



Entry No. 1

GROWING UP IN COFFEE

BY EDWIN DAVID MARTINEZ

SOME OF MY BEST MEMORIES are of being a child on my family's coffee farm, Finca Vista Hermosa, located in Huehuetenango, Guatemala. When I was a child, I enjoyed learning new things, and a coffee farm was a great place to do that. Still, as a young boy, I didn't have the focus or discipline to stick to anyone thing for very long, and I thought that if I wanted to be successful, I had better learn to be good at something. Being optimistic, I decided that if I was going to try to be good at something, I might as well try to be the best.

I was off to a good start when I opened my first business at the age of nine with nothing more than scrap paper, bamboo off the roadside and mom's sewing thread. My toy kite manufacturing and distribution business might have gotten off to a quicker start if my kites could actually fly. But I kept trying, and after a few weeks I landed a distributor that bought my almost-flying kites as fast as I could make them. I had it made! Unfortunately for mom, she didn't seem to have my business sense, as she didn't have much luck reselling them.

Fast forward 20 years. I've now had the opportunity to be involved in every link in the coffee chain, and to this day I am still nowhere near being the best at anything. But on a positive note, I am selling our family's entire crop and it is not to my mom.

In the upcoming issues of *Roast*, I hope to share with you a glimpse of what life is like on our coffee plantation and especially what it is like during harvest in the highlands of Huehuetenango, Guatemala, at Finca Vista Hermosa (Estate with a beautiful view). But first, I'd like to introduce you to our farm and our family.

Almost 50 years ago, my grandparents, Felipe and Marta, purchased the first little piece of land before it could even be accessed by dirt road with a four-wheel drive. It was a day away from the city of Huehuetenango, including a bus ride to where the road ended and a half-day hike. When Felipe only had one day off, he would go to the farm in the morning and return in the dark in order to spend a day there. It was not easy for them to raise a family with seven kids on \$25 per month. Delmi, the oldest sister, vividly remembers carrying tables and chairs and dishes on their head as they hiked for hours through trails to



get to their property in their Sunday shoes—their only shoes. They slept on the dirt floor unless it was time for coffee to be taken down the mountain. Felipe hired help to hike the coffee bags to the closest road and was obligated to sleep there each night until someone came by with a vehicle to take him and the coffee to town.

Today, not much has changed at the plantation, although we did ring in the new millennium with electricity. My parents, Edwin and Evelyn, began to take on more responsibility with the farm. And when I was old enough, I left home and went to Bellingham, Wash., where I started an espresso cart to pay my way through Western Washington University. I got married and became the first salesperson for a start-up company that manufactures roasters. It wasn't long before I couldn't resist opening our first roaster/retailer location. At this point, what was once a dream seemed within reach.

Eventually, my wife and I returned to Guatemala for six months to be with family and to attempt to get a license to export our own coffee. Our little café could only go so far when we were importing our green beans in check-on luggage instead of containers. I knew that origin brokers who bought our coffee at a premium still made more money on our coffee than any other coffee, because a few times our roaster/retailer ran out and we had to purchase green from a U.S. broker who bought from the chain of brokers/coyotes who bought from us. This is where I learned the value of cupping for profile as a roaster and consumer. Traditionally in Guatemala, we cup for defects, which is a straightforward science, rather than cupping for profile, which I'm learning is more of an art.

That new understanding of cupping is part of what led up to our farm's biggest honor so far. In 2004, our phone started ringing off the hook. We were showered with calls about a contest we had entered—we had won the "Exceptional Cup" award for 2004!

After hearing this, I remembered responding to an invitation-only contest because our land was supposedly in an area that was capable of growing exceptional coffee. I had taken a coffee sample—just a couple of pounds still in parchment in a wrinkly plastic grocery sack—to ANACAFÉ in Guatemala City. I was intimidated as I saw men twice my age with bodyguards submit

samples along side me in customized formal packaging. I felt I didn't belong. I knew our coffee was good, but I didn't expect much as in any contest there is always politics.

To my surprise, we ended up qualifying again in another round and then later made it into the Exceptional Cup 2004 Internet auction. My grandfather, Felipe, couldn't have been happier. After the auction, he was given an award that brought him to tears. When he had the opportunity to express his gratitude, he shared that it was nice to receive recognition after 50 years of blood, sweat and tears that had been poured into the land. At age 84, he did not waste a moment, and he grabbed his cell phone and started making calls to share the news with family.

After the auction ended, my grandfather received a call from the winning bidder. This Japanese firm wanted to pursue a long-term contract with a nice price tag for the entire crop. What they didn't know was that another Japanese firm paid us a visit that culminated in a much better offer three months earlier, and that the balance of that year's crop was already being sold in the U.S.

Since my grandparents started Finca Vista Hermosa nearly 50 years ago, there has been an endless train of obstacles and it has not been easy, but it's surely been worth the collaborative family effort to realize this dream. I am now convinced the future of specialty coffee is in relationships—it's about people. If you have ever wanted to go the extra mile and visit origin, don't delay. Just don't think you are going to source all your own coffee as a roaster without going insane. Take it from me. Find a handful of brokers you feel comfortable with that will listen to you first and that are looking to build long-term relationships. Then cup, cup, cup.

Until next time.



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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