

# Coffee

## FACES

THE MONTHLY NEWSLETTER  
OF VIRMAX CAFÉ



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Since September 2001, when we first entertained the idea of developing and marketing Colombian Specialty Coffees, we have talked to numerous coffee growers, coffee co-ops, importers and roasters, analysing the market and developing a coherent strategy for our product within a niche market.

In July 2002 our subsidiary, Virmax Colombia Ltda, was born, in effect giving birth to the only Colombian green coffee exporter specialized in high quality coffees.

Currently, only one and a half years after we started this coffee adventure, we have established firm business relationships with renowned coffee importers and roasters in different continents, and continue to establish ourselves as the supplier of choice when it comes to high quality Colombian coffees.

Key to our development has been our commitment to quality and the partnerships we have forged with both coffee growers and customers. By working directly with the growers we can advise them on how to produce premium quality coffees and to offer our customers traceability and consistency. We also pride ourselves in offering our customers a personalized service, which is almost unparalleled in the industry. We are in the business of generating partnerships, looking for win-win situations that can really generate a benefit for all the parties involved. This is not a slogan; it's almost a way of life.

This newsletter is the first of the many we expect to publish on a monthly basis. It will be your opportunity to meet our coffee

growers, to learn about the Colombian premium quality coffees, as well as insights into the details of how to grow and process quality coffees. As we are constantly travelling around the country, either to keep in touch with our coffee growers or to find new coffees and to establish partnerships with growers, we will also include trip reports so you will be able to get to know the regions where your coffee comes from. Finally, we will include news and anecdotes of interest and will be inviting some people to write their opinions.

By publishing this monthly newsletter we aim to be able to transmit to our customers and everybody involved or interested in Colombian Coffee, a line of interesting and current information about one the most fascinating origins in the coffee world.

If you would like to share ideas, or have any comments regarding our newsletter please feel free to contact us, we will try our best to accommodate them.

We hope you enjoy your reading along with a fresh cup of Colombian Coffee... ■

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## LA UNION, NARIÑO

Café La Unión is one of our new coffees for the mitaca harvest. It is grown in the hills surrounding the town of La Unión, in the department of Nariño (Southern Colombia). As part of the preparations for the start of the harvesting season, Alejandro Cadena, Managing Director of our Colombian office, visited the region and met the coffee growers of ASPROUNION, the coffee growers association which supplies us with Café La Unión. Here is a summary of his trip.

**A**SPROUNION, through their main coordinator, Mr. Roberto Tulcan, kindly invited me to speak at their annual meeting. I had been planning to visit the region for some time, so I gladly accepted the invitation, hoping to take full advantage of my trip to get to know the region and the coffee growers, as well as to give them advice on how to improve the quality of their coffee, in preparation for their harvesting season, which will begin at the end of this month.

We started working with ASPROUNION towards the end of last year's harvest (June 2002), and even though we received good feedback from our customers, it was impossible to get our hands in ASPROUNION's coffee last year. In order to avoid the same from happening again, this year we have made a commitment to purchase at least four full containers of their coffee (approximately 1,000 bags of 70 kg each).

On Saturday March 1, I took the first flight out of Bogotá to Popayán, the nearest city to La Unión. There, I was greeted by Roberto and three other members of ASPROUNION. We then drove from Popayán to La Unión, a beautiful three-hour trip, during which we talked about the region and the work they have been doing since the foundation of ASPROUNION in August 2001.

We arrived to La Unión just after lunch, and soon after I started visiting some of the member's farms. I was surprised to see such a beautiful coffee growing region: the scenery was very green, with different tonalities due to the mixture of coffee and banana trees. Their coffee trees are well kept - mostly of the Caturra variety, with some *Typica* and *Bourbon* trees remaining. Constant fertilization (mostly organic nowadays) results in good yields; most farms have shade-grown coffee, with banana and plantain grown in between the coffee trees, which allows growers to earn a small income the time they are not producing coffee (unlike other Colombian coffee growing regions, Nariño only produces coffee once a year, from April to June). They also have nogales, guadua and *cachimbos* as shade trees.

I visited six farms from as many members of ASPROUNION, all quite different and none bigger than 4 hectares. I took the opportunity to give them some advice on better beneficio practices that will help improve the quality of their coffee. One of the main



recommendations I gave was to improve their drying patios and to monitor very closely the wet process so that they do not over-ferment their coffee in the water tanks. As part of my visit, we agreed on sending samples of each the member's farm to our cupping lab in Bogotá so that we can identify possible mistakes made during harvest and *beneficio* and therefore try to get as many people producing high quality coffee.

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## ABOUT ASPROUNION



ASPROUNION was founded in August 2001 by 121 coffee growers from the Municipality of La Union, Nariño. The association was founded as a way to unite forces

with the objective of eliminating middle-men in the commercialization of coffee and therefore obtain better prices for their coffee.



As of today, ASPROUNION has more than 180 members, each with approximately 3 ha. of land. During the 2002 crop they sold over 180,000 kilos of parchment coffee. This year they are planning on selling over 500,000 kilos of parchment coffee, of which at least 200,000 will be premium quality coffee. Their member's potential production is over 1 million kilos of parchment coffee per year. ■

The following day was ASPROUNION's annual assembly where I was invited as the guest speaker. Almost all the 180 members of ASPROUNION were there, as well as some other coffee growers from the region. I talked informally with them for about two hours, discussing the three criteria of high quality coffees (physical quality, cup quality and consistency) and the five principles that guide our relationship with coffee growers. I answered their questions, mostly about what they needed to do to grow and process high quality coffees and stimulated them to become part of the increasing number of Colombian coffee growers that get paid a premium price for producing high-quality coffee.

Unfortunately, right after I finished my talk I had to head back to Bogotá (I was starting the milling of our March shipments the next day), but as I left some of the growers came up to me and thanked me for visiting them and giving them advice on how to improve their coffee. I could see the excitement in their faces and their anxiety to start working as soon as the mature beans appear on producing the best coffee they can. They know it will not be an easy task. With coffee prices so low, there is not enough money to spend on making improvements. But after seeing their faces and answering their questions, I am sure that we will easily



**C**afé del Paraiso is the latest addition to our portfolio of high quality Colombian coffees. Grown in Hacienda La Virginia, a 100 hectare estate located in the South of the Department of Huila, Café del Paraiso is a true single-estate coffee (a rarity in Colombia, where farms average a mere 1.5 hectares). Café del Paraiso is named after the area where the Hacienda is located, the *Vereda El Paraiso* (which in Spanish means "paradise"). And the region is truly paradise: a beautiful valley in-between two mountains, crossed in the middle by the river Neiva, just before the vast Amazon Savannah begins.



Although the Hacienda produces over 2 million kilos of parchment coffee (enough for over 80 full containers), Café del Paraiso is available in limited quantities, being a selection of the best of the crop.

Under the management of the third generation of the Lara family, Hacienda La Virginia has developed a modern approach to the cultivation of coffee, without forgetting about its social and environmental responsibilities.

Café del Paraiso is characterized by a delightful floral aroma, similar to the crispness of an early morning in the countryside, and a smooth cup with a perfect balance between acidity and body.

As we speak, a first lot of Café Paraiso is en-route to our warehouse in England. We expect to start sending landed samples of this lot by the second half of April.

From there on we don't believe we can keep it under our roof for too long. ■

be able to source the four containers we have committed on buying.

The people of La Union were very hospitable and invited me to come back to visit them soon. I told them that my next visit depended on their ability to

produce high quality coffee. I have a gut feeling that I will be back in La Union very soon.

*Café La Union will be available for shipment starting in June. Look out for our samples in the post. Hopefully you will agree with us that Café La Union is an excellent coffee.* ■

## DID YOU KNOW?

As you may already know, Colombia has two coffee harvesting seasons. The so-called “Main Season”, which occurs between September and January, and the “Mitaca” (or fly-crop) Season, which occurs between April and July. The reason behind this is the seasonality of winter (rainy) and summer (dry) periods, which differ in every region.



The main coffee growing regions (Antioquia, Huila and the Viejo Caldas) harvest coffee during both seasons, although during the Mitaca there is a smaller quantity of coffee than during the Main season. The following chart summarises the seasonality of every Colombian coffee growing area:

Main Season Only	Mitaca Season Only	Both Seasons
Boyacá Cesar	Cauca Cundinamarca	Antioquia Viejo Caldas (Caldas, Quindio and Risaralda)
Sierra Nevada	Huila (North) Nariño	Huila (South) Santander Tolima Valle

## OFFERING SHEET

### UK Warehouse

Brand	Preparation	Position	No. of Bags	Notes
La Cacica	EUR, SG	CLEARING	7	R
La Cacica	EUR, SG	DEL April	155	R
Café Bohemio	EUR, PG	DEL April	250	E
Timaná	EUR, PG	DEL April	100	R
Café del Paraíso	EUR, SG	DEL April	243	E

Updated: March 17, 2003

### Terminology

E: Estate  
O: Organic  
R: Relationship Coffee:  
Produced by a co-op or  
association of coffee  
growers

EUR: European Preparation  
(screen 15+)  
PG: SCAA Premium Grade  
preparation  
SEL: Select (screen 18+)  
SG: SCAA Special Grade  
preparation  
SUP: Supremo (screen 17+)  
UGQ: Usual Good Quality  
(screen 14+)

AFLOAT: Coffees that are on  
their way to our  
warehouses and will be  
available in the next 4  
weeks  
CLEARING: coffees are  
clearing customs. Should be  
in our warehouses in about  
a week  
DEL: Coffees that are  
supposed to be delivered  
the last day of the month  
listed  
SHP: Coffees that are to be  
shipped in the month listed  
SPOT: Coffees in our  
warehouse

## MITACA PREVIEW

This year's Mitaca has all the ingredients to be an exciting one. Currently we can anticipate two main issues:

1. The continuity of the high quality shown by coffees whose main crop is during the October to December cycle, albeit in smaller quantities; and
2. The entrance into stage of coffees whose main crop (and in some cases its only crop) is the Mitaca cycle. Among this last batch we can find new coffees from the North of Huila, as well as Cauca, Cundinamarca and Nariño.

Currently we are very busy analysing samples, discussing the *Mitaca* crop with growers, and beginning to make our own estimates in terms of quality and quantity. We feel very optimistic with what we have seen so far and the commitment shown by coffee growers is at its height.

We will keep you informed of any developments with regards to the Mitaca crop with reports in late March, mid-April and mid-May. So stay tuned... ■