



Entry No. 2

FRUITS OF THE HARVEST

BY EDWIN DAVID MARTINEZ

BY MARCH, most plantations at lower elevations, those closer to the coastlines, have picked their last beans for the year, but for high-elevation farms like Finca Vista Hermosa, it is the peak of our harvest time.

Getting to this point of harvest is always an adventure. This year, we lost almost a third of our crop due to a brief moment of hail back in January and the C Market price has been hovering back up near the 10-year average. Later this year, we are looking forward to starting a roaster-supported project of building a medical clinic. And finally, words can't describe how excited my dad is about the 20 sheep that are now a part of Finca Vista Hermosa (FVH).

But what makes harvest time really special at Finca Vista Hermosa are the relationships that are cultivated and the excitement of all the activity. The first thing heard in the cool morning is the sound of hearty fresh corn tortillas being made by hand (not those photocopies you buy at the store) over a clay stove with a crackling fire. Soon, in the background, laughter bubbles over from all the kids running around and playing on their way to school.

Then, while it is still early, most of the adults head off to pick coffee, which is not an easy job due to the nature of the mountainous land. Compensation is by volume, so one can work as much or as little as one pleases. Between 2 and 4 p.m., most make their way back to turn in their pickings and have them measured. The coffee is then wet-milled the same day it is picked. All the information about the volume each worker has picked that day is recorded into a book for payroll every other week. But before the manager is even done measuring those volumes, a soccer game is quickly put together on any open patio space where coffee is not drying.

After a long day of picking, workers reward themselves with a trip to the *chuj* (pronounced chooh), a clay or brick



igloo that has a fire in the corner covered with a pile of rocks over a metal rack. One to three people get in for a good sweat before soaping up and washing off with a mix of cold and hot water. It's a perfect ritual for a great night's sleep.

Some like to work hard and play hard, and others like to take it easy. Whatever their nature, we try to keep everyone happy by not only meeting their expressed needs, but by providing medical, dental, eye care, hygiene education, clothing and an improved diet.

In Guatemala, there is an exceptionally high percentage of Native Americans, or Mayans, per capita. Unfortunately, there is still a fair amount of racism. You don't often see a Mayan that is wealthy and owns a lot of land, and you rarely see someone picking coffee that is not Mayan. This means that most land owners and managers are Latino, a mix of Spanish descent and a little bit of Mayan. There is often a lack of respect and opportunity given to those that are less educated, but it is very admirable how well the Mayans have preserved their culture, dialects and traditions.

At Finca Vista Hermosa, we have had a Mayan manager, Lencho, for more than 12 years. In the last few years, Lencho has also trained his brother Carlos to do most of his job. They do payroll and hiring, manage a crew of 20 to 200 people throughout the year, drive the trucks and conduct quality control. They will stay up all night if they need to, wet-milling the coffee as it comes in, and they are ultimately responsible for deciding when to cut the fermentation process and for how long to wash and dry the coffee.

Today, Lencho, Carlos and their families are considered part of our own family. Ironically, those who 12 years ago questioned why we would trust them so implicitly are now

asking if they have any more brothers who would be willing to work at their plantations! In fact, Lencho has been nominated for mayor every four years for the last three terms due in large part to his reputation as a peacemaker. Do not confuse this with a pushover; he is a very firm and disciplined man who keeps tight control over his operation. But he has managed to earn the trust and respect of both his people and the Latinos as well. Lencho is often requested to mediate disputes between other landowners and workers. This has even resulted in higher paying job offers that he has instantly turned down because of the family that he has already established at FVH. There are some things you just can't put a price on.

As I finish this article on Friday, March 25, 2005, we are on the final stretch of harvest. All the picking is done, and the last coffees picked are drying on the patios. Soon we will be carrying our final loads of coffee down the mountain in our 1976 and 1987 Toyota Land Cruiser pickups. Both have been rolled several times, but they are very reliable work trucks despite their exceptionally high mileage. (Strangely, it is rare to see a truck in the Cuchumatanes Mountains that is not a Toyota.)

There is a great sense of community as we return with an empty truck and pick up people along the way back to the plantation. It used to be that you could walk faster than you could drive because the roads were so rough; thankfully they have improved. Today, people prefer to ride in a passing vehicle with their customary loads of chickens, 24-packs of Pepsi and a plethora of children in tow. To this day, no buses dare go on these roads, hence every passing vehicle is seen as a taxi and will often carry between 10 and 25 people in the bed of the pickup. Passengers in these "taxis" will pay 15 cents to one dollar for their ride and baggage, which will cover

gas for most drivers, although it is our policy to never charge our passengers.

As we prepare to dry mill and export from April through June, we get a jump on one of the most important activities: the same six workers who manage the patios during harvest/drying now transition to pruning for a season. They are very proud of their work, as it plays a strong role in the quality and quantity of next year's crop. There is a tremendous glow about their faces as I take them to an Internet café in Hue Hue to visit some of our customer's websites.

This is the future of specialty coffee: relationships. I hope to bring Lencho and Carlos to the United States some day to visit and take them to an SCAA conference so that they can meet many of those who are enjoying the fruits of their labor.

As the harvest season comes to an end, a new season begins, and we are reminded of how we are all dependant on each other. Trust, honesty, hard work and collaboration are important building blocks for a strong future. In your search for great coffees, when you come across something truly exceptional, remember what is behind the fruits of the harvest: the people, coffee's greatest asset.



EDWIN D. 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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