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## Organic Coffee from the Chiapas Highlands

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Coffee was brought from Europe to Mexico—and to the rest of the American countries that grow it—between the mid-eighteenth century and the early nineteenth century. French, English and Spaniards brought the coffee tree to the colonies and de-

termined the way it was to be produced and consumed.

During the colonial period, coffee was imported from Cuba to New Spain, ground and packaged, and consumed as an exotic beverage. Its beginnings as a commercial crop are not completely documented, but we do know that in the nineteenth century it was successfully distributed in the states of Veracruz, Oaxaca, Chiapas, Tabasco and Michoacán.

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[1, 2, 3] Photos courtesy of Chiapas's Ministry of Tourism Public Relations Office. [4] Photo: Elsie Montiel.





Compost deposits on the Irlanda plantation. Photo: Elsie Montiel

Coffee trees arrived in Chiapas in the mid-nineteenth century from neighboring Guatemala and flourished in the Soconusco region thanks to the excellent altitude and humidity conditions. At the same time, numerous families of coffee growers came from Europe, mainly from Germany, attracted by the generous advantages offered by President Porfirio Díaz's colonization policy. By the end of the nineteenth century, the Soconusco region was dotted with large estates dedicated to intensive cultivation that guaranteed high volumes of production destined mainly for the foreign market, especially Europe and the United States. At the same time, thousands of peasant and indigenous families who grew coffee on a small and medium-sized scale in pre-industrial conditions were displaced. From the beginning, this would be one of the sources of the social and economic contradictions that characterize coffee growing in our country.<sup>1</sup>

In the twentieth century, Mexico became the world's fourth largest coffee

producer, and Chiapas the leading producer in the country, a place it still occupies: of the 12 producing states, a little over 30 percent of domestic production comes from Chiapas, which has the best climate and soil conditions for so-called highland production.

Since exports have always been high on the agenda—even today, 80 percent of current national production is for export—coffee has historically been subject to the highs and lows the international markets periodically suf-

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fer; for that reason throughout the twentieth century there were recurring coffee crises. Today, coffee represents 3 million jobs, but 84 percent of coffee-growing towns are mired in pover-

ty or extreme poverty. Most production comes from small producers (66 percent is grown on plots of less than 10 hectares), organized in small community groups, and 65 percent of Mexican coffee growers are indigenous. In the state of Chiapas alone there are 72,000 producers. The previously large, powerful plantations are also fighting to survive and adapt to a world that poses new challenges to production and commercialization of the popular beverage.

#### TOWARD ORGANIC COFFEE CULTIVATION

Today, the reality of coffee, both in Mexico and in the rest of the world, is dominated by such contradictory objectives as producing the best quality coffee, conquering a market with excess demand, fighting monopolies and intermediaries and their practices, guaranteeing a living for thousands of small owners whose families depend on the crop to survive, and at the same



Processing plant on the Irlanda plantation. Photo: Elsie Montiel

time conserving and protecting the environment.

Coffee requires rich, humid soil that absorbs water well and quickly drains off excess rain. It is grown mainly in cold regions, at temperatures that vary from 13 to 26 degrees Celsius, between sea level and 1,800 meters above sea level. *Canephora* (robusta) and *liberica* varieties grow best below 900 meters altitude; but arabica (the most common type in Mexico and Chiapas) prefer higher altitudes: the higher the altitude, the better the quality.

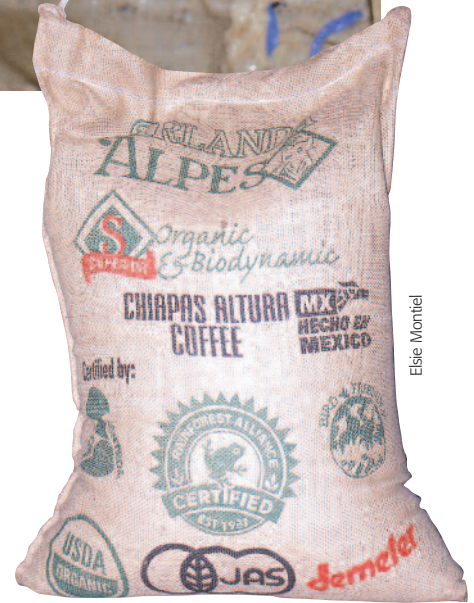
Coffee trees can grow in the shade or in the sun. And the differences between the two methods determine not only the time needed for maturation and the quality of the coffee, but also the degree of damage to the environment. When the coffee grows in the shade, it shares the land with different species of trees and grasses that benefit the environment by facilitating water collection, oxygen generation, carbon fixing, erosion control and the conservation of flora and fauna. In Chiapas where most coffee groves are located in



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Finca Irlanda is one of the very few coffees that has earned certification from many different international bodies.

forests and jungles characterized by biological diversity, plantations have a definite role to play in ecological conservation. In addition, shade-grown coffee takes longer to mature, which



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benefits the quality of the bean produced.

Sun-grown coffee trees do not share the land with other species of plants and mature more rapidly so the number and size of crops increases, but they produce lower quality beans and cause irreparable damage to the environment by fostering erosion and the destruction of biological diversity.

Until a few decades ago, ecological considerations did not play a determinant role in coffee production and commercialization. It was common practice to use large quantities of commercial fertilizers to stimulate growth of the healthiest plants and increase yield. Also, insects and blight that attacked



The Big House on the Argovia plantation. Parts of the estate are open to tourists. Photo: Elsie Montiel





The Hamburgo plantation Big House. Photo: Elsie Montiel

both the bushes and the berries were fought off with chemical pesticides and herbicides. The unequal production and commercialization conditions between the large coffee growers, hoarders and packers and the thousands of small and medium-sized producers were also not taken into consideration. But, when the crisis of world markets became practically insoluble,<sup>2</sup> the damage to people's health and the environment caused by the pesticides and intensive cultivation techniques were revealed and the fight against poverty became a vital necessity for many countries' economic policies, production and commercialization practices began to adapt to other global imperatives. The time was ripe then for organic agriculture and fair trade, which have increasing markets in Europe, Japan and the United States.

Mexico is the world's foremost producer of organic coffee, and a large part of that production comes from Chiapas: of 27 certified organic coffee producers in the country, 13 are from Chiapas. Attracting hard currency and economic and social benefits stemming from social organization to produce and commercialize as a community are some

of the advantages of the organic market, in addition to awareness about the conservation of the environment, sustainable development and the benefits to consumers' health.<sup>3</sup>

Organic cultivation without the use of chemical fertilizers, pesticides or herbicides is increasingly widespread in Chiapas. Growers use compost and biological control, fighting pests like the coffee berry borer (*hypothenemus hampei*, the worldwide enemy of coffee trees), the brown coffee twig beetle (*xylosandrus morigerus*) and the *chacua-tete* (*Idiarthron subquadratum*) with their natural enemies. Organic cultivation also seeks to combat water contamination during the wet processing of the coffee by gradually setting up water treatment plants. The conservation of plants and trees also leads to the preservation of biodiversity: as a whole, then, it is a practice that is a real hope for sustainable development.

Under the auspices of fair trade, more equitable rules of commercialization have been established worldwide, offering small producers (mostly indigenous and peasants), organized democratically and managing their resources transparently, preferential prices that allow them to compete in a world dominated by big capital. The idea is to combat the use of intermediaries that puts most of the profits in the pockets of roasters and big brand names.<sup>4</sup>

Organic cultivation and fair trade are ruled by strict certification norms that attempt to guarantee the final con-

ditions of the coffee beans.



Sorting and storing the beans on the Hamburgo plantation. Photos: right, Elsie Montiel; left, Rubén Vázquez

sumer a high quality product that is not a risk for their health and is beneficial socially and ecologically.

Not all producers in Chiapas are interested in organic production. Many small producers still lose their crops because of lack of support, credit or precise knowledge about how to access preferential markets. Many continue in the clutches of intermediaries who own transportation and processing equipment and have a connection to the markets.

Some of the large growers are facing production crises and lack of labor to work the big coffee groves. Their option is to hire Guatemalan immigrants, particularly women, for picking and selection. Organic production does not interest them because they sell their entire crop to U.S. companies that buy the coffee green (the unroasted bean), process and pack it in different ways, most of the time without specifying where it is from. Others have opted to redirect their businesses and are preparing to face the twenty-first century by opening up their impressive mansions to tourists and cultivating other products, like, for example, ornamental flowers on part of their land. Still others have switched completely to organic coffee, and are an example of ecologically safe plantations, such as Finca Irlanda, which boasts certification by more than five international bodies including the very exclusive Bird Friendly.

But the innumerable world crises, the plummeting prices, the environmentalist efforts and thousands of families' day-to-day struggle for survival go unnoticed by millions of people the world over who could not get through their mornings, their endless nights of study or their long conversations with old friends without a good cup of coffee.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Working conditions on the coffee plantations are not the topic of this article, but it is important to mention that many references are made in the literature about the exploitation of labor on the plantations, mainly using the form called *enganche*. This involved innumerable indigenous from the Chiapas Highlands who had lost their land as a result of the Reform and needed a way to make a living being tricked into going to work on the plantations. They were attracted by *enganchadores*, or recruiters, who worked for the plantation owners in the Soconusco region who advanced them part of their wages before taking them to the region, promising them better living standards and the guarantee of returning to support their families with money in hand. Most never came back and succumbed to unending debt or the diseases typical of the humid lands, accustomed as they were to the cold climate of their homelands. The plantation owners never worried because there were always more indigenous to take their places.

<sup>2</sup> In Mexico, the Mexican Coffee Institute (Inmecafé) was dismantled in 1989, leaving many

small and medium-sized producers defenseless; many had to compete in increasingly unequal conditions at a time when world market prices plummeted. Inmecafé had supported the production-processing-commercialization chain of the product.

<sup>3</sup> Organic coffee pays between U.S.\$20 and U.S.\$30 more per quintal than the price on the New York Stock Exchange.

<sup>4</sup> Under fair trade price norms, a certified organization of small producers sells directly on the market and gets up to U.S.\$60 more per quintal of coffee than quoted on the New York Stock Exchange.



### THE BENEFITS OF MODERATE COFFEE CONSUMPTION (FOUR CUPS A DAY)

- Helps prevent drug and alcohol consumption.
- Reduces the chance of developing diabetes by 30 percent.
- Prevents colon cancer.
- Alleviates headaches.
- Reduces the incidence of Parkinson's disease by 80 percent.
- Helps diminish male infertility.
- Stimulates the brain (memory, attention and concentration).
- Diminishes depression, suicides, cirrhosis.
- Increases physical energy without causing dependence.
- Improves mood.
- Increases scholastic performance by 10 percent.
- Prevents depression and discourages alcohol consumption among young people.

**Source:** Vanderbilt University

#### COMPOSITION OF COFFEE

- caffeine
- minerals: potassium, magnesium, calcium, sodium, iron
- lipids, sugars and amino acids
- vitamin B

