

Coffee

THE NEWSLETTER
OF VIRMAX CAFÉ



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FACES

Hello again. It may seem odd to find two editions of Coffee Faces in your Inbox with such a short time between them. But hey, if we're not shipping high quality coffee then all we can do is talk about it.

Over the last few months, there has been a lot of noise about coffee competitions and Internet auctions for high quality coffees. Among the best exponents we have: Cup of Excellence® (in Nicaragua, El Salvador, Brazil – and now Honduras), the Golden Crop® (in Costa Rica), the CQI's Q Auctions, and the Exceptional Cup® (Guatemala). These initiatives have several things in common: finding and rewarding the best coffees.

How do you find the best coffees? Through intensive cupping that in most cases include experienced cuppers from purchasing countries. How do you reward the best coffees? Through an open auction, a transparent method of price discovery completely separated from the commodities market, while assuring that the majority of the price paid goes to the farmers.

Of course, these auctions are not going to solve all the problems that most of the coffee producing countries are currently facing. But we do believe that these events do increase the level of awareness that a certain region, farm, and country has within the specialty industry. Thanks to initiatives such as this, growers have been able to show the world the quality of their coffees and earn recognition from buyers and coffee drinkers, as well as begin to establish long-term business relationships with them. These initiatives are the groundwork towards building long-term sustainability within the coffee industry.

Colombia, as we all know, has for many decades promoted itself as a producer of higher-than-average, homogenous coffee. It

has never dedicated enough resources to finding and developing the unique and exceptional coffee among its 10 million coffee bags and more than 500 thousand coffee growers, preferring to obtain a small premium for its huge quantities of commercial coffee.

We believe that this type of events would be the best and most transparent way to let hundreds or thousands of small, medium and large Colombian quality-conscious coffee growers to rise from anonymity. It would also be a quantum leap in terms of raising the awareness of Colombian coffee among the specialty coffee industry.

We know from experience that Colombia has the potential for amazing coffees. It is just a matter of finding them before they are lost for good. In fact, some of you already know from experience that some of the country's coffee growers are already producing exceptional coffee (in part thanks to our work).

We are committed to continuing our work towards finding these exceptional coffee growers.



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VIRMAX IS A PROUD MEMBER OF:



We strongly believe that a wider effort from all the Colombian coffee industry is needed to organize a transparent and open competition/auction of truly great Colombian coffees. We would surely commit our experience, time and resources to help such an initiative and know that many coffee buyers would be very keen to participate.

In this edition of Coffee Faces, you will find a brief report on Alejandro Cadena's trip to visit La Esperanza del Huila, one of our new coffees, as well as a report on how the coffee bags we use get their markings. Coffee Drops is also returning, with fresh information on Virmax and our new initiatives. We hope you enjoy it while drinking a true Colombian Specialty coffee!! ☕



Coffee FACES

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Dessicant gelpads / ABSORBAGS



Since the first shipments of the 2003/2004 coffee year, we have been using for our Specialty Coffee shipments special dessicant gelpads called "Absorbags". These gelpads help control moisture accumulated inside the containers filled with coffee, avoiding potential condensation issues that can damage the cargo. So far we have had a good experience with this particular product, if they are installed correctly in the container.

Absorbags are one-time-use moisture absorbents. It is designed to hang from the loops of the container's interior and to fit in the recesses of the container walls. The upper chamber of the unit contains the absorbent medium,

calcium chloride, which absorbs the moisture in the air of the container and transfers it to the lower chamber in the form of water, where it is stored safely.

We think using these moisture absorbents can protect our high quality coffees during their voyage from the Colombian port to our customer's warehouse. If you would like to learn more about this new initiative to protect our coffee, please feel free to contact us. ☕

TRAVELOGUE: La Esperanza del Huila

An important part of the partnerships we have with the coffee grower associations is the constant contact between them and us. We usually visit them four times per year; twice during the harvest period to check how they are doing; and twice once the harvest has finalized to give them feedback and check if they have adopted any of the recommendations provided during previous visits.

This is how at the end of March I traveled to the South of Huila to visit the five CGA's we work with in this area of the country. I was mostly impressed by the work that the Asociación Colinas del Macizo La Esperanza, the producers of La Esperanza del Huila Relationship Coffee, had done since the last time I visited them.

The Bruselas vereda, where they are located, is about 20 minutes from Pitalito. It started to rain pretty hard as I arrived there, and I met with at least 50 members of the Asociación who were waiting for me. They were pleased to see



me and even thanked me for bringing some rain, which is curious since I had nothing to do with it. The rain of course will help the bean growth of the main harvest, which they will start to pick in October/November of this year.

I related to them how things went with the first 270 bags that we exported

together, explaining among others how the Peso/Dollar exchange rate had negatively affected their sobrepuestos. Some of them were initially unhappy about the amount of money received, but I insisted on the long-term vision of the specialty business, how they had just started a business relationship with a customer, and how the fruits of this effort would be seen over the long run. Patience and continuity are a big part of success in this market. Results are almost never achieved in the short-term.

My impression is that they understood this because at the end of our meeting their faces looked happy. They also mentioned that they would be producing another 100 thousand kilos of high quality parchment for the mitaca crop, which starts mid-April, insisting that we should start to find a buyer for their coffee.

We then sat down for a sancocho (a typical plate composed of soup, rice, hen, potato, yucca and plantain). Afterwards we visited some of the



member's farms. I was gladly impressed to see the dramatic changes in their coffee processing facilities and in their quality of life.

I left just after 3:00 PM thinking that "there are still many things to improve, but the Asociación is on the right track." Our task now is to continue promoting their coffee in order to find a loving buyer for them and La Esperanza del Huila Relationship Coffee. We will be sending samples starting in mid-May. ☺



Until a year ago, most of the Asociación's members sold their parchment coffee wet (basically, they processed their coffee using the wet process but never dried it). This of course was an easy way of receiving money for their coffee rapidly, but also meant that they received as much as 50% less for their coffee than if they had sold it in dry parchment. Additionally, this meant that their coffee was blended, since it was usually dried in big fuel fired silos with coffee from other coffee growers. Not to mention about the quality of the resulting lots and the loss of La Esperanza's identity and cup profile!!!!

Thanks in great part to the support of the ACIDI/VOCA Specialty Coffee Program, the group's members are now selling almost 100% of their coffee in dry parchment. Some of the group's members received brand new depulpers and money to build new beneficiados and drying patios, which gave many others a huge incentive to do the same.

Armed with this new infrastructure, the Asociación's members produced 100 thousand kilos of high quality parchment coffee for the main crop season that ended last January.

We were truly impressed by the quality and consistency shown by their coffee and so were some of our customers.

- This year, once again, both Alejandro Cadena and Giancarlo Ghiretti will be attending the SCAA Conference and Exhibition to be held in Atlanta. We both look forward to meeting all of you there. You can contact us while there at +44 7939 138344 or by e-mail at info@virmax.com.
- During the last week of March, Alejandro Cadena visited all of the coffee growers we are working with in the south of Huila, spending time at their farms. The visit had a double purpose: report on the outcome of the first half of the 2003/2004 crop, including the personal delivery of sobrepuestos, and to continue to motivate the growers to produce quality coffees and making recommendations that once implemented will contribute to increases in quality and consistency of their coffees.
- We also visited Hacienda La Rochela and other larger farms in the north of Valle del Cauca, mainly with the same purposes as above. We are already exporting La Rochela Organic Coffee and believe its quality will continue to improve in the coming months. Among the other farms we visited we believe there is potential for the development of Estate Coffees. In the coming months we will work hand-in-hand with them to achieve this.
- During our recent visit to Hacienda La Rochela we learned that they are well under way in their efforts to obtain the Utz Kapeh certification by the middle of the year. We hope to have La Rochela Utz Kapeh certified for the beginning of the 2004-2005 crop.