased planting of the catimor variety, which needs to grow in full sun, a "major issue," and a result of farmers' need to choose between "either increasing production possibly at the expense of quality or increasing quality often at the expense of production."

Mechanized sun coffee production constitutes a minority of Honduran coffee production, however. Ninety percent of Honduran coffee producers are small-scale, harvesting less than 5,000 pounds per year, and estimates of how much is grown under shade range from 65 to 98 percent. The best coffees are designated as Strictly High Grown (SHG), grown at 1,500–2,000 meters (about 4,900–6,500 feet). Honduran coffee possesses a natural sweetness

and lower-than-expected clean Central American acidity in the cup, making it a good enhancement to espresso blends. Despite these favorable conditions and the recent growth in quality coffee production, most Honduran coffee is washed arabica that is partly processed and wet-milled, without being dried to 12 percent moisture. More than 90 percent of the country's coffee is shipped from its northwestern Puerto Cortez on the hot Caribbean coastline, where warehouse storage may compromise any coffee quality that survived the sometimes-marginal processing methods.

NEW TECHNOLOGIES

Recently, lesser-known quality coffee origins have established a name in the industry by encouraging growers to market online via Geographic Information Systems (GIS)-based tools called Internet mapping servers. A GIS is a computerized system for the collection, storage, manipulation and output of spatially referenced information, and may be used to compile layers of data on different factors pertinent to coffee production in order to help retailers find new desirable origins and even inform farmers of the best growing land.

In 2003, the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) and the U.S. Geological Survey partnered to develop an Internet mapping server called GeoCafe for Guatemala, Costa Rica and the Dominican Republic. GeoCafe's services may be part of the reason Guatemalan and Costa Rican coffees trade with at least a 7 percent premium over Honduran coffees, and Leonidas Batista Diaz, the executive director of Codocafe, the Dominican Republic's coffee board, has stated: "The new specialty coffee market demands timely and accurate information, the provision of which can be greatly facilitated by the use of information tools and data sets that can be integrated on the Web by Internet map servers."

With data on Honduras's range of variables amenable to quality coffee production, I produced a GIS similar to GeoCafe, and it mapped favorable land for growing quality coffee in eight western departments: Santa Barbara, Copan, Ocotepeque, Lempira,

Intibuca, La Paz, Comayagua and Francisco Morazon. Variable ranges considered amenable to production include 400–1,700 meters (1,300–5,600 feet) of elevation; annual temperature ranges of 60–75 degrees F; annual precipitation ranges of 100–430 centimeters (40–173 inches); and gently sloping (5–24 percent), moderate- to well-drained, slightly pH-acidic (6–7) soils.

Most of the land found by GIS analysis to be physically suitable for growing quality coffee covers areas currently in coffee production, and falls within one kilometer of a road. However, I would consider one 1,000-hectare favorable area in the Santa Barbara department in northwestern Honduras an optimal source because the region is not designated a conservation priority area by the World Wildlife Fund, and because most top-ranking COE farms in 2008 and 2009 are located in the Santa Barbara department. Two top COE farmers in Santa Barbara, at the La Guinellera and El Plan farms, spend about an hour transporting their coffee harvests by pickup to their nearest processing facility and exporter, and they (as well as another COE 2008 farm, San Jose) are interested in agro-forestry, or using their land to growing diversified products, such as timber. Given the regional interest in quality coffee production and the farmers' shared need for processing, it is fair to assume that this area is prime for a cooperative development and is an exciting source for quality coffee.

It is also worth noting that the areas identified as favorable by the GIS are near areas known for either quality coffee production or sustainable agriculture: in the southwest, there is Marcala and its associated cooperative, Regional Cooperative for Organic Growers of the Mountains (RAOS); and in the center, there is the La Campa municipality of the Lempira department, home to the Lenca indigenous peoples, who have been historically proactive in reforestation efforts. Tools such as the GIS may assist groups such as Lenca peoples, cooperatives, and COE farms in coordinating their efforts to increase the value of their land.

FUTURE

Honduran quality coffee farmers face a number of challenges. Many smallholder farmers are losing laborers to higher-paying jobs with factories or vegetable plantations, and may be tempted to grow more intensive "sun coffee" in lieu of a trade infrastructure which would allow their quality coffees to garner a fair price. In order to fully realize their production potential and compete with producers in other Central American countries, Honduran growers require technical assistance that U.S. organizations have provided its neighbors.



HONDURAS FACTS

OFFICIAL NAME Republic of Honduras

AREA 112,492 square kilometers (43,433 sq. miles)

LOCATION Bordered by Guatemala to the west, El Salvador to the southwest and Nicaragua to the southeast. The majority of its coastline is delineated by the Caribbean Sea to the north and east; the Gulf of Fonseca (Pacific Ocean) is situated in the southwest corner of the country.

CAPITAL Tegucigalpa

LANGUAGE Spanish

POPULATION 7 million

MONETARY UNIT Lempira

Competitions like COE are helping connect growers and retailers. After judging for COE Honduras 2009, Jon Ferguson—owner of Cultiva Coffee in Lincoln, Neb.—was able to buy a lot from the area where he had volunteered in the Peace Corps. Ferguson helped to identify infrastructure parameters for the GIS project in Honduras, and he says that he would like to see more involvement of such technological tools in coffee trade. Tools similar to the GIS may help to foster more of these grower-retailer connections, garner consistent attention for Honduran coffee, and help the vibrant fair-trade movement to realize its full potential in Honduras.

ELLEN MICKLE studied GIS and Honduran quality coffee production for her thesis at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln in 2009. She is currently interning at the Rodale Institute for organic farming and plans to travel to Colombia in early 2010 to learn more about coffee and farmer cooperatives. Please feel free to contact her at ellenmickle@yahoo.com.

