



## Entry No. 3

### FROM GOLD TO ORO— EXPORTING THE BEAN

BY EDWIN DAVID MARTINEZ



FOR THOSE OF YOU who know a little Spanish, you know that *oro* means “gold.” Here in Guatemala, *oro* is also the word we use for green coffee. To us, green coffee is a very liquid commodity that is “as good as gold.” Ironically, before this *oro*, or green coffee, is dry-milled, it actually looks like gold due to its golden parchment (assuming it has been wet-milled and dried). But at this stage, we just call it *pergamino*.

Through our years of growing *oro* and selling it to exporters, we learned that beans have the potential to change hands more than a dozen times between leaving our farm and arriving at the roaster’s door. This changing of hands can be quite risky, as better coffees are commonly swapped out for lower-quality coffees or stolen before they move on to the next link in the chain. In an attempt to alleviate those risks, and in the hopes of building direct relationships with the roasters who were buying our coffee, we decided to export our own coffee and guarantee it from our farm to the roaster’s door. Of course, exportation brings its own unique set of risks—with all of the guards we have to hire, you’d think we were moving actual gold instead of beans.

For us, exportation starts upon completion of the processing. After wet-milling, fermenting and patio-drying half a million pounds of cherry, we truck it down the mountain to the city of Huehuetenango. Here we strategically store it in our garage, a friend’s spare bedroom and at a nearby bible school until the last truckload arrives.

About 72 hours before export day, we arrive at our dry mill before sunrise. The guards at the gate write down information on each person and vehicle coming in and out. There are few cars out on the road and you can hear a pin drop inside. Our voices echo through the warehouse. There are probably 70–80 containers worth of coffee already milled waiting to go out. Our special order of less than three containers is just a hiccup in the mill’s schedule, yet the attention to detail is impeccable.

I’ve hired out a few larger trucks that will bring in 20,000 pounds of *pergamino* at a time. Each time they enter, the

vehicle is weighed. Then, once the coffee is unloaded, the trucks are reweighed as they leave.

While the coffee is being unloaded, I remove a sample out of every bag. Then, all the bags are torn open and the coffee is dumped onto a screen on the ground. The *pergamino* falls through the screen into a giant underground cement hopper. From here, a series of about 10 conveyers lifts the coffee out of underground compartments and works the coffee down through some form of processing before it makes it down to another underground compartment where the process is repeated. These systems include 2-3 dry mills, a variety of sorters for foreign objects and peaberries, 2-3 vibrating angled screen beds that also use gravity to sort out broken beans, and my very favorite: electronic sorters that use a bullet of air to knock off-color beans out of rotation with incredible precision. We tweak it to the most sensitive setting to guarantee the best possible final product. Ever wonder exactly how many beans it takes to fill up a container with 37,500 pounds? This machine will tell you. Once all this equipment is up and running, the sound is deafening. The smell of green coffee is everywhere.

As nightfall approaches, three 18-wheelers show up with empty containers and we begin to load. The cost of shipping a 40-foot container is not much different than shipping a 20-foot container. So, logically, it seems like you could ship twice the coffee in a 40-foot container and save some money. Great plan, except that there are weight limitations on some container lifters, as well as on U.S. roads and rails.

At midnight, just as we’re installing the high security locks and tamper-proof seals on the back of each loaded container, there is a change in guard. We all head back home to sleep a few hours. At 3:30 a.m. we meet again. This time there is an additional crew of armed guards to accompany us on our five-hour trip to the port. They maintain a straight face and show no emotion. Instead of staring straight ahead like the guards at Buckingham Palace, they look us all in the eyes and their sense of fearlessness is chilling. They remind us that, “A bank truck is built to keep moving under heavy fire—18-wheelers are not. So look alive!” And with those encouraging words, we are on our way.

For obvious reasons, the trucks cannot go too fast uphill or downhill. Carlos, the manager, as well as my father, grandfather and I, follow the trucks from a distance. We have only one scheduled stop that is almost sacred—the coffee break. Aside from coffee, Huehuetenango is known for two things, chorizo and bread. Not just any bread, but the sweetbreads that are the perfect complement to the perfect coffee.

Half-way between Huehuetenango and the port, we stop by the side of the road to pass around a thermos and a thin red plastic bag from the baker containing fresh sweetbreads: *pirujos*, *lenguas*, *ojaldras*, *rosquias* and my childhood favorite of *champurradas*. While we eat, we figure out that we are carrying enough coffee for someone to pull single shots of espresso one after the other for over five years straight.

As dawn approaches, we hit the road again, maintaining radio communication until we arrive at Puerto Quetzal (Guatemala’s Pacific port, a.k.a. Puerto de San Jose). Although it is barely sunrise,

there is already a long line. I turn in a quarter-inch thick stack of paperwork to the Maersk Sealand office. I also go check in at the Anacafé port office. The most challenging part for me in getting our coffee from our plantation to the roaster is explaining that I am both the exporter and importer/broker. It's confusing because my name is all over the paperwork except where my father's name is used. His name, by the way, is also Edwin Martinez.

After all the paperwork is processed, we are given a go-ahead to enter the secured area, at which point the guards are free to go. I jump in the passenger side of one of the trucks and accompany them through what looks like a city built with containers. I feel like a rat in a maze. I point out to the driver that the truck in front of us is on a unique maintenance plan where the bald tires are replaced immediately after they blow out. He chuckles and says his fleet is the only one in the nation that would be street legal in the U.S. He knows what he's talking about, having been a long haul driver in the U.S. for three years.

*Slam!* As we come around a corner, we see a very large new mobile container lift. In an organized manner, as the trucks come to a stop, the lift grabs the container, turns and slams it in like a Lego piece with the rest of them. By the time it turns around, we are positioned to be next. We are stopped for less than 30 seconds before we drive off empty and the next truck pulls in.

After we exit the secured area, the trucks head back to a container yard to pick up their assigned empty container to do it all over again. As for me, I head back to the city of Guatemala and go to the Maersk Sealand office to pick up the shipping invoice, known as Bill of Lading (BL), and then swing by Anacafé to thank everyone for their help and fill out the final after-shipment paperwork. If a container is going to Japan, I also fax a BL to them. Otherwise I stick the BL in my pocket and prepare to fly back up to Washington state.

From here on out, despite customs delays, the importing is a lot less work.

The boat takes 5–6 days to bring the coffee from Guatemala to Los Angeles before spending an intimate and indefinite amount of time with U.S. customs. The Bioterrorism Act of 2002 requires me to register with the FDA any place that processes or stores our coffee, including our U.S. facility. All the information needs to match up between the Bill of Lading, the packing list, the booking info, commercial invoice, certificate of origin, dry mill report, orders to board the vessel, producer exporter license, business license and possibly four other documents in between. If any of this information does not match exactly, U.S. customs will de-van each container and bill me up to \$1,500 per container to take a look.

Once everything clears, it's down to the logistics of distributing a sold-out crop. I call each customer to let them know their coffee has arrived safely. My customers never see what happens along the way, but when it arrives at their door I breathe a sigh of relief.

As our customers grow, we will inevitably experience growing pains since our crop will not grow proportionately. But we are looking to partner with two of the most awarded coffees in Guatemala: Finca Villaure from Oja Blanca and our neighbor, Miralvalle, in Agua Dulce. Of course, they are both from Huehuetenango. They both share the vision of having a positive impact in our community (not just within the plantation) through a direct sustainable relationship. As for us, our export process will continue to be filled with armed guards and our very own version of *oro*; We wouldn't have it any other way.



*EDWIND. MARTINEZ is a third-generation grower who was raised in Guatemala. He has worked in every link of the coffee chain, from growing to retail. Edwin and his wife, Nina, both live and work between Guatemala and Washington state.*

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