



Colombia Auction Lot: EL NOGAL

TASTING NOTES

Complex aromatics of yellow flowers, sweet herbs and lemon drops transform into notes of Rainier cherry and cantaloupe in the cup. When you least expect it, the acidity bursts forth with Meyer lemon and clementine orange. The finish is cheerfully tart and leaves behind hints of passion fruit and fresh licorice root.

COFFEE

LOCATION Florencia, Cauca
FARM El Nogal
FARMER Oscar Fuentes
VARIETAL Caturra
ALTITUDE 1550 m
HARVEST July - August 2009

CHARACTERISTICS

FLAVOR Floral, Rainier cherry, cantaloupe
ACIDITY Citric, decisive
MOUThFEEL Clean, juicy
FINISH Pleasantly tart, passion fruit

GEOFF'S NOTES

I can get a little skeptical when I run into development agencies operating projects in coffee-producing countries that purport to help farmers achieve better livelihoods. There has been a long history of failure in that regard as various NGO's parachute in, set up offices, and then go about trying to spend a couple of million dollars of USAID money. A lot of that money can get used up pretty quickly without really providing lasting benefit to the intended recipients. Administrative overhead, US-based contractors or consultants with high pay rates, simple inefficiencies, and a lack of real understanding of the idiosyncrasies of the coffee market can eat up funding like a whale eats plankton—in a few big gulps.

Sometimes the ideas are strong but the operators don't have the right qualifications to effectively implement them. Sometimes the intentions are good but the strategies are critically flawed. And of course, sometimes there is outright corruption that short-circuits any hope of the project working as intended. The biggest problem often seems to be one of time—big, lasting change, especially with agriculture, usually requires lots of it. But most projects are set up with a specific time window, perhaps three years, and a certain amount of funding allocated for spending within this period.

At the end of the time period, either the project ends and everyone moves on to the next thing or attempts are made to acquire more funding based on demonstrated successes so that the project can be extended. Often it turns into this funky dance where the project operators are spending as much time chasing the next source of funding around as they are actually working on the project itself. As the project moves into the second and third years, the pressure grows to justify one's existence in the eyes of the donors, and there is a mad scramble to come up with evidence that this wasn't just a massive waste or resources. At that point you see all kinds of funny things go on...or things that would be funny if they weren't so plain sad. I see them all the time and one of the mistakes that gets repeated over and over is that idea of coffee quality—the real, intrinsic quality of the coffees being produced—is either poorly understood or not recognized as important.

Sometimes this is because there is a feeling that coffee is still a commodity and that this whole “specialty” thing is just a niche that isn't so consequential in macro-economic picture. Or it is because quality in the cup is regarded as too elusive to pin down and quantify, so it just gets paid lip service and is not treated as a central



objective. That's problematic because by the time the curtain falls producers will need something they can hold on to, and the ability to produce legitimately and consistently great, high quality coffees is something of tremendous value that farmers should take with them and use to their benefit long after the development organization has pulled up stakes and moved along.

Some of the best projects I've seen in coffee have been the ones that recognized up front that to really accomplish anything lasting they would need to plan for continuity and be willing to keep operating the project until it either began to be self-sustaining and self-regenerating or until it was deemed a failure.

For this reason I like what ACIDI/VOCA has done in Colombia in recent years. They've been operating a Specialty Coffee project in Colombia since 2002, and it is one of the more thoughtful, well executed, and well planned I've run into. Unsurprisingly, given these preconditions it has also been fairly successful. In 2008 some of the personnel changed, some project names were refreshed, and some new acronyms were likely invented, but the work continues in a similar fashion.

This year ACIDI/VOCA decided to put together a quality competition in order to recognize the achievements in quality that the producers in their programs had realized. The coffees came from producers in the departments of Huila, Tolima, Cauca, Narino, and Cundinamarca. From an initial group of 150 coffees 56 were selected to move on to the semi-finals. The final round took place in Ibague on September 13 during an ExpoCafe event, a Specialty Coffee exhibition aimed at the domestic market. Everyone involved hoped that showcasing some of these lovely coffees would generate interest among the judges and other conference attendees.

They hoped right. I'm generally disappointed by most “quality competitions” that are not run with the kind of intense preparation, strict standards for protocols, and vigilant obsession with detail that outfits like Cup of Excellence put together. Too often the quality isn't high enough or pervasive enough to justify the time and expense of the competition. I can tell you from firsthand experience that traveling halfway around the world to work as an unpaid judge and taste and score nothing but mediocre or even poor coffees is a special kind of bummer. It is a week of your life you'll never get back. Fortunately this time there were indeed some coffees worth getting excited about, and the organizers took the time to make sure the farmers were able to interact with and get some good feedback from the international judges who had scored the coffees. Out of 10 finalists there were four coffee lots that I really liked. Two of them made the trip back to Chicago with me. We are releasing them simultaneously so that you can compare them, contrast them, taste them next to our DT coffees from the Santuario farm or simply choose one that seems up your alley and enjoy it by itself.