From Jalapa to Crossroads: The Alcoba Coffee Journey

One of the perquisites of being a market manager isconducting farm visits. I enjoy identifying the crops, asking questions about production methods, and authenticating the abundance that appears at our beautiful market stands. Part of the visit is ensuring that vendors meet Crossroads' guidelines of producing within 125 miles of market. But what happens when the production farm is in another county, located 3,112 miles away? Believe it or not, in one special case, that product is welcome at our market—and I was more than happy to take the trip.

Alcoba Coffee is the exception at Crossroads Farmers Market. Have you sipped this locally-roasted brew? If not, please come over for coffee this afternoon! Vendor Jose Castillo is a Guatemalan agronomist turned urban farmer and herbalist, now living in Maryland for 28 years. When not occupied with carpentry, beekeeping, gardening, or making herbal concoctions for his wife and kids, Jose stays busy roasting high altitude Guatemalan coffee at the Centro Ashe Farm in Accokeek, Maryland. Then, he markets it directly to consumers at a handful of regional farmers markets for $10 per 14-ounce bag. When Jose invited me to visit the origins of his delicious, pesticide-free product, I couldn't refuse.

Jose picked me up at La Aurora airport in Guatemala City on January 20th 2015, precisely at 10:30 am as planned, and not at la hora Chapina*—which was highly possible for either party. Guatemala is known as the “land of the eternal Spring,” and after feeling the warmth of the air and seeing a familiar face, I was smiling ear to ear.

As he threw my bags into the back of a 1987 Nissan Pathfinder he once drove down through Mexico, Jose said, “Let's go. We can make it happen.”

Geez, I thought. I hope we can make it happen. I paid a lot for the plane ticket after all.

“First,” he continued, “I need to buy some wood. Then we'll stop for lunch at Pollo Campero,* and drive straight to the farm.”

At that moment, I recalled Jose saying that his family's home was in Jutiapa, a lesser-known coffee region. But why not start a coffee business in this place, known as La Cuna del Sol?? Jutiapa was about 1.5 hours from the capital, and I had assumed that was also the location of the farm. With this unexpected promptness and proposed schedule (Jose's not big into scheduling), I began to realize the coffee farm must be a bit farther away.

To hydrate us for the journey, Jose stopped for coconuts. Soon, we were sipping fresh coconut water from straws; later, the shell would be machete'd off for snacking on the delicious, supple meat. We took another coconut (and its accompanying water) for the road, even though it didn't exactly fit in the cup holder.
Crossing county lines, using pineapple and zapote* stands as mile markers, and passing an exit for the Pacific Ocean, we at last arrived in the dry, dusty heat of Jalapa, the actual town where the coffee farm was located, around 4pm. Even while living in northern Guatemala as a Peace Corps volunteer, I had never come out this far to “cowboy country,” locally referred to as El Oriente*. El Salvador’s favorite neighbor, El Oriente is known for its eternal summer, queso seco* production, and tough-spirited, gun-carrying men riding on horseback. It was so hot that even after my years living in the tropics of Guatemala, I had to stop to change into cooler clothing.

Jalapa lies in a valley surrounded by the Jumay volcano, the Jalapa Mountains, and Alcoba Mountain (where Jose’s coffee gets its name), with the city’s name spelled out in limestone-painted rocks at the base of the mountain. The landscape was already rocky and brown, with amber waves of some familiar-seeming plant out in the fields, though Jalapa was only just entering its dry season.

“The rain doesn’t come again until May,” explained Jose, “and the most resource-rich soil lies in the mountains.” He paused. “Of course we’re on a fault line, so we get some exciting shakes from time to time, too! I love my homeland,” he added, gesturing broadly. “Isn’t it beautiful here?”

I nodded, amazed at how different this terrain was from the tropical cloud forest climate where I had lived, just a three-hour drive to the northwest. I recalled that Guatemala, a country smaller than Pennsylvania, has 14 ecoregions; we were definitely in a warm one.

It was a maze to get to the entrance of Alcoba Mountain, but a few elders in cowboy hats pointed us in the right direction: “Hay que regresar al parque, va una cuadra más, va recto, después a la derecha, pasando la iglesia y subirrrr.”

“Vaya pues. Gracias,” said Jose. We began our ascent up the steep mountain.

The Pathfinder jumped from pavement to dirt to new cement strips. “The road here is new” said Jose, pointing at the narrow track. “My brother Donaldo built it when he purchased the land 8 years ago. This road is good for the economy of the mountain. The leñeros* can now collect and deliver their firewood more easily, and our coffee farm has brought jobs to the people who live on the mountain. Road maintenance is another recent job here, so the community is happy to have some paying work now.”
Within a few minutes, I found myself questioning his use of the word “road.” I hadn’t seen a more dangerous switchback since 2003, when I journeyed to Guatemala’s “8th wonder of the world,” Semuc Champey*, long before this hidden road became more tourist-friendly. The “road” we traveled today consisted only of two pavement strips, just wide enough for the tires. As if sensing my concern, Jose got out and locked his transmission into 4-wheel drive.

“This car is old, but it’s good. We can make it happen.” He beamed.

To walk up the mountain takes a full hour, but descending with a quintal* of coffee strapped to your back is nearly impossible. Even in the Pathfinder, the ascent took us half an hour. As we climbed, we passed boys on horses, two children balancing water jugs on their heads, a family scrubbing their clothes on rocks along the river, and young men carrying loads of firewood. The road, undoubtedly, had it’s own unique brand of traffic. Covered in dust, we at last arrived at the entrance.

Now on top of Alcoba Mountain, 1,700 meters above sea level, I was greeted with curiosity by six members of the core harvest team, appearing in a little red pick-up along with the day’s harvest. January is early-season harvest time, so only a third the number of helpers are needed this time of year. In the bed of the truck I counted about 7 quintales of coffee beans, and leaning over the edge, peeking inside—before the team rolled down the hill to deliver the high-demand January beans to processors and then exporters—I observed an array of colors, from bright greens to cherry reds, to dark purples.
“The darker the color, the sweeter the bean,” Jose revealed. “It’s the 6-to-8-year-old bushes that give the best and sweetest beans. You can suck on them, and they’re full of medicine. They will cleanse your blood, and they’re good for your heart too. Oh,” he added, “and they will take away your hunger.” This was a good tip, I acknowledged, because dusk was falling and I was starting to think about dinner.

I didn’t believe the terrain could get much steeper, but we scrambled up another hill, leaving fresh tracks in the moist, volcanic soil. Half of Donaldo’s 15 hectares* is in coffee production, and the other is inter-planted with shade trees like banana and castor oil, even Australian Grevillea trees. Pine and medicinal Cyprus trees outlined the property, part of a reforestation project that Donaldo, a forestry engineer by trade, oversees. The coffee farmer encourages his Alcoba Mountain friends to plant their own crops amongst the coffee bushes. This created an unexpected distraction to Jose and I, as we soon found ourselves sifting through dried bean pods, searching for black turtle beans that were left behind. Foraging has always been one of our favorite pastimes.

As we continued on our hike, Jose showed off his machete skills, chopping Cyprus branches and caña*—or monte*—at every turn. Snacking on fresh coffee beans, the sweetness, I decided, rivaled that of sugar cane. Unlike the sugar cane, however, I discovered that the beans carry a hint of blueberry, or even passionfruit.

As I searched for the perfect bean, I was told that harvest will increase from now through April. What is not sold at early harvest is then offered to Jose, and any extra is then sold to other local distributors at a much lower price. Once in the hands of distributors, the coffee beans are peeled, fermented for 36 hours, washed, dried, peeled again, roasted, cooled and finally, ground.

“We leave the brewing and enjoyment to the customers,” Jose joked. “But the brew produced with our beans is nothing like the bitter, burnt taste of Starbucks.”
In April, the plants will be fertilized with pesticide-free fertilizer—i.e., composted manure—and additional natural methods will be applied to help fight the Roya blight, a pest that is affecting a portion of the crop. New seedlings will also be planted in the spring, marking the start of their 3-year journey to becoming productive bushes.

On our descent back to Donaldo’s cabin, we drink water from a natural spring, evoking dusky flavors of wild mushrooms, as well as the more ephemeral tastes of risk, and wonder. To compensate, we chomp down on fresh ginger and machete branches from medicinal trees, all in an effort to counteract our risky consumption.

Later, Jose makes me a secret, local, herbal tea, helping boost my immunity as well as stomach health. At long last, Donaldo returns from bean delivery, and we use the light of our iPhones to assist in finding matches, dry wood, and ingredients to make a pot of hot coffee. Over an open fireplace outside, cupping our mugs, we reflect upon the, star-sculpted vistas, the inherent wholesomeness of the work, yet also consider the undeniable loneliness that the mountain provides.

“This season will be harder,” laments Donaldo in broken English, “because the Roya fungus is affecting part of my crops. But with the right maintenance and with the help of my very good team... we can make it happen.”

Back in Maryland now, my long journey home turns out to be much easier than the Alcoba Coffee trail. For example, did you know that your cup of Joe from Jose spends two weeks in transit, traveling by boat from the Caribbean Coast of Puerto Barrios, Guatemala to Baltimore, Maryland? When Jose gets the call that it’s arrived, he settles his bills for the shipping container, transportation, inspection, and customs taxes and—after crossing his fingers in hope for good sales—begins peeling and roasting batches for his appreciative customers.


*Interested in climbing the mountain and harvesting Alcoba Coffee yourself? Email me for more information about our first Alcoba Guatemala group tour(s) next winter, and/or Crossroads’ first Alcoba Coffee tasting event in May.*

mdudley@crossroadscommunityfoodnetwork.org

- **La hora Chapina**, or “Guatemala time”, is a reference to things happening later than planned, as is common in Latino culture. Jose says, “it’s one hour late.”
- **Pollo Campero**, a popular, Guatemalan fast-food chain has restaurants throughout Central America, as well as in Mexico, Spain, China, Indonesia, India, Italy and U.S. (Langley Park!)
- **La Cuna del Sol**, literally, the sun’s cradle
- **Zapote** is one of my favorite Central American fruits, a.k.a. sapodilla or naseberry, and is native to Mexico, Guatemala, Nicaragua, Belize
- **El Oriente**, the Eastern part of Guatemala
- **Queso seco**, literally dry cheese, a drier version of *queso fresco*
- **Leñeros**, those who make their living by collecting leña (firewood)
• **Semuc Champey**, a swimming attraction in rural, Alta Verapaz where the Cabón River runs under a 300 meter natural, limestone bridge. Atop the bridge is a series of stepped, turquoise pools.

• **Quintal**, 100 lb. measurement in an old feed sack

• **Hectare**, A unit of area equal to 10,000 square meters. Equivalent to 2.471 acres

• **Caña**, sugar cane

• **Monte**, the forest and its weeds